



Ancient Places

TENNESSEE'S STATE ARCHAEOLOGIST REVIEWS UPGRADES FOR WILLIAMS ISLAND.

Story by Deborah Petticord

Site photography by Deborah Petticord / Aerial photography by Matt McLelland

State Archaeologist Michael Moore works with all types of Tennesseans. There are developers, private landowners, educators, land trust representatives and more developers. Most of them want something—except for the dead—those ancient ones who have left their remains in and on the land he oversees.

The 450-acre Williams Island has been inhabited for over 10,000 years, according to archaeologists. It is one of several Mississippian-era dwelling places in the state. Pottery shards, arrowheads and stone tools have been found at the site. Later, a Cherokee village occupied the shores, leaving behind farm implements. Even Spanish artifacts have been found on the island, although it is unclear whether Spanish explorers were actually there, or whether the items had been brought there by Native Americans or other traders.

The island is a little over two miles long and is located at the mouth of the Tennessee River Gorge, an area of stunning beauty that was formed as prehistoric

glaciers receded on the North American continent. The island takes its name from Samuel Williams, the first white settler to farm and live on it, after the Cherokee removal.

“Williams Island is pretty cool,” says Moore. “It is still an intact archaeological site, that has been preserved due to limited access and with relatively few development pressures.” The island is accessible only by boat, and therein lies the challenge. Heavy rains and high waters in recent years have washed the dock away and damaged the rough roadbed leading to fields that previously had been farmed by local, organic farmers.

“Farmers couldn’t grow crops this year, because they couldn’t get their produce off the island,” says Larry Roberts, a sustainability coordinator and former Baylor schoolteacher. Roberts is also a former board member for the Tennessee River Gorge Trust, the organization that is charged with management of the island. The island is owned

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Larry Roberts and state archaeologist Michael Moore, right.



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by the state, so approval for projects is required.

"We're careful about what we allow out here," says Moore. "The Tennessee River Gorge Trust (TRGT) has helped with the island's preservation—it's a non-renewable resource."

Moore is a thoughtful man with prematurely silver hair, who knew from his first Intro to Archaeology field class as a college student that this was what he wanted to do.

After grad school, Moore went to work for the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, excavating sites for the Hartsville Nuclear Plant. He also worked at the Hermitage in Nashville on historic properties. When cemeteries must be disturbed, he is often on the scene. But Moore favors prehistoric settlements above most other projects, and Tennessee is one of the richest states in the South when it comes to prehistoric Indian mounds. Other major sites include Mound Bottom in Cheatham County and Sellars Farm State Archaeological Area near Lebanon.

"Excavating palisade lines is extremely interesting because you find so many differ-

ent things," says Moore. Although Moore grew up near Nashville he has roots in Chattanooga, where his grandfather, Millard Reese, owned a restaurant during the 1940s. His grandmother was living in East Brainerd when she died a few years ago. "I still enjoy coming to Chattanooga."



Hikers, including Huffines and Moore, right, observe wild turkeys at the edge of the cattle pasture.



The collapsed dock that is being rebuilt is on the east side of the island. Above inset—a composting toilet.

LOOKING AHEAD

A \$47,000 Lyndhurst grant was awarded in 2012 for the materials cost of rebuilding the dock and improving drainage at the docking site. Roberts has also made suggestions for a Baylor School senior leadership project that includes the historic re-creation of an old barn and silo, as part of a history exhibit. The island currently has a couple of farm sheds and an impressive new composting outhouse on the property. Rustic campgrounds, with fire rings for each tent, are to be a part of the big picture, as well.

New TRGT Executive Director, Rick Huffines praises the beauty of Williams Island and its most unique quality—as a prehistoric archaeological site within the limits of a bustling city.

In an article in the Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture, Kevin E. Smith writes that Mississippian cultures thrived from A.D. 900 to 1450. "Their most significant achievements included the construction and use of large flat-topped earthen pyramids, as platforms for temples and elite residences, and the creation of one of the most spectacular artistic traditions of the western hemisphere.

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Aside from being an ancient place of archaeological importance, the island is an important home to wild-life and migratory birds, say conservationists.

"There are so many species of birds that come here," says Huffines. "The island is home to indigenous animals like deer, woodchuck, fox and wild turkey, too. It's a beautiful place." A look around confirms that statement.

Deer swim easily across the river into the gorge. The cliffs below Edwards Point to the north and the low blue silhouette of Lookout Mountain on the southwest side of the island are plainly visible and familiar landmarks that hikers are able to see from an entirely different perspective. "This is an amazing and priceless gem for the city," adds Huffines.

Williams Island is actually classified as a state archaeological park.

Since 1986, archaeological consultant Lawrence Alexander has been involved with the island. He grew up in Arizona and California, then attended the University of Alabama, graduating in 1974. Alexander began working for TVA, excavating sites in middle Tennessee. He lives in the Chattanooga area and still works on projects for the United States government, throughout the south-east.

"The problem is, it's very fertile soil," says Alexander. "To keep it accessible, you have to farm it or mow—you have to get equipment over there." Without a dock, doing that is impossible say Huffines and Roberts. As Huffines has remarked before, Chattanooga organizations and the state are accustomed to collaborating on projects. He is not the first to be impressed by that, but he thinks it will be this willingness to cooperate that gets the job done.

"The TRGT does an impressive job of caring for this island and it's an important resource," says Moore. "It's one more thing for Chattanooga to be proud of." 

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