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ARCHEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL RESEARCH

BLEDSON BERM PROJECT

CORPS OF ENGINEERS ITEM NO. R-693

Burney B. McClurkan
Arkansas Archeological Survey

December 1976

Report submitted to the Memphis District, Corps of Engineers
under Contract No. DACW66-77-C-0025

ABSTRACT

In November, 1976, the Arkansas Archeological Survey conducted a survey for archeological, historic and architectural resources for the Memphis District of the Corps of Engineers of the proposed Bledsoe Berm construction and of borrow areas between Corps right-of-way boundaries. The purpose of the survey and research was to assess the impact of the proposed project upon any historical or archeological resources discovered and to propose mitigation designs in the case that such resources would be adversely affected.

No archeological, historic or architectural resources were discovered within the direct impact zone of the project, and, therefore, no mitigation measures are proposed. One archeological site, 3LE82, was recorded which is just adjacent to an easement near the southern part of Council Chute, but it is not expected to be adversely affected by the project. Two unusual architectural features occur in the general vicinity of the project but are not in the impact zone.

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ARCHEOLOGICAL AND HISTORIC RESEARCH

BLEDSON BERM PROJECT

CORPS OF ENGINEERS ITEM NO. R-693

Introduction

A survey for archeological, architectural and historic resources along the Bledson Berm in Lee and Crittenden Counties was conducted by the Arkansas Archeological Survey under contract to the Memphis District of the Corps of Engineers between November 15 and 22, 1976. The Corps proposes to expand the levee berm that runs along the north and east sides of Council Bend, obtaining fill from borrow areas near the levee and along Council Chute, a project which could disturb archeological, architectural or historic resources if they were present in the area.

Historical and archeological data were gathered by records search, field survey, and archival research. Determination of current ownership status was made through the office of the Lee County Tax Assessor. Of particular note was the assistance and cooperation afforded the Survey by the landowners, Mr. Sam Dillahunty of Bright Future Farms, Mr. Bryant Vance of McDaniel's Farm, and Mr. Bert Rivers, owner, and Mr. Robert Block, Manager, of the Bear Track Planting Company.

Archival research was conducted in Lee, St. Francis and Crittenden Counties, Arkansas. Historical research was assisted by Mrs. Virginia Hicks of the St. Francis Historical Society and Mrs. Thomas Gist of the Lee County Historical Society. Thanks are also extended to Mrs. Sally Kelly of the Crittenden County Circuit Clerk's office, Mr. Johnny McClendon, Lee County Tax Assessor, and Mr. Bill Gatlin, St. Francis County Circuit Clerk, for their interest and assistance.

Historical Perspective

The project area of Bledson Berm is located on the north and east sides of Council Bend and of a smaller ox-bow, Council Chute or Goose Lake. The area to be affected is for the most part in present-day Lee County and along a short extension of the existing levee eastward into Crittenden County. South and inside Council Bend is Tunica County, Mississippi, which will not be affected by the project.

This region was originally surveyed in 1821-23 by Mr. Rightor for the U.S. Government. A copy of Rightor's survey field notes is on file at the Crittenden County Court House in Marion, Arkansas. Copies are also at the State Land Office in Little Rock and the National Archives in Washington, D.C. The area around Council Bend and Council Chute was surveyed in the Metes and Bounds system, which would imply that there were no Indian claims to the area, nor were there any French or Spanish Crown Grants extant.

The distribution of this land to private owners is shown in a volume entitled "Lands Entered - Crittenden County", also in the Crittenden County Court House. This volume bears on its last page a statement of certification by J. R. Berry, Auditor of Arkansas, 26 September, 1868. The notations show the Township, Range and Section, or fractional part thereof, number of acres, to whom sold and the year of title transfer for each parcel of land.

Detailed information about land acquisition may be obtained on request, but for purposes of this report it will suffice to say that between 1835 and 1847 the bulk of the land in the area was given into the possession of James Erwin, Isaac Burgett, Ezekial Bledsoe, George Anderson, and Walter Dabney. The Horseshoe Lake Quadrangle of 1960 shows a Mississippi River meander line which indicates that the course of the river at that time followed the course of the present-day Council Chute, the larger Council Bend apparently being a later meander scar.

Through the course of time the names of some of the original land owners have faded into obscurity, while the names of others are still affixed to the local area: Bledsoe Bend and Bledsoe Landing are still local landmarks, and the Anderson Farm is still known by that name although it is officially the Bear Track Planting Company today. Council Bend and Council Chute are named for Mr. Redwick Council, who reputedly built the first house in that area, possibly on the west side of Council Chute where the community of Council still exists. Council is not listed among the owners of property in the Corps project area, however.

The property now known as Anderson's Farm was originally deeded to Dabney. Because of the retention of the Anderson name, it is assumed that the property changed hands at a relatively early date. Property in Sections 13 and 24, originally owned by Burgett and Bledsoe, became the property of Mr. Arthur McDaniel around 1890. Part of this land is still in the McDaniel estate and is farmed by Mr. Bryant Vance, who also owns parcels of what was McDaniel property. Dillahunty's Bright Future Farms now encompass property originally owned by Anderson, Burgett, Bledsoe and Erwin.

There is no clear existing record of when, if ever, the original owners actually occupied this land. One notation in the "Lands Entered - Crittenden County" volume states that the "residency" of Isaac Bledsoe was located in the NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of the SE $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 13 T3N R6E. This particular plot is outside the project area. Since Mr. Vance was in the process of harvesting the cotton crop at the time of our survey, access to the plot was not practical. Historic material which may date from the early or middle 19th century was found, however, in fractional Section 14 within the south end of Council Chute on property originally deeded to Bledsoe. What this actually means in regard to land occupancy or origin of the historic material found is not known.

Previous Historical and Archeological Research

The area around Council Bend was first proposed as the location of DeSoto's 1541 crossing of the Mississippi River into Arkansas by T. H. Lewis (1902), who formulated the so-called Commerce Landing (also called Tunica) theory. In Lewis's reconstruction of the crossing, the Spaniards came from near New Albany, Union County, Mississippi, across the northern part of the Yazoo Basin to cross the Mississippi either at Council Bend or Walnut Bend in the vicinity of Commerce Landing, Tunica County, Mississippi. From there they headed inland in a northwesterly direction (and out of our area of interest).

There have been many other theories of the crossing, but the Commerce Landing, Sunflower Landing, and Memphis theories remain the most plausible ones. The various theories were re-examined in the 1930's by the DeSoto Commission under the direction of Dr. John M. Swanton. The Commission decided in favor of DeSoto's crossing the Mississippi somewhere in the vicinity of Sunflower Landing, some miles to the south of Council Bend (Swanton 1939). A further examination of the crossing theories is presented in "Archaeological Survey in the Lower Mississippi Alluvial Valley" by Phillips, Ford and Griffin (1951: 384-389). They conclude on the basis of archeological and geographical evidence that the Commerce Landing theory is the most feasible of the three principal theories.

The Phillips, Ford and Griffin survey, for which the field work was done during 1940 and 1941, is the principal large scale, systematic archeological research that has been conducted in this area. No sites were recorded during that survey within the immediate Bledsoe Berm project area, but a few sites slightly outside the area were noted. The Barrett Mound site, 3LE3, is located at the north side of Council Bend, about $\frac{1}{2}$ mile from the western terminus of the proposed berm work. The Belle Mead site, 3CT30, and the Beck site, 3CT8, about $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles northeast of Council Chute in Crittenden County, are the only other sites in the general vicinity reported in that survey.

Historical Research, 1976

The search for early records of this portion of Lee County was contingent on the county of origin. Lee County was not formed until April 17, 1873, and the extreme northeastern corner containing Council Bend was originally part of Crittenden County, which was formed October 22, 1825. St. Francis County was formed October 13, 1827, but at that time and until the subsequent formation of Lee County many years later, the eastern boundary of St. Francis County was some miles to the west of its modern boundary. Lee County was created from parts of Crittenden, St. Francis, Phillips, and Monroe Counties, and the Bledsoe area was apparently part of Crittenden County until 1873 when it became part of Lee County. A visit to the St. Francis County Court House in Forrest

City neither confirmed this nor denied it since a fire there destroyed many records some years back. The earliest records on hand only date back to 1881.

The Crittenden County Court House in Marion, Arkansas, contained the needed records relative to the earliest Anglo-American occupation. These records showed that the transfer of titles for the parcels of land under consideration to private ownership took place from 1834 to 1847. Although these are the dates of title transfer, this in no way negates the possibility of earlier occupation of these lands by the subsequent title holders or even by others prior to survey and purchase of specific land parcels. Occupation of this land prior to the dates noted in the Crittenden County Circuit Clerk's office, however, are conjectures beyond the scope of this report.

Archeological Research, 1976

The work proposed by the Corps of Engineers is to expand the width of the berm along some 5 3/4 miles of levee. The general maintenance for this section of levee is performed by the St. Francis Levee District, West Memphis, Arkansas. The expansion of the berm is to be supplied by fill dirt taken from areas adjacent to the expansion area. Both levee base expansion and areas available for borrow are clearly delineated on aerial photographs of the entire area supplied to us by the Memphis District of the Corps of Engineers.

On-the-ground research was greatly facilitated by the Corps of Engineers and the St. Francis Levee District personnel. By the time the archeological survey was begun, the property to be affected by the berm work had already been purchased and removed from the individual owners' tax records, and fencing of the property was well underway. Those portions of Corps of Engineers land which were not fenced were outlined clearly by surveyor's stakes so there was no mistaking the actual area of concern.

All parts of the clearly marked area of impact were investigated on foot. The existing network of field and logging roads made it possible to get to all portions of the impact zone by automobile, thus facilitating quicker walking survey.

One archeological site, 3LE82, of historic origin, was located in partial Section 14 T3N R6E, which is adjacent to the direct impact zone. This site is on property currently owned by Bright Future Farms, originally deeded to Isaac Bledsoe. The artifacts indicate a date of origin in the early or middle 19th century, which would be consistent with Bledsoe's occupancy of the land. This site is not, however, on the parcel of land listed as containing the headquarters of the McDaniel Farm; however, the listing of "residency" in a court house record and the actual on-the-ground location of the residency may not always correspond. In other words,

the documentary evidence does not eliminate the possibility that these artifacts represent a relatively early occupation of the area and possibly even Bledsoe's home site.

Visual ground surface examination was augmented by subsurface testing in some areas of the impact zone since the action of the river might have buried cultural deposits that would not now be apparent through strict visual survey. A series of auger and shovel tests both on the river and the land side of the levee was made in various locations from the eastern end of the project to the north end of Council Bend. These tests varied from 30 cm to something less than a meter in depth. The tests were primarily directed at the slopes of natural levees of the river where it was felt buried deposits would probably be closer to the surface. Invariably the testing showed hard, sterile, compacted silt within 10 to 20 cm of the surface. Test holes of greater depth failed to produce any change in the soil texture or color. Considering the configuration of the river historically, as indicated on the Horseshoe Lake Quadrangle of 1960, any sites which might have existed along this section of bank would probably have been washed away instead of buried.

No material of an archeological or historical nature was found within the primary zone of impact.

Architectural Note

By the time our survey was begun there were no structures of any sort within the impact zone. There are, however, two architectural features of this general area which should be mentioned. First, there are some four or five barns within 1 to 3 miles of the impact area which are unique in size and construction. These barns appear to be some four or five stories high and are massive in dimension. They are all built along the same lines of design. Structures of this type and size are not a widespread phenomenon, at least in this region of Arkansas.

The second feature consists of the small, two-story tenant houses on the Joe Beck Plantation. There are some six or eight of these houses, some of them occupied currently, others not. They are rectangular in shape, with small galleries on both floors in the front. Some of these structures have outside stairways, others do not, suggesting that they all had inside stairways, at least at one time. They are not large houses by any means, but the two-story form is unique to this area.

Summary

The research done for this project indicates that there is no material of archeological, historical, or architectural nature within the project impact zone. One historic site was discovered, 3LE32. It is located adjacent to the impact zone and apparently consists exclusively of material either directly on the surface or within 5 cm of the surface. It is probably sufficiently removed from the primary impact zone that it will not be further damaged.

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