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Georgia Southern University Archaeology Students Uncover Priceless Civil War Artifacts

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Georgia Southern University archaeology students have uncovered numerous priceless and unique Civil War artifacts at the site of a Confederate prison camp in Millen, Ga.

"This is truly a stunning find with historical implications that will be studied for decades," said Georgia Southern University Archaeology Professor Sue Moore, Ph.D. "While we knew we were searching in the immediate vicinity of the site of the Civil War's largest prison camp, we were amazed by some of the artifacts that were uncovered and at their condition. These pieces tell the story like nothing else can of what life was like for the thousands of prisoners and soldiers who lived here at the close of the war."

The artifacts—including a makeshift smoking pipe, bullets turned into gaming pieces, a tourniquet buckle, jewelry, eating utensils, and coins—were found at Magnolia Springs State Park in Millen, Ga. The area was the site of Camp Lawton, which at the close of the Civil War was believed to be the largest prison camp in the world. The state park was established in the 1930's, after the exact boundaries of the prison camp were no longer known. The widely accepted view by many archaeologists was that there were no significant or personal Civil War artifacts to be found at the site.

Georgia Southern University archaeology graduate students began conducting research there in the fall of 2009 at the request of Georgia Department of Natural Resources Director Chris Clark. Clark, an alumnus of Georgia Southern University, hoped the team could pinpoint the location of the stockade walls that originally surrounded the prison. If the team was successful, Clark eventually planned to reconstruct the walls to bring additional tourists to the park. However, no one believed the land still contained much else in the way of Civil War artifacts.

"Many Civil War sites have been stripped by a century and a half of farming and development," said Georgia Southern University graduate student Kevin Chapman, who is heading the project and discovered the first artifacts. "Now we have unearthed numerous items that haven't been touched in 150 years. We never believed that we would find anything of this magnitude."

Camp Lawton was constructed in 1864 by the Confederate Army to replace Georgia's notorious Andersonville prison. Camp Lawton housed more than ten-thousand Union prisoners, and hundreds of Confederate soldiers. But, the camp was only occupied for six weeks before evacuations began in the middle of the night on November 26, 1864 as the Union army approached during Sherman's March to the Sea. Chapman believes that hasty exit may be the reason so many artifacts remained on the site.

"What we've found were treasures of the prisoners who were kept here," Chapman explained. "They would have hidden these things from the Confederate guards. When they were roused in the middle of the night to begin the move out, there may not have been time to retrieve them. Also, records tell us anywhere from 750 to 1,200 men died at Camp Lawton over the course of six weeks. Some of these items may be things the soldiers hid away and were never found between their death and the time of the evacuation."

Under an agreement with the federal government, the portion of the land in Magnolia Springs State Park where the artifacts were found was recently transferred to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. This area is now enclosed by a fence and is under 24 hour video surveillance and manned security to prevent looting of the site. Anyone caught looting in the area is subject to prosecution, with penalties that could include prison time and hefty fines. Georgia Southern University students will continue their scientific research and excavations in an effort to study the area as thoroughly as possible.

"This is sacred ground," said Moore. "Hundreds of men died here and what they, and the other prisoners, left behind belong to the public and future generations. When these artifacts are excavated and preserved in the correct, scientific way they give us a detailed picture of the people who lived and died at Camp Lawton. We are dedicated to preserving these pieces so everyone can have an up close look at these secrets that have been buried for more than a century."

The artifacts will be on exhibit at the Georgia Southern University Museum beginning October 10, 2010. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the custodian of the artifacts, which belong to the American people. For more information about Georgia Southern's discovery at Camp Lawton, please visit www.georgiasouthern.edu/camplawton.

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