FOR THE PEOPLE

State’s Ancient Treasures Come to Light — After 60 Years

As Steponaitis talks about the collection, his excitement is infectious. Many people wouldn’t be able to visualize, much less make sense of 6 million artifacts. For him, it’s a matter of reconstructing the stuff of everyday life—a gigantic cooking pot, still charred from many dinners, a box full of arrowheads, some broken and discarded by Native American hunters; a stone scraper, probably used to prepare hides for tanning.

Detective work, he likes to call it. “You can pretty much reconstruct what activities went on in everyday life.”

Every piece makes work such as this possible, and having them housed under the same roof will be immensely beneficial to students and researchers. Mark Plane, a second-year graduate student, can attest. For his dissertation, Plane is looking at pieces of pottery to determine the impact of European settlement on Native American culture and eating rituals.

“It’s neat to look at the impact of cultural change,” Plane says. “And I particularly really like working with pottery.”

Because parts of the collection date 12,000 years, the collection documents Native American life before European settlement and predates what many think of as the beginning of North Carolina’s history. The artifacts have been excavated from 98 sites in 40 counties, and a large portion of them are from Town Creek Indian Mound in Montgomery County, and Hardaway, the oldest excavated site in the state, in Stanly County.

The collection won’t be available for routine public viewing, but Steponaitis and his colleagues hope to continue and improve public service projects that are in the works. UNC archaeologists routinely bring the artifacts to K-12 schools, showing students the relics and teaching them about the work they do. They also participate in Project Archaeology, a national educational program in which archaeologists work with educators to create lesson plans about the nation’s cultural heritage. And modern Cherokee pottery potters have learned how to recreate ancient techniques in the Research Laboratories of Archaeology’s workshops, part of the Cherokee Pottery Revitalization Project.

The space in Wilson is needed for other purposes, Steponaitis said, so the grant could not have come at a better time. “We were incredibly lucky,” he said.

The renovation project is estimated to cost $1.3 million, and completion is expected by 2006. The Research Laboratories of Archaeology continues to seek additional money to meet the budgeted amount. Renovations are required to foster the relics’ preservation, including climate-controlled air distribution, upgraded fire protection, compact shelving and waterproof exterior walls and flooring to prevent flooding. The relics will be repackaged in bags and boxes that will endure without harming them.

“It’s not only a state treasure,” Steponaitis said, “it’s a national treasure.”

— Caroline Lindsey