

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

Compared with the 12,000 years of history they span, the six decades the relics spent in cardboard boxes in Wilson Library seems trifling. But these 6 million artifacts, excavated by UNC anthropologists since the 1930s, comprise the largest and most comprehensive archaeological collection in North Carolina. Nationally known and used, the relics include the most important known archive of Cherokee and Catawba Indian artifacts.

What’s surprising is that, until recently, such a significant collection as the artifacts had no permanent home. That changed late last year, when the University’s Research Laboratories of Archaeology received a \$450,000 federal grant to renovate a 3,200-square-foot area in Hamilton Hall and house the relics there.

The “Save America’s Treasures” grant, awarded by the U.S. Department of the Interior’s National Park Service, was one of 63 given last year. UNC received the third-largest dollar amount. The grants fund conservation or preservation work on historic collections or sites that hold national significance. Recipients are required to match the grant dollar-for-dollar with nonfederal funds — the University matched the funds with a \$500,000 pledge from overhead receipts.

Vin Steponaitis, director of the Research Laboratories of Archaeology, was ecstatic when he learned of the grant. The collection had attracted him to the University before he joined the faculty in 1988, and since then he has been working with the artifacts and looking for ways to store them.

Steponaitis applied for the grant as soon as the campus mail office vacated the basement of Hamilton.

Because of a space shortage on campus, the collection had been stored for several years in a Durham warehouse, threatened by a lack of climate and humidity control; the warehouse collapsed days after the artifacts were moved to Wilson Library. Once there, the collection was promised a home for five years — a stay that library employees have been kind to extend, Steponaitis says.

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 of the state’s 100 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 potters have learned



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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 addi-

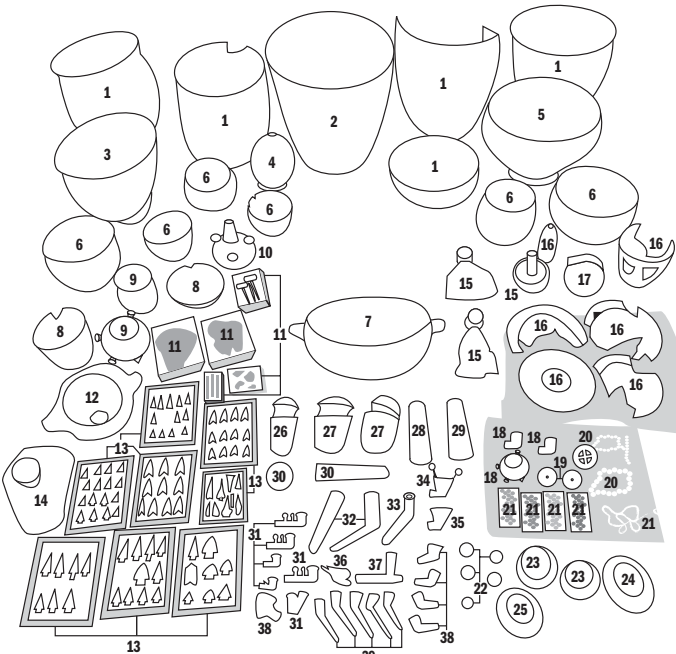
tional money to meet the budgeted amount.

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

**Vin Steponaitis, director of the Research Laboratories of Archaeology, joined the faculty in 1988, and since then he has been working with the artifacts and looking for ways to store them.**



- 1. Earthenware pots** Town Creek Indian Mound (Pee Dee culture, 1200-1400)
- 2. Earthenware pot** Anson County (Pee Dee culture, 1200-1400)
- 3. Earthenware pot** Iredell County (Catawba, 1400-1600)
- 4. Earthenware jar** Virginia (Dan River culture, 1200-1400)
- 5. Earthenware bowl** South Carolina (1400-1600)
- 6. Earthenware jars, pans** Swain County (Cherokee, 1800s)
- 7. Soapstone bowl** Mecklenburg County (Late Archaic period, 2000-1000 BC)
- 8. Hand-painted earthenware vase, pan** Swain County (Catawba, 1880s)
- 9. Earthenware bowl, jar** South Carolina (Catawba, 1960s)
- 10. Effigy water bottle** Jackson County (Cherokee, 1200-1500)
- 11. Shell hairpins, masks, pendants** Macon County (Cherokee, 1600s)
- 12. Soapstone bowl** Unknown N.C. site (Late Archaic period, 2000-1000 BC)
- 13. Spearpoints, hide scrapers, drills** Hardaway site (Late Paleoindian and Early Archaic periods, 9000-6000 BC)
- 14. Stone mortar and pestle** Alabama (Archaic period, 8000-1000 BC)
- 15. Iron hoes, wine bottle** Orange County (Occaneechi, c. 1700)
- 16. Ginger beer bottle, stoneware vase, pearlware, whiteware plates** Eagle Tavern site, UNC campus (1800-1850)
- 17. Moravian earthenware pitcher fragments** Old West, UNC (early 1800s)
- 18. Clay pipes** South Carolina (Catawba, 1960s)
- 19. Stone ear spools** Town Creek Indian Mound, (Pee Dee culture, 1200-1400)
- 20. Shell pendant, strand of shell beads** Town Creek Indian Mound, (Pee Dee culture, 1200-1400)
- 21. Glass trade beads** Town Creek Indian Mound, (1600s)
- 22. Stone gaming disks** Jackson County (Cherokee, 1200-1500)
- 23. Chunkey stones** Swain County (Cherokee, 1200-1600)
- 24. Chunkey stone** Jackson County (Cherokee, 1200-1500)
- 25. Chunkey stone** Haywood County (Cherokee, 1200-1600)
- 26. Grooved ax** N.C. Piedmont (Late Archaic period, 2000-1000 BC)
- 27. Grooved axes** Stanly County (Late Archaic period, 2000-1000 BC)
- 28. Stone celt** Swain County (Cherokee, 1200-1600)
- 29. Stone celt** Macon County (Cherokee, 1600s)
- 30. Copper pendant, ax** Town Creek Indian Mound (Pee Dee culture, 1200-1400)
- 31. Carved stone pipes** Swain County (Cherokee, 1800s)
- 32. Stone pipes** Stanly County (Late Woodland period, 1000-1600)
- 33. Stone pipe** Halifax County (Late Woodland period, 1000-1600)
- 34. Carved clay pipe** Cherokee County (Cherokee, 1400-1700)
- 35. Carved clay pipe** Jackson County (Cherokee, 1400-1700)
- 36. Carved clay pipe** Macon County (Cherokee, 1600s)
- 37. Catlinite stone pipe** northern plains
- 38. Clay pipes** Town Creek Indian Mound (Pee Dee culture, 1200-1400)
- 39. Clay pipes** Upper Sauratown (Sara, 1600s)