VISALIA TIMES DELTA

Archaeologists scour Old Lumberyard for remnants of Fort Visalia, city's birthplace, future site of 80-unit affordable housing

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A treasure hunt is underway at Visalia's Old Lumberyard. Crews are rolling high-tech radar devices to search underground for the remnants of Fort Visalia, the city's birthplace.

The survey, which started Tuesday, comes just weeks before the lumberyard on Oak Street is scheduled to be demolished to make way for The Lofts at Fort Visalia, an 80-unit affordable housing complex in the heart of downtown.

Before ground is broken on the apartments, local historians and artists hope to uncover Visalia's Holy Grail: The 159-year-old fort that was the first non-Indigenous building in the city.

Mark Becker of ASM Associates operates a ground-penetrating radar at Visalia's Old Lumberyard. The team hopes to find remnants of Fort Visalia, the city's birthplace. Next month, the site will be demolished to make way for The Lofts at Fort Visalia, an 80-unit affordable housing project.

"We have a good chance of finding that historic footprint," Terry Ommen, a Tulare County historian said. "How many cities can identify the exact spot where the town began? This is pretty historic stuff here."

On Tuesday, architectural consulting company ASM Affiliates scoured the lumberyard with ground-penetrating radar, searching for clues of the historic fort. The radar is as much an art as science, though, and the experts will have to interpret patterns and anomalies discovered underground with maps of the previously known construction at the site stretching back nearly a century.

If the radar detects something unusual or noteworthy, the next step will be to excavate the site in hopes of finding a piece of the 150-year-old fort, ASM Director David Whitley said.

"What the (radar) is telling us is, 'There may be something important. Here's where we need to target the excavation," Whitley said, comparing it to an archeological dig. In the first two hours of the survey, the radar had already uncovered an unusual finding, indicating that the fort's pillars may still be resting dozens of feet below.

Visalia-based nonprofit Self-Help Enterprises is managing the future affordable housing complex. Founder and CEO Tom Collishaw said he wanted to incorporate as much of the site's history as possible into the new development.

"This feels like a real, true start of the project," he said. "Besides the great location —next to Family Health Care Network and the Visalia Transit Center — we are thrilled to be able to honor Visalia's history and thriving arts scene while also serving the city's needs for affordable housing."

Demolition of the Lumberyard is scheduled for Nov. 1. Archaeological work, if warranted, will take place before that time.

The 80-unit apartment building is expected to welcome its first tenants by April 2023, Collishaw said. The project will also feature retail storefronts facing Oak, a community space and will be the new home of the Arts Consortium. The arts organization, which had operated out of the Old Lumberyard, has temporarily relocated to a building at Oval Park.

Arts and history will feature prominently throughout The Lofts at Fort Visalia, Collishaw said. A monument honoring its namesake history will stand on the corner of Oak and Bridge Street. Public artwork and murals will decorate buildings throughout the complex.

"There a number of ways we want to commemorate Fort Visalia and its history," Collinshaw said. "As a service-oriented organization, it's also important to provide opportunities for people who are coming out of homelessness and the working poor, who are working hard and trying to start a family."

By incorporating Visalia's birthplace into the building's name, Ommen said an important piece of local history will be preserved for future generations.

"How many developers would make this happen? Self Help had the foresight to want to help the city preserve its history," he said. "I see this whole aspect as an amazing chance to get people hooked on local history."