

OUR VALLEY VOICE

State-of-art equipment will try to locate Fort Visalia

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By: Valley Voice Contributor

Local historians are almost positive that Fort Visalia, where the town of Visalia began in 1852, is located at the Old Lumberyard at Oak and Garden streets. Thanks to state-of-the-art GPR detection equipment being brought to Visalia on Oct. 12, they hope to find out for sure.

The Old Lumberyard will soon be torn down to make way for low-income housing called “The Lofts at Fort Visalia.” Before that happens, Self-Help Enterprises, which is building The Lofts, and Visalia Heritage is paying to bring in Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) equipment, to see if they can find positive evidence of the fort.

“Most towns don’t know where their town started, but we do,” said Ommen. “Visalia is the oldest town in the Valley between L.A. and Stockton. What an amazing opportunity to bring in this state-of-the-art equipment to see what evidence we can find.”

The GPR equipment runs over the landscape in back-and-forth grids to detect what is underground. The radar shows shapes and straight lines and earth displacement, but exactly what these things are can be open to interpretation.

The split logs used to build the fort were probably reused once the fort was abandoned to build other structures, according to local historian Terry Ommen. So he doesn’t expect to find the fort walls. But a deep trench had to be dug to place the upright logs into when the fort was built. So the difference in dirt types and layers may show up. Ommen is hoping to find the 60×60-foot trench footprint of the fort.

And other remnants may be found.

“There were probably dances, maybe weddings held inside the fort,” said Ommen. “Plus blacksmith and farming equipment. There must have been ash pits. There’s a possibility that someone was buried in there. There were no cemeteries in Visalia until later.”

History of the site

A group led by the Matthew brothers decided to start their town in the lush oak forest with rich delta farmland that became Visalia in 1852. They started by building a fort where people could be safe at night. Nathaniel Vise, for whom the town was named, lived there. They soon found out that there were no hostile Native Americans in the area, and Ommen speculates that the fort was abandoned about three years later.

The land probably lay vacant for awhile afterwards. Ommen has used Sanford maps, which showed where structures were located back then for insurance purposes. They were first produced in 1885.

“The first time a Sanford map shows a building on the site is 1898,” he said.

The next known structure on the site was when William Spalding built a lumber yard there in the early 1900s. He built his first lumber yard on Main Street, and then expanded to the current location after that.

Spalding's was there for over four decades. Eventually Copeland's Lumber took over the site in the 1960s and sold it to Keith Brown Building Materials in 2000. In 2010, the City of Visalia bought the site with the idea of redevelopment. For the last four years, they have leased it to the Arts Consortium, Tulare County's arts council.

Right after the Art Consortium's annual Taste the Arts event on Oct. 16, Self-Help will take possession to start the new building project. The Lofts will also house the Arts Consortium and have four artist lofts for artists to live and work.

Self-Help and their architect are working with Visalia Heritage to have some kind of representation of the fort in the building along with an historical marker.

"Visalia is such an amazing town with so much interesting history," said Michael Kreps, president of Visalia Heritage. "To find the exact location of the fort and represent it on our historical walking tour would be so incredible."

Other relics

The Arts Consortium's video class is working on a video of the fort/lumberyard site to document its history and Arts Consortium events that have been held there. In talking to former Copeland Lumber employees, they have learned that bottles and a porcelain doll's head were discovered underground when they dug to add structures to the lumberyard.

These items were probably left long after the fort, but GPR equipment can detect artifacts at different levels.

However, the focus of the site GPR survey is to find the fort footprint. The historians will be holding their breath to see what is found.

Details of the fort

Built in 1852, Fort Visalia is considered the first community structure built in Visalia and possibly the San Joaquin Valley. The enclosure was about 60 feet square with small extensions on each corner. It was built of oak logs that were split, placed in the ground vertically and stood side by side with the curved side of the logs facing the outer walls. The walls were about 14 feet high. Some say there was a tunnel dug under a wall which was used as the entrance/exit to the fort itself. A dozen or so families used the enclosure for security, primarily during the evening.