

Fort Visalia excavation to begin next month

By Reggie Ellis
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Ground penetrating radar reveals soil anomalies which may provide evidence of Fort Visalia, the original structure of the Visalia settlement in 1852

VISALIA – Rudimentary maps, oral recounting and Reconstruction era writings of local residents all place the location of the first structure in Visalia near the corner of Oak Avenue and Garden Street. But within the next few weeks, there may be stronger evidence than ever a planned development there called The Lofts will actually be at Fort Visalia.

In a joint project between Visalia Heritage, a foundation focused on Visalia history, and Self-Help Enterprises, a nonprofit community developer, ground penetrating radar (GPR) was brought to the future home of the housing complex known as The Lofts at Fort Visalia on Oct. 13 in an effort to definitively determine if there is any evidence buried below the former lumberyard of Fort Visalia, the original settlement of the city of Visalia. 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 is open to interpretation.

“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.”

Kristin Ainley, senior project manager for Self-Help, said an archaeologist reviewed the GPR scans of the site and found soil density changes or ‘anomalies’ at depths that might suggest matter from that time period. Self-Help took possession of the property in late October and plans to begin razing structures and removing old hardscape this month.

“We expect the excavation [of the Fort Visalia site] to happen around the week of December 6, once we get structures and hardscape demolished on site,” Ainley said.

According to records, 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. Local historian Terry Ommen speculates the fort was abandoned about three years later in 1855.

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,” Ommen said in October.

The split oak tree logs used to build the fort were probably reused once the fort was abandoned to build other structures, according to Ommen, who 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 the anomalies are part of the 60-by-60-foot trench footprint of the fort along with other possible remnants.

"There were probably dances, maybe weddings held inside the fort," Ommen said. "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."

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