



## NEWS RELEASE

### **Mike Browning**

PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER

Twitter: @cityofmborotn

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/cityofmurfreesborotn](http://www.facebook.com/cityofmurfreesborotn)

PHONE: 615-848-3245/642-3230 mobile

EMAIL: [mbrowning@murfreesborotn.gov](mailto:mbrowning@murfreesborotn.gov)

Website: [www.murfreesborotn.gov](http://www.murfreesborotn.gov)

---

## **Native American site discovered, secured at Black Cat Cave** *City teams with MTSU archaeologists and other partners to protect site*

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:** August 5, 2015

**MURFREESBORO, Tenn.** – The discovery of a Native American cemetery at the Black Cat Cave archaeological site has led the City of Murfreesboro, Middle Tennessee State University, and other public and private partners to secure the cave area and discuss plans for its future.

Well known among Rutherford County locals as the reputed location of a speakeasy during the 1920s Prohibition Era, Black Cat Cave recently became the subject of an archaeological excavation by a team of MTSU professors and students.

Conducted in spring 2014, the MTSU field study came soon after the City of Murfreesboro discovered vandalism and heavy looting to the cave, including graffiti and illegal digging. The study confirmed the presence of a prehistoric cemetery at the site, and through radiocarbon-dating it was determined that the human artifacts and human remains recovered from the cave date back 5,000 to 7,500 years to what is known as the Middle Archaic Period.

“The discovery of ancient human remains within the confines of Black Cat Cave has required sensitivity to the peoples and rituals of the ancient past,” said MTSU archaeologist Shannon Hodge. “As a scholar of prehistoric culture, I appreciate the efforts of the City of Murfreesboro to protecting and preserving this cultural resource.”

“Because this site has a previously unknown prehistoric Native American cemetery on it, Murfreesboro Parks & Recreation officials have been conscientious about treating the site with respect and marking sure that the site is secure. We couldn’t have asked for better partners.”

The public-private partnership to protect and preserve the archaeological site has resulted in an innovative gate system to prohibit public access to the property. The new cave gate consists of steel columns supporting horizontal bars spaced approximately 5 inches apart. The design balances cave security with biological transparency, an important part of the design because it allows air and water exchange in the cave system as well as habitat for cave-dwelling species.

**-(MORE)-**

“We recognize, with the help of our MTSU partners, that Black Cat Cave is a cultural resource that must be preserved,” said Lanny Goodwin, director of the Murfreesboro Parks & Recreation Department. “We appreciate the work of the university’s scholars and students, as well as the engineering firm Griggs & Maloney to preserve and protect this newly found evidence of prehistory.”

Griggs & Maloney Inc., a Murfreesboro engineering and environmental consulting firm, teamed up with the City of Murfreesboro Parks & Recreation Department, the MTSU Department of Sociology and Anthropology and Rollins Excavating Company to plan, design and construct the new gate system. The Native History Association also participated in the planning.

The cave’s entrances had been closed and fenced by the City due to the vandalism and potential liability for injuries. A man-made concrete floor had covered-up the natural cave flooring. Until last year’s vandalism drew its attention, the City had no knowledge of any evidence of prehistoric or ancient activities within the cave.

The City partnered with Aaron Deter-Wolf, a prehistoric archaeologist with the Tennessee Division of Archaeology, and MTSU’s Hodge and fellow archaeologist Dr. Tanya Peres. Peres and Hodge directed the team of MTSU student volunteers to do the study, with their work including cleanup of garbage and an assessment of the damage done to the natural cave walls and cultural features.

Peres was able to radiocarbon date charcoal samples from the site with funds from a Tennessee Historical Commission grant.

“The ultimate goal is to protect this Native American site from future episodes of vandalism and looting, while gaining important archaeological information to better understand the long-term use of the cave by various groups that lived in Rutherford County,” said Peres, who recently left MTSU to take a position at Florida State University.

Traditionally, historians and archaeologists believed that for thousands of years much of Rutherford County was a “no-man’s-land” between neighboring groups, used simply as a hunting ground. But this site proves that prehistoric people lived and thrived in the rich environment and abundant natural resources in the county, Hodge said.

In its natural state, Black Cat Cave had a 5- to 6-foot limestone shelf which formed a horizontal opening, approximately 120 feet in length. During more modern history, the cave’s opening was barricaded with boulders and a failing, aged fence for safety. The boulders and fence have been removed and replaced with the new design.

Griggs & Maloney Vice President Ryan Maloney said the new gate system is designed to protect cultural and natural resources and “prevent public access to a potentially hazardous environment.” The new gate system includes a “heavy duty, hinged opening” that will allow future archaeological study, Maloney added.

**-(MORE)-**

In addition to modern artifacts, including glass fragments from the cave's speakeasy days, the 2014 dig and screening uncovered stone artifacts and other evidence from the Middle Archaic Period dating back more than 5,000 years. The evidence includes ancient remains of freshwater mussel and snail shells brought into the cave and discolored soil layers which are evidence of human activity such as a hearth for a fire.

"Despite previous historical writings to the contrary, this new evidence shows that people lived in what is now Rutherford County for thousands of years," added Peres. "This is a rich prehistoric cultural past in Rutherford County that we are just beginning to understand."

Peres has studied other prehistoric sites in Rutherford County, including what is known as the Magnolia Valley Site in the southwestern corner of the county. The site at Black Cat Cave will help tell part of the story of prehistoric occupation in the area and could expand understanding of how Rutherford County was used by prehistoric people.

"As archaeologists, one major focus is to preserve these resources not only for us, but for people who are going to come a decade, a hundred or a thousand years after us," Hodge said. "We want them to be able to know as much and gain even more."

Study of evidence found in the cave by the MTSU team is ongoing.

For City News online, visit [www.Murfreesborotn.gov](http://www.Murfreesborotn.gov).

**Photos attached captions:**

Photos by Jim Davis, Murfreesboro Parks & Recreation Department

1. *Exterior View of Black Cat Cave entrance.jpg*
2. *Exterior View of Black Cat Cave entrance.jpg*
3. *MTSU and Tennessee Division of Archaeology (TDOA) screening dirt from looter damage.jpg*

(###)