

TE Corner



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Archaeological Research Project Links Surface Transportation to the Trail of Tears

The Tuscumbia Landing TE project is the first archaeology project in 15 years to be funded by the Alabama Department of Transportation. Located at the confluence of Spring Creek and the Tennessee River in Sheffield, Alabama, the landing was added to the National Historic Register in 1982 for its railroad and steamboat-related significance prior to the Civil War.

Though Tuscumbia Landing has a fascinating connection to surface transportation, the site's role as a key waypoint on the Trail of Tears is the basis for its historical notoriety. President Andrew Jackson's forced removal of 46,000 Native Americans from their homelands created what is now known as the "Trail of Tears." The relocation of Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, Creek, Muscogee-Creek, and Seminole nations to reservations west of the Mississippi River (present-day Oklahoma) occurred between 1831 and 1838. In 2007, the National Park Service designated Tuscumbia Landing as a Certified Historic Site

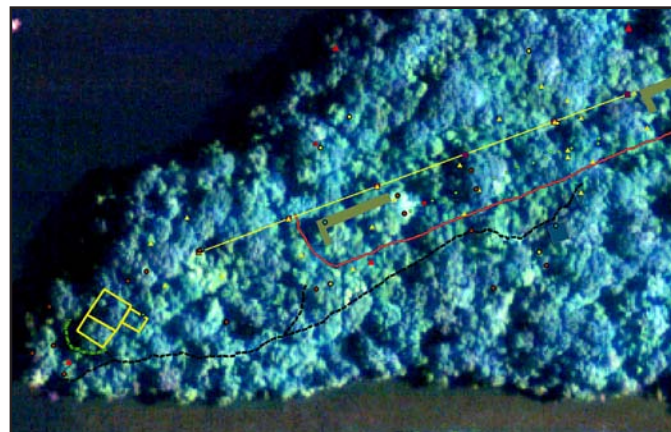
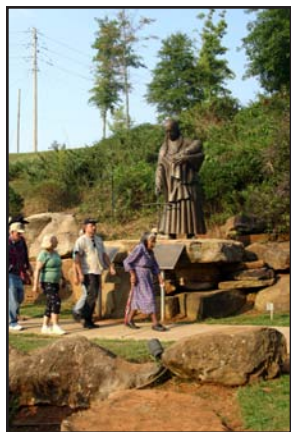
on the Trail of Tears.

The archaeological project at Tuscumbia Landing is a result of the tenacity of its lead investigator, Gail King. King began investigating Tuscumbia Landing in 2006, when she was elected president of the Alabama Chapter of the Trail of Tears Association. At the time, King was also a professor at Northwest-Shoals Community College (NWSCC). King initiated the TE application process in September 2008 with a meeting at the Northwest Alabama Coalition of Local Governments (NACOLG), which is located on the NWSCC campus. That same month and with NWSCC acting as the project's official applicant (and providing local matching funds), King submitted the first of two TE grant applications to Alabama's Department of Transportation (ALDOT). Later that year, ALDOT informed King that the project was ineligible because Tuscumbia Landing was part of Park West, a 40-acre park surrounding the landing. By ALDOT guidelines, parkland is not eligible

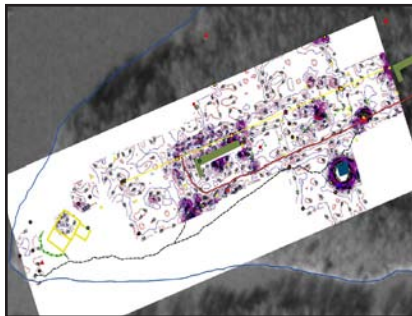
for TE funding.

Tuscumbia Landing is also a historic nexus in the region's surface transportation system. It played many roles in the local and regional transportation system throughout its history in addition to its role in the Trail of Tears. Beginning in the 1820s, the landing was a significant link along steamboat trade routes traveling between New Orleans and Knoxville, Tenn. The railroad connection, built in the early 1830s between Tuscumbia Landing and the landing at Decatur, proved to be a critical improvement to this network, as it allowed steamboats to avoid 45 miles of treacherous shoals along the Tennessee River. The site's value as a nexus led to its downfall when the Union Army destroyed the railroad depot during the Civil War.

Instead of conceding to the rejection of her initial application, King scheduled a meeting with ALDOT to discuss ways to improve the application. ALDOT staff suggested that King re-write the



(Left) Annual walk commemorating the role of Tuscumbia Landing in the Trail of Tears, here led by 90 year-old Chickasaw elder Flora Perry. (Center) Ground-penetrating radar used to image subsurface features of historical significance. (Right) Image produced from ground-penetrating radar and GPS data. (Photos courtesy of Marty King)



(Left) Image produced by the GPS and ground penetrating radar. (Center) Researchers from NWSCC lead tours of Tuscumbia Landing to raise awareness about the location's historical significance. (Right) National Historic Trail Dedication Ceremony in 2007.

application in the format typically used for archaeological proposals, making the process of applying a second time around much more involved. In addition, ALDOT recommended that King make a case for Tuscumbia Landing being a separate entity from Park West. To do this, King enlisted the support of the Mayor of Sheffield and the Parks and Recreation Board. Letters of support from these figures helped make a case for the importance of additional research in Tuscumbia Landing as well as the critical distinction between the landing and the adjacent parkland.

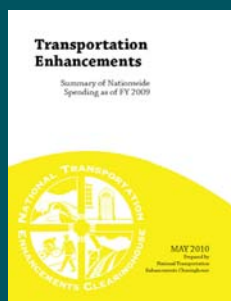
In 2007, King submitted a second and improved TE application. Though approved, it took nearly two years to gain ALDOT's authorization to use an alternative procurement method for hiring highly specialized archaeologists. (Typically, TE grantees must use a standardized competitive bid process.) In October 2009, ALDOT granted the Tuscumbia Landing research team permission to proceed with the project. The total grant award was \$104,450.

At the time of this publication, the investigation of Tuscumbia Landing is about 75% complete. This past Spring, the research team—comprised of an ethno-historian, a GIS specialist, archeological technicians, and a cartographer—employed sophisticated equipment for archaeological mapping and discovery. They used a laser scanner and ground-penetrating radar to identify

underground artifacts and a magnetometer to identify any underground tanks or anomalous areas. They then mapped the archaeological features discovered with the help of a Global Positioning System (GPS). Dr. Kent Schneider of Bucks Geophysical used this data to develop three-dimensional topographical maps of the site. Their findings, which are detailed in a report scheduled to be released in July, have already contributed new evidence illustrating pre-Civil War transportation patterns in the Southeast. These include maps of the road, rails, and building foundations that formed the infrastructure of Tuscumbia Landing. One particularly interesting preliminary finding involves the death of four Native American children while waiting for the arrival of a steamboat at Tuscumbia Landing in 1838. During a ground survey, King found three depressions in the earth. Utilizing the ground-penetrating radar, Dr. Schneider found that this is indeed a burial place; however, because the landing became the resting place for many throughout its history, it is unclear if the two are connected.

As of fiscal year 2009, archaeological planning and research projects comprised only 0.5% of the funds distributed through the Transportation Enhancements (TE) grant program. Though small in number, these archeological projects—such as this one at Tuscumbia Landing—uncover unique historical aspects of the surface transportation system. To learn more about this project, visit <http://southeasternai.net/tuslanding.html>.

FY 2009 TE Spending Report!



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