

Archaeological Excavations for the Southern Parkway Project St. George, Utah

Celebrating Utah Archaeology Week – May 12, 2011



Archaeological work is currently being conducted for Segments 3 and 4A of the Southern Parkway project by William Self Associates, Inc. (WSA). Seventeen archaeological sites located within the construction corridor are considered eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places.

The Southern Parkway project is located partially on land managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), and is receiving funding primarily through the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) with certain sections using funds from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA). As such, it must meet the requirements of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, and the Utah Code Annotated regulations to consider the effects of undertakings on significant cultural resources.

Preliminary archaeological surveys and site descriptions have been completed. Archaeologists began backhoe trenching in late April to determine site boundaries within the construction corridor and the types of structures and features that lie below the ground surface. This information is being used to guide further excavations.

The Southern Parkway route lies in a cultural transition zone containing prehistoric occupations associated with the Great Basin, the northern Southwest, and the farthest extent of the Mojave Desert. Most of the sites along the Southern Parkway represent prehistoric occupation by the Virgin Anasazi. The Anasazi (also known as Ancestral Puebloan because their descendants can be found today in the pueblos of northern Arizona and New Mexico) were prehistoric agriculturalists who occupied much of the plateau country in the northern Southwest including southern Utah.

The Virgin Anasazi, like many Anasazi peoples, lived in areas with good soils and access to water where they could grow corn, beans, and squash. They also relied on a variety of collected wild plants such as pine nuts, agave, mesquite, amaranth, and sunflower. Deer and bighorn sheep were the primary large game hunted, while rabbits, desert tortoise, and other small game were also pursued. The extent of reliance on agricultural crops in contrast to time spent hunting and gathering continues to be debated by archaeologists. Excavations for the Southern Parkway project may help shed light on this question as "household archaeology" is a major focus of the work.

People were living near the Virgin River by at least 200 B.C. during what is known as the Basketmaker occupation. Population increased over the centuries, as did the size and extent of villages and hunting and gathering camps. Early evidence comes from subterranean pit houses in small communities. Over the centuries there was a transition to above-ground, rock-outlined houses, and the arrangement of villages became quite standardized. They contained well-defined "courtyard" outdoor work areas and underground storage pits. Pottery indicates widespread contacts. The Virgin Anasazi reached their maximum geographic extent about A.D. 1100. It is also around this time that most of the archaeological evidence for specialized farming practices such check dams and water diversion features is found.



We do not know what happened in the centuries following A.D. 1100 that were times of apparent cultural change and population decline. We do, however, have evidence of Paiute occupation at several of the sites in the Southern Parkway corridor. These indicate long-term and continued use of the St. George Basin and its surrounding valleys.

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