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Veterans Curation Project preserves past, prepares veterans for the future

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Active duty service members make history fighting today's wars. Upon their return from the battlefield, the Veterans Curation Project gives them a chance to preserve history as they build new skills.

The VCP, which was conceived by Dr. Michael "Sonny" Trimble, director of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Center of Expertise for Curation and Management of Archaeological Collections in St. Louis, has two primary purposes.

Veterans are trained by professional archaeological laboratory management specialists in technical skills such as digital

photography and scanning, cataloging, data base and records management, preserving historical documents and making the information about these items available to researchers and historians via the internet.

At the same time, they are helping USACE reduce the backlog of artifacts, images and records from engineering projects carried out over the past decades. "We estimate there are materials, stored artifacts and other items, that would fill 30 semitrailers – and this is in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers alone," Trimble said.

Using \$3.5 million from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, USACE established three pilot VCP projects in areas that are home to large numbers of wounded warriors and veterans. Center locations include St. Louis, Augusta, Ga., and Washington, D.C.



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Left: Trey Stone, a Veteran Curation Project staff member, scans a preserver of black and white negatives that document archeological investigations conducted over decades of U.S. Army Corps of Engineers excavations. The negatives were of a multitude of public works projects such as locks and dams, recreation and water resource projects.



VCP opens door to St. Louis veterans

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The project is being conducted with cooperation from the Department of Veterans Affairs and organizations such as the Central Savannah River Area Wounded Warrior Care Project.

Project participants are employed, earning a fulltime or part-time salary as they learn new skills.

“This isn’t make-work,” Trimble said. “Properly documenting these items is required by the National Historical Preservation Act to preserve them and their information for study and educational purposes. It is unfinished business. It’s federal law

and it is our responsibility.

“We aren’t trying to turn these Soldiers into archaeologists or anthropologists,” he added. “But the skills they are gaining, the processes they are learning, relate directly to the growing field of record keeping in medical, insurance, financial and other professions,” Trimble said.

Soldier-curators in the St. Louis VCP office said working with the artifacts help them understand and appreciate the past.

“I have held a metate in my hands. That’s a stone Native Americans used to grind grain,” said eight-year Army

veteran, Walter Sinnott IV.

“When they ground the grain, tiny, abrasive flecks of stone would mix with the food. I have also held the flattened teeth of the people who produced and ate these foods, which ground their teeth down over years. It all became very real – not just intellectual, like a picture or a text about prehistoric America. I felt the connection between their tools and their lives. I felt I was able to touch these people.”

That’s how Sinnott, who served four tours in Iraq and Afghanistan as a fire support specialist, described his greatest thrill as a participant in the VCP.

Sinnott spoke as he carefully smoothed wrinkles in an aging table-sized chart and map that had been tightly folded for 40-plus years. “We humidified this chart with hot water vapor for an hour. Then we dried it between blotter paper and I manually smoothed the folds. I’ll repair any damage and then I have to figure out how best to preserve it for the future,” he said.

Sinnott said that after being discharged three years ago he first studied to become a computer engineer.

“But I didn’t want to spend my life in a cubicle. I have always been fascinated by outdoor characters like Indiana Jones. This experience is showing me I can do anything I want to do, and if I have to choose today, I’ll say I want to be a geologist,” he concluded.

In a far corner of the VCP office,



Staff members from the St. Louis Veterans Curation Project discuss how to properly photograph artifacts.

East St. Louis, Ill., native, Sean Box, described how he wants to work with people, perhaps in an office setting.

He spoke as he stared at a computer screen, trying to conjure up the precise word he needed to “nail” a carefully crafted technical report of a study he was finishing.

Box, who served six years in the Army, explained what he was gaining from the VCP.

“First of all, in addition to technical skills, I’m learning not to speak ‘Army.’” Awaiting a knee replacement for a service injury, Box said, “This isn’t just learning computer skills. This is very real.

“I have also gained a new appreciation for those who have gone before me. They couldn’t read and write, and I thought that made them stupid,” he said.

“But listen, I’m learning people have always been smart, just knowing how to live and figure out how to do what they did,” he said. “And this experience has taught me that there’s a lot more to life than TV. I read a lot more now and want to know more and more. We had a daughter a year ago, and I want her to be proud of me. I want to be her role model as a daddy,” he added.

Trey Stone, a five-year Army veteran as a vehicle driver, reviewed a collection of documents to confirm their proper disposition. “I am learning technical skills like photography,” he said. “I am studying criminal justice at Kaplan University, and the photographic skills I have learned and used here may earn me college credits and help me complete my education sooner.”



Veteran Walter Sinnott smooths creases in a map the contains details about where and at what depths artifacts were recovered at a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers construction site.

Stone, who last served with the 128th Infantry Battalion at Fort Riley, Kan., went on to draw connections between forensic and documentation skills needed to curate historical materials and similar methodology in police work.

“This is giving me hands on skills I can use in what I want to do in the future. Holding artifacts and imagining how someone might have used them a thousand years ago is something that will help me visualize a crime scene and how seemingly insignificant things may be keys to solving a crime.”

In addition to the technical skills, Stone said he is being helped in other

ways. “I’m gaining people skills. I’m getting help building a resume to tell potential employers about what I can do for them,” said Stone. “They are helping me learn how to relate better to civilians,” he said. “You cannot order them to do things like you could with Soldiers,” he said.

“This is a win-win for America,” Trimble said after returning from opening the VCP in Washington, D.C.

“Information on large amounts of materials that were undocumented and unavailable for study are emerging to fill gaps in our historical knowledge.

“At the same time, veterans, to whom we owe a great deal for their service and sacrifices, are being prepared for post-service civilian employment and lives,” he added. “That will serve them today and in the future. This repays a debt to the past, the present and the future,” he said.

The VCP is a small start on a road to resolving two challenges our nation faces. The program may or may not grow in areas or numbers of former Soldiers served.

To this point, Soldiers find connections and gain life’s wisdom from reaching across centuries to touch America’s earliest peoples’ lives.

“I never even dreamed this kind of work existed,” one veteran said as he looked at a pottery shard, turning it over carefully in white-gloved hands. “Wow! This is exciting,” he said.

Sean Box, a U.S. Army veteran, weighs archaeological materials at the Veterans Curation Project office in St. Louis.

