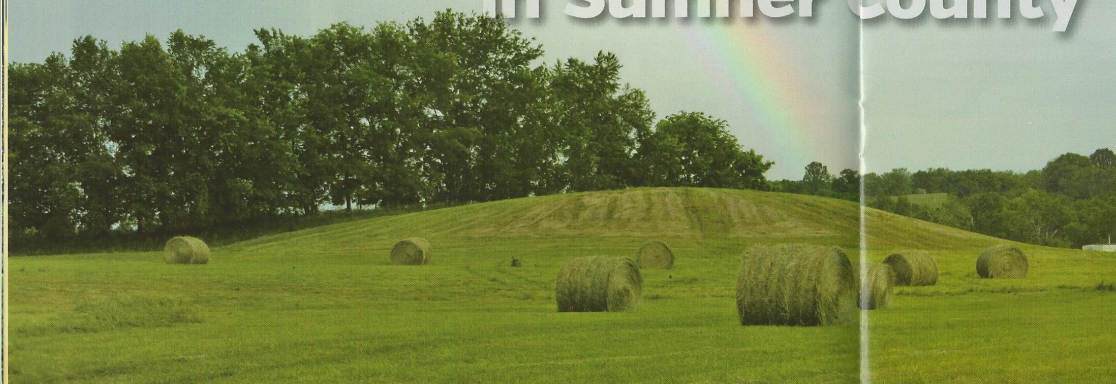




2011 MTSU Excavations in Mound 3. Below: A rainbow over the Castalian Springs Mounds.



By Kevin E. Smith

Nestled in the rolling hills of eastern Sumner County, the rural community of Castalian Springs is home to a remarkable set of publicly owned historic parks and preserves spanning over 12,000 years of the state's history.

Centered on the rich concentration of mineral springs first named "Bledsoe's Lick," the herds of mastodons, piglike flat-headed peccaries, and other long since extinct game animals drawn to the salt and mineral rich waters likewise attracted Native American explorers there more than 12,000 years ago.

When British-American and African-American colonists pushed westward into the area in the late 1700s, they too encountered rich concentrations of deer around the springs – and even small herds of American bison or buffalo, exceedingly rare this far east of the Mississippi River.

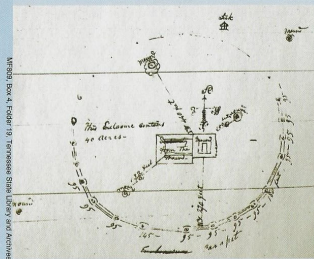
Those amazing springs and surrounding resources would lead Isaac and Anthony Bledsoe to settle with their large families and build Bledsoe's Fort in 1783 as part of the initial colonization of Middle Tennessee – a site now preserved in the county-owned Bledsoe's Fort Historical Park. In 1802, General James Winchester of Revolutionary War fame would complete his mansion Cragfont – now open to the public as Cragfont State Historic Site. A few years later, his daughter Almira would marry Alfred Royal Wynne and they would eventually build the Castalian Springs Resort

Inn — Sumner County's only National Historic Landmark and now preserved as Wynnewood State Historic Site.

Most recently, the state of Tennessee acquired the nearby Hawthorn Hill State Historic Site, a circa 1805 brick house that was the birthplace and home of Dr. Humphrey Bate Jr., one of the cornerstone artists of the early Grand Old Opry.

In the heart of this striking cluster of early Tennessee historic sites lies an even more ancient Native American town site now protected by state ownership — the Castalian Springs Mounds State Archaeological Area. After state purchase of the 132-acre Shoulders tract containing the mounds in 2005 from the heirs of Leon and Julia Ellen (McKee) Shoulders, I initiated the Castalian Springs Archaeological Project as a multi-year (and ongoing) research project sponsored by Middle Tennessee State University, the Bledsoe's Lick Historical Association, Tennessee Division of Archaeology and the Tennessee Historical Commission. Over the past decade plus, the research team has engaged hundreds of students, volunteers, and archaeological specialists to reveal a

“That Extraordinary Mound at Bledsoe’s Lick” in Sumner County



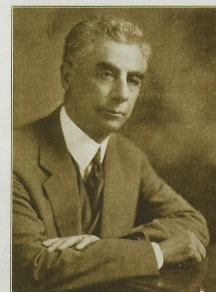
A plan view map of the Castalian Springs Mounds by Ralph E.W. Earl, October 1821.



Excavations in Mound 2, winter 1916-1917.



An artist's sketch of Mound 2 at Castalian Springs by Ralph E.W. Earl dated October 1821. The dark rectangle on the right of the mound represents Earl's excavation pit. Left: William Edward Myer, ca. 1920.



WILLIAM EDWARD MYER

ARMSTRONG, THOMAS G. MYER, 1821-1822, TENNESSEE HISTORICAL COMMISSION

Tennessee Historical Magazine, Vol. 234

detailed story of this prehistoric Sumner County town.

The Castalian Springs Mounds have been known as one of Tennessee's most impressive late prehistoric landmarks for over two centuries. In October 1821, Ralph Eleaser Whiteside Earl, famed portrait painter and confidante of President Andrew Jackson, wrote a lengthy letter from Cragfont describing his explorations of "that extraordinary mound at Bledsoe's Lick." Although Haywood would eventually publish most of Earl's five pages of notes in the first published history of the state, the even more astounding treasures that accompanied the letter would sit quietly for almost two centuries before re-discovery.

In addition to archaeological excavations spanning seven summers, the CSAP has focused on research in archives and museums throughout much of the eastern United States in search of early documents and artifacts pertaining to the site. Earl's map of the mounds and enclosing town wall and his artist's sketch of Mound 2 – the central public earthwork of the town – are the earliest known examples from Tennessee and provide an amazing level of detail about how the site appeared before subsequent centuries of plowing. Mound 2 was indeed "extraordinary" by any standard – its base covering an area approximately the size of a football field, rising to well over two stories in height, and containing an estimated 400,000 cubic feet of earth. During its

active use by native peoples around A.D. 1300, this massive earthen platform supported multiple large buildings, including the palatial residence of the ruling elders, workshops and other buildings.

A century ago in the winter of 1916-1917, William Edward Myer from Carthage – described by some as Tennessee's first home-grown professional archaeologist – would return for his third season of digs at Castalian Springs funded by a grant from the R.S. Peabody Museum of Archaeology in Massachusetts. Myer's earlier investigations in 1891 and 1893 produced some of the most famous artifacts from the site and another detailed sketch of Mound 2, but on his third visit he was also armed with a camera. His detailed records and photographs curated by the Smithsonian Institution's National Anthropological Archives were also rediscovered during the MTSU archives project and have informed and guided modern archaeological research and interpretations. Modern archaeology on Mound 2 in 2008 and 2010 shows that the entire earthwork was built in only two stages between A.D. 1275 and 1350 and was surmounted by multiple large burned buildings.

While these early records provide important insights into parts of the prehistoric town at Castalian Springs, the modern project has used cutting-edge technologies and modern archaeological methods to develop a far more detailed understanding of

the "history" of that community and the daily lives of people who lived there. Based on over 40 high-precision radiocarbon dates, the native community at Castalian Springs was founded as a small town of a few hundred people about A.D. 1150 – almost certainly to produce salt from the nearby mineral springs for exchange throughout eastern Middle Tennessee. By a century later, the town had grown to perhaps as many as 1,000 citizens and embarked on an ambitious expansion project to create a mound center – including creation of the impressive set of mounds, earthworks, and town wall in less than 50 years.

The project has explored the archaeological remains of dozens of structures – from small typical family houses of about 250 square feet comparable in size with the log cabins of later eras, to half a dozen enormous public buildings and temples that range from 1,300-12,000 square feet. Modern people tend to underestimate the architectural abilities of prehistoric Tennesseans – they constructed some things that were much more like cathedrals than huts, and the mounds themselves are incredible feats of engineering skill.

Other significant discoveries include compelling evidence for the manufacture of many important ritual objects at the Castalian Springs Mounds, including the remarkable negative painted female effigy rattles and bottles referred to as "The Middle Cumberland Changing

Woman," ear bobs made of calcite crystals and engraved pendants made from Chattanooga shale (a stone unique in that it often contains sufficient oil to burn). The Changing Woman bottles are currently interpreted as being first made at Castalian Springs and nearby sites – but the rites were so popular they spread throughout much of the interior South by a century later.

The calcite for the crystalline ear jewelry is only available locally by mining explorations deep into the nearby caves of Sumner and Smith counties. Similar to many other prehistoric towns in Middle Tennessee, another important industry at Castalian Springs was the production of salt – attested by the thousands of sherds of large "salt boiling pans."

Perhaps the greatest contribution of the modern project are not spectacular whole objects, but the recovery of nearly half a million fragments and shards of "everyday life" from centuries ago. They come from everyday places where things were thrown away – fragments of animal bones and charred plants from meals and feasts, shards of pottery, broken tools and discarded fragments of copper, calcite and other stones produced during the manufacture of tools and regalia.

While the mounds and public buildings are key parts of the community layout, modern archaeologists are also concerned with the more mundane aspects of what families were eating (and not eating), their toolkits and their other activities.

In sum, the Castalian Springs Archaeological Project has begun to change "that extraordinary mound at Bledsoe's Lick" into the centerpiece of what was once a vibrant Tennessee town and ancient capital of Sumner County.

The Castalian Springs complex of publicly owned archaeological and historical sites is one of the most intriguing in Tennessee – capturing many elements of the significant eras of our history. Now presented as one of Tennessee's State Archaeological Areas, the Castalian Springs Mounds are not open to the public for self-guided tours but guided tours are provided periodically by the Tennessee Division of Archaeology and the Bledsoe's Lick Historical Association.



(Kevin E. Smith is professor of anthropology at Middle Tennessee State University. He is co-author of *Speaking with the Ancestors: Mississippian Stone Statuary of the Tennessee-Cumberland Style* published by University of Alabama Press in 2009. He is currently working on a trilogy concerning the archaeology and history of the Castalian Springs community, the first of which will focus on the prehistoric occupation around the mineral springs.)



Above, left: A large fragment of a "salt boiler" pan showing textile impressions from near the mineral springs. Above, right: Negative-painted Middle Cumberland Changing Woman Rattle from the Castalian Springs Mounds.



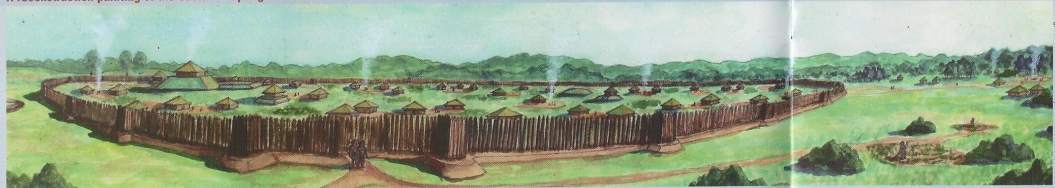
An MTSU Laboratory shot of typical "artifacts of everyday life" being processed, including pottery shards, freshwater snails, and assorted animal bone fragments.



An engraved pendant from Chattanooga shale, Castalian Springs Mounds.



A reconstruction painting of the Castalian Springs Mounds.



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