

“Pulverant Between the Fingers”
The *Aux Arc* Journal documenting the fourth leg of the
Ouachita River float:
Prairion Bayou Recreation Area to Duty Ferry
December 26th – 30th, 2008

In Late October 1804, the William Dunbar & George Hunter expedition reached the area covered by the *Aux Arc*'s 2008 float. It was at this point in time the expedition experienced the drawbacks of the river craft designed by George Hunter and built in Pittsburgh. The boat drafted 2 ½ feet of water and the Ouachita River, over this stretch, was as low as 18 inches. Thus, the expedition had to rent and buy canoes to lighten the load, search the river at each perch for the deepest water, cordell rather than row up the River, and adjust the rowing seats. Some days the expedition covered only two miles (Berry, Beasley, & Clements, 2006)

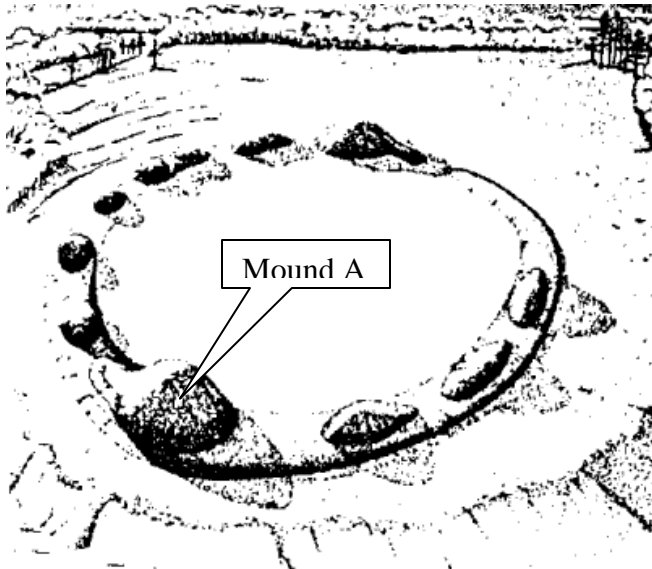


Photo supplied by Tim Richardson

Those on the trip this year, 2008, were: Back Row: Andrew Downs (Pocahontas, AR), Robert Carroll (Sherwood, AR), Bill Runyan (Crossett, AR), Bob Rogers (Fort Worth, TX), and Ed Williams (Little Rock, AR). Middle Row: Norajean Harrell (Little Rock, AR), Robert Rogers (Fort Worth, TX), Laurine Williams (Little Rock, AR), and Harvey & Mary Alexander (Schenectady, NY). Front Row: Larry Layne (Sheridan, AR), Tim Richardson (Little Rock, AR), and Earl Harrell (Little Rock, AR). Not pictured as they joined the trip later were: Wayne Elliott (Jonesville, LA) and John Ed Bartmess (Duty, LA).

In addition, Michael Bethea (Maumelle, AR) joined us at Columbia, Louisiana to work with the public. I want to thank ZET, Inc, (in particular Ovid Switzer, David Cathy, and John Creach), Recca Jones, Brandon Muey, Archie and Virginia Wyant, John Ed & Shirley Bartmess, and the US Army Corps of Engineers –Vicksburg District.

Day 1, December 26th, 2008– Arrival at Prairion Bayou Recreation Area



Walking down Mound A. Photo by Tim Richardson

<http://www.science-frontiers.com/sf114/sf114p01.htm>

I had picked up the keelboat from Chuck Martin's house on Christmas Day and brought the *Aux Arc* to my house to load tents, water, cooking gear, food, and other gear. Judy Downs brought Andrew down from Pocahontas, AR, arriving at the house around 7:30AM. In addition, we had switched vehicles with my son-in-law (i.e., a Miata for a 4-door sedan) and Norajeane & Earl arrived at 8AM. Thus we left the house at 8:15 AM with Andrew and I in the truck towing the *Aux Arc*, followed by Laurine, Harvey & Mary in the sedan, and Norajeane & Earl in Norajeane's car. The remainder of the crew were also driving toward Prairion Bayou in Louisiana with Tim, Larry, Robert, and Bill in Tim's truck and Bob & Robert Rogers driving in from Fort Worth, TX and Wayne Elliott driving in from Baton Rouge, LA.



Photo by Laurine Williams

It was about a 200 mile drive to Prairion Bayou Recreation Area. I stopped for gas in Monticello, AR and the three vehicles arrived at the Recreation Area at 12:30PM. Both Tim and

Bob had arrived around 11:30 AM. A reporter from the Monroe, Louisiana newspaper, *The News Star*, arrived at noon and interviewed Tim and took pictures of the keelboat for a story run in the evening paper (<http://www.thenewsstar.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2008812270316>). At the end of the 2007 float, a local resident and archeologist, Reca Jones had volunteered to take us on a tour of some manmade mounds in the area. I had setup a time for Reca to meet and she was waiting for us and the *Aux Arc* at the Recreation Area.

We left the Recreation Area for a tour about 1PM and as we were leaving, ZET, Inc. (Ovid Switzer, David Cathy, and John Creach) arrived. As in the last two years, ZET, Inc. had volunteered to cook us a nice supper to start off our trip with a bang! Reca took us to the Watson Break archaic mound complex, named after a nearby bayou.

Watson Break is the oldest known mound complex in the America's (i.e., north, central, and south). Evidence indicates that people first occupied the site around 4,000 before present (BP).



That means about 6,000 years ago. The site consists of 11 mounds of various heights all connected by a terrace (see drawing below). Mound and terrace construction began around 3,500 BP, with the last mound completed around 3,000 BP. The site was soon abandoned, with evidence indicating no other activity after abandonment. The evidence indicates that people lived on the terrace and that the complex was used for activities of daily living and was secular in nature.

The tallest mound today is 35 feet. The land is both public and privately owned. There has been some vandalism at this site, however, since this site predates the use of pottery and there were no human remains found at the site, it is hoped that word will spread that this site is not a place to vandalize for money's sake. The next major mound complex did not appear until almost 1,000 years later at Poverty Point in Northeast Louisiana. (http://www.lpb.org/programs/povertypoint/pp_transcript.html)

Archeologist do not know who lived at the Watson Break complex, why they choose to live there, why the mounds were built, the day-to-day activities at the complex, or why the site was abandoned & not re-occupied. (Saunders, et al, 2005)

Reca took us on a two hour tour of the entire terrace and mound complex. Reca grew up just a few miles from the complex and while folks in the area knew there was something there, Reca was the first person, in 1981, to document the mounds. She is 79 years old, a trained archeologist, and has been documenting the Watson Break complex almost all of her adult life.

Harvey Alexander, a professor of science, spent most of the tour chasing after flora and fauna, picking up snakes and discussing what sub-species all the oak trees were. It was a warm day for all of us, in the mid to high 70's, which is unseasonable, even for Louisiana, this time of the year. At the end of the tour, we presented Recca with a bottle of Evan Williams bourbon. We got back



the Recreation area about 3:30 and spent the time until dark setting up our tents and launching the *Aux Arc*.

ZET, Inc. outdid themselves this year, serving up frog legs, fries, buffalo, catfish, and bream. Later Ovid entertained us with a light show. We first presented each with a bottle of Evan Williams bourbon and later a picture of the *Aux Arc* under sail with all our signatures. Many thanks to Ovid, David, and John. We spent the evening doing some star gazing and catching up with folks we have not seen for a year. The remainder of the night was typical Recreation Area traffic, folks coming through at all hours, shining their headlights on our tents, some nosier than others. The night was cloudless and very warm.

Day 2, December 27th, 2008 – Prairion Bayou Recreation Area to Riverton Recreation Area: River miles 143.5 to 117.5 (26 miles)

We had 26 miles to go this day. I had thus asked folks to be ready to leave early. On past trips, we typically left around 9 AM, so it came as surprise when the crew was ready to leave at 7:15, all packed up and at the oars. We had one crew member to show, Wayne Elliott. Wayne did not show up until 8:00 AM. I had told Wayne we were leaving between 7:30 and 8:30, so Wayne thought if he split the difference he would be okay. Well, I had underestimated the crew, so I will take the blame. Next time I will set a time of 7:30 AM, but as habit will tell, we will leave at 9:00 AM.

Probably one reason we were ready to start sooner was that we decided to cook breakfast on the *Aux Arc*. We had done this on our first trip, but then we had five rather than 14 people. The coffee or coco never did get hot enough and forget the grits.

We got underway at 8:15AM, Saturday morning, December 27th. The forecast was for strong southerly winds at 20 mph, with gusts of 30 mph. We were not disappointed. While we started off with three sets of four rowers each, we soon changed to two sets of six rowers each to just keep a steady pace of 3 mph forward speed. At about river mile 140 the wind had really picked up, with waves splashing water over the bow. We pulled to the west bank to take a 30 minute break and to hope the wind would abate. As Bob Rogers says, "We had honest to God whitecaps." After this rest we took off and almost immediately we were hit with a strong blast of wind. The wind blew off Wayne's tri-corn into the river. Andrew quickly bent over and snatched the hat out of the river, but in doing so, his flintlock pistol slide out of it's holster and into the Ouachita.



Wayne Elliott:
Photo by Laurine Williams

Soon after, we spotted a man and his son on their boat dock holding a large sign which read “Welcome Aux Arc.” These two soon launched out in their jon boat, with sign in tow, to circle the *Aux Arc* and talk to us about our trip so far. What a joy to get these types of response to our trip and what joy to interact with such wonderful people. I grew up on the Mississippi river and we were called “river rats.” It is a welcome surprise to be greeted by so many Ouachita river rats.

We continued to row alternating teams every hour. A cookie break was at 10AM, followed by lunch of crackers, hard cheese, salami sausage, and oranges. The wind continued so strongly to blow that we took another break, facilitated by the wind blowing into the wet bank. However, the wind did begin to abate by early afternoon, which at first was welcome, but was a warning of a change in the weather.

At river mile marker 120.5 the Ouachita river makes a sharp turn or bends to the east. It is at this location that a tall cliff abuts the river. The cliffs are a shear drop, with bands of dark, black, and clay colored stripes. Dunbar did not mention this cliff in his journals, however, Hunter recorded in this journal on Thursday, November 1st, 1804”...passed a sandy cliff about 100 feet perpendicular above the water near which [we] went ashore to examine a stratum of blackish substance looking like stone coal, but which proved to be only indurated clay colored with iron, easily pulverant between the fingers...” (Berry, Beasley, & Clements, 2006, p. 36) This quote could lend some credence to my and perhaps others peoples thoughts that Hunter was looking for mineral riches and Dunbar was looking for good cotton and tobacco land. At this bend we still had about 3 miles to go and the time was 4:45, sun down in 30 minutes.

We arrived near Riverton around 5:30, not only had the sun set, but dark clouds had rolled in,



Bob Rogers serving up poached eggs to Larry Layne & Earl Harrell.
Photo by Tim Richardson

blocking out any ambient light. We at first placed the keelboat on the west side of the river to offer some wind break if needed, but once the lights of Columbia Lock & Dam we clearly visible, we moved the *Aux Arc* to the east side of the river to begin searching for the entrance to the

Riverton Recreation Area. The sky was black, with no light; we did hit a few snags, but managed to locate the entrance. Just as we turned in the sky opened up, not with any light, but gobs and gobs of rain.



A wet Ed & Laurine Williams, Earl and Wayne. Photo by Tim Richardson

At this point in time, Bob Rogers was at the helm and the six rowers were Harvey Alexander, Wayne Elliott, Robert Carroll, Ed Williams, Tim Richardson, and Earl Harrell. All seven had on what rain gear they had. The remaining seven had dropped the side and front curtains. In other words, the seven inside had no visuals on what was happening outside. Mary Alexander stationed herself on the step at the front curtain and would act as message echoer between the rowers in the front and the helmsman in the stern. With Andrew

balancing on the ice chest at the rear of the cabin, and Mary centered in the front, Bill, Laurine (with the charts), Larry, Norajean and young Robert stood side to side in the cabin and balanced with the rocking of the *Aux Arc*. Holding the side curtains in place took some effort as the wind and rain kept blowing them about. The tents had been moved inside from the roof when the rain began, so space was a bit cramped.

Bob kept the *Aux Arc* close to the bank as we had almost no light, except for a flash of lightening. What flashlights we had were not powerful enough to cut through the heavy rain. At first we came upon an inlet, with thoughts this was the recreation area. We stopped and quickly surmised this was not the place. In addition, Laurine had referenced the river map and told us to continue on.

Unfortunately, but in a sense luckily, someone had installed permanent concrete and steel pylons to delineate the boundaries of the swimming beach. Hitting a traditional river buoy a boat can bounce or shy away. However, with a permanent buoy there comes a sudden halt. Thus, hitting the concrete buoy let us know we were at the Recreation Area, but we also heard some wood cracking. I knew it was not the hull, but, either an oar or tholl pin. Mary Alexander had been providing what light we could use and also announced, "We are there."

The seven of us beached the *Aux Arc*, got off, tied her to the nearest post and sought the nearest shelter. This was a nearby kiosk, which had lots of information, but nothing on the location of the picnic pavilion that I knew was at this Recreation Area. Wayne Elliott took our only

flashlight and lit out across the Recreation Area in search of the pavilion. Wayne came back shortly to explain where the pavilion was.

Earl and I followed Wayne's instruction and struck out to find the best route to the pavilion as Wayne had warned us about a ditch full of water. Once we had determined the best route, Earl



Mary, Bill, Andrew, Harvey & Tim.
Photo by Laurine Williams

and I went back to *Aux Arc* to tell the remaining people to hold tight until the rain abates, as with most thunder storms, it came on and should leave quickly. There was a cell phone or some type of radio tower about a mile away that was taking multiple lightening hits during storm.

The rain did abate and we moved our dry sleeping gear to the picnic pavilion. We fired up the two charcoal braziers to boil up some hot coco and to dry socks and shoes. However, we had a cold supper of hard cheese, salami sausage, crackers, and trail mix. The originally scheduled potato soup fixings were buried somewhere in the *Aux Arc*, inaccessible as an aftermath of stowing tents, bags, and gear to prevent their soaking during the storm. Since it was unknown if another storm was approaching, I went back to the *Aux Arc* to move as much perishable gear high enough to keep the water way.

Except for Mary Alexander, who got wet helping spot for us, the other six in the cabin stayed dry. Even those that rowed were mostly wet in areas not covered by their rain gear. Norajean & Earl Harrell and Laurine Williams discovered that the restrooms were not only dry but had a heater. Thus, these three bedded down in the ladies room, which they dubbed "The Comfort Inn" and Andrew bedded down on the men's side. The remainder slept under the picnic pavilion. All stayed warm, even as the temperature plummeted after the storm.

Day 3, December 28th, 2008 – Riverton Recreation Area to Columbia, Louisiana: River miles 117.5 to 110 (17.5 miles)

The next morning we warmed up with a breakfast of fried ham and boiled potatoes. Ed, Harvey, and Bill Runyan bailed out the *Aux Arc*. There was about 2 to 2 1/2 inches of water in the bilge. Bob Rogers discovered that a portion of the rudder had broken, perhaps when we hit the first set of snags coming in from the river into the Riverton inlet. We raised the mast, hoisted the EARA

pennant, and left Riverton Recreation Area at 11:00 AM, two hours later than normal, but much dryer. We then proceeded to traverse the Columbia Lock & Dam.

Robert Carroll had a marine band radio and as we approached the lock, I call the lockmaster. I said, “Keelboat *Aux Arc* requesting permission to lock through.” The lockmaster replied, “Are you are Riverton?” which after answering the affirmative, the lockmaster said, “We will be right down to lock you through.” Soon two vehicles drove up to the lock, which is on the east side of the river, and the lockmaster opened the gates, warned us about some flotsam, and then asked us to tie up on the port side so the assistant lockmaster could get some photos. The lock dropped us about 10 to 12 feet.



Norajean plugs her ears. Photo supplied by Tim

Once clearing the lock and the tail waters of the dam, I gave a nod to Bob Rogers at the helm, who proclaimed, “Man the braces and sheets.”; “Unfurl the mainsail.”; “Hoist the mainsail.” The appointed crew rushed to the braces and sheets, three crew members unfurled the mainsail, and Earl hoisted the mainsail. The sail filled with air and propelled the *Aux Arc* down river. All proclaimed, “This sure beats rowing.”

As we approached within a mile of Columbia the swivel gun “Mike Fink” was put into service to alert or warn the fine people of Columbia of the imminent arrival of the keelboat *Aux Arc*. We arrived at 2:00PM. To a crowd of about 50 to 60 people and spent the next 30 minutes showing folks the keelboat, shooting “Mike Fink” one more time, and securing the *Aux Arc* for an overnight stay. Later Tim, Larry, and Michael

gave an hour presentation at the Community Coffee Shop on the Dunbar-Hunter expedition, hunting along the Ouachita River, and rope making. The remainder of the crew checked into the “Captain’s Quarters” a bed & breakfast next to the levee.

At about 4:00 PM several of us got into Michael Bethea’s truck to begin the shuttle process of bringing all vehicles, except for Norajean’s, to Jim Bowie’s Way Station Restaurant. Norajean and Laurine planned to drive back to Little rock on Monday. We got back to Columbia around



Robert & Larry. Photo by Tim Richardson

7:00PM and went to the Mexican food restaurant in Columbia for supper. All stayed at the B&B except for Andrew and Tim, who stayed on the *Aux Arc*. It had been a long two days on the river and all welcomed the night sleep.

Day 4, December 29th, 2008 – Columbia, Louisiana to Archie Wyant’s: River miles 110 to 90.5 (20.5 Miles)



Bob & Robert Rogers, photo by Robert Carroll

We ate breakfast at the Community Coffee Shop and loaded our gear. Norajeane and Laurine left our crew. They stayed on in Columbia to do some sightseeing and shopping before heading back to Little Rock. On the way home Norajeane’s car broke down in Pine Bluff. They had to rent a car to get home.

We left Columbia at 9:00 AM, to a small but enthusiastic crowd. The sky was clear and the temperatures moderate. We rowed in teams of four. One hour rowing and two hours off was a schedule appreciated by all. The wind was favorable at times and we were able to sail a few miles. At one point, under sail, the river took a sharp bend to the right putting the wind abeam of starboard. The means instead of the wind coming from behind, the wind was coming from the side. We moved a number of

people to the port side to tip the *Aux Arc* a bit. The idea was to determine if the chine, the juncture of the side and bottom planks of the hull, would create enough resistance to keep the *Aux Arc* from sliding or being pushed sideways by the wind. It did not work as the wind pushed us sideways.

We still made good time getting to Archie Wyant’s place around 2:30 PM. Archie has the only paved boat ramp between Columbia and Bayou Dan, about 28 miles. It was decided that rather than setup our tents, at the suggestion of Archie, we would move his bass boats from underneath their carport and sleep under the carport. Archie and his wife Virginia were excellent hosts. We had several of Archie’s adult children stop by and visit us and one brought us a couple of pounds of boudin sausage for breakfast. We gathered wood for a campfire and had our first real campfire supper of the trip. I called it “chicken pasta primavera”, but the name soon changed to “possum pasta primavera.” Interesting happenings; After a lively discussion around the campfire on a variety of subjects all went to bed, I guess Archie’s dogs, six or seven all together, did not take well to first the sudden silence and then all of the snoring, for Archie’s dog took to barking and hollin’, making a terrible racket! We of course began yelling back at these dogs, but to no avail. Tim Richardson finally got up, gathered all the hounds



Bill Runyan, photo by Robert Carroll

around him, and spoke to these canines in a soft voice explaining the reason for all the snoring. These canine noise makers must have clearly understood what Tim was saying, as they all dispersed to their favorite nightly sleeping spot. We never heard another peep from this pack, even when folks had to get and use the facilities.

Day 5, December 30th, 2008 – Archie Wyant’s to Duty Ferry: River miles 90.5 to 81. (9.5 miles)



John Ed Bartmess, photo by Tim

Well, John Ed Bartmess was to show up at 7:30 AM, but some folks are late, some are early, and some are just plain unpredictable. John Ed was one of those early types. He and his wife Shirley pulled into Archie’s place at 6:30 AM. We all had to get up and greet our newest crew member, thus, leaving our warm bed, as the early morning temperature was 28 degrees. We soon had the campfire stoked up with John Ed and Tim holding the coffee pot over the fire using a paddle. Archie had given us two dozen eggs the night before and Bob Rogers, our cook, decided to poach the eggs and steam the boudin. Not everyone likes poached eggs, but for me this is the optimal method of preparing eggs. Both Earl and I had four each, wonderful. We loaded our gear again, got John Ed settled in with an oar, and we headed down river at 9:00 AM. Again we had three teams and each was to row an hour or three miles, whichever came first. The first team did just fine. The second team had Robert Rogers as the pace setting rower. Well, I guess Robert had a lot of stored up energy he wanted to dispense with this last day of rowing, cause Robert set a torrid pace for most of

the hour. I was part of that team and I am thinking is this a scene out of the movie “Ben Hur” and am I Charleton Heston.

John Ed did not have enough of this fun and joined the third team for the final hour into Duty Ferry. We arrived near Duty Ferry around noon, but before heading down the ferry ramp we first dropped off several of the crew at the Duty campground. The campground was closer to the vehicles than the ramp. We had a short walk to the restaurant to get the trailer. John Ed had gotten permission from the State of Louisiana, who owns the ferry, to allow us to use the ferry ramp to pull out the *Aux Arc*. Many thanks to John Ed for getting the okay. We pulled out the *Aux Arc* in typical fashion and drove back to the restaurant to unload our gear. Ovid and David of ZET, Inc had driven down to the restaurant and met us there with some cold refreshments, many thanks to these fine fellows. We all parted ways around 2:00PM, with many a hug, pat on the back, and promises to make it to New Orleans one of these trips. It is truly appreciated and a heart felt thanks to all of the wonderful people that helped this crew of 16 folks make in down the Ouachita River. We could not make this trip without the support we have gotten from all kinds of folks. Total length of the trip, if we had gone in straight line, was 62.5 miles. So ends this log.

Ed R. Williams

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