

Site may have been Chinookan chief's home

MEGLER, Wash. (AP) — It's a collection that might be found on the living room mantel of a world traveler or on an episode of Antiques Roadshow. Ceramics made in China. A tea caddy shipped over from England. Flintlock muskets and iron daggers. Glass beads and clay tobacco pipes.

These were signs of wealth and power originating from all corners of the world in the early 1800s.

All were found buried below scotch broom and layers of dirt about a mile northwest of the Astoria-Megler Bridge.

Excavations over several years lead archeologists to believe this spot near the mouth of the Columbia River may have been home to one of the

Pacific Northwest's most decorated and influential Indian chiefs.

National Park Service archaeologist Doug Wilson says artifacts found at Lewis and Clark's Station Camp suggest to him the site may have served as a part-time home of Chinookan Chief Concomly.

"The amount of fur trade items is really quite astounding," Wilson said in a phone interview last week. "We suspect this village was, if not inhabited by Concomly, then certainly one of his relatives would have been living there."

The discovery of many of these artifacts, which Wilson calls "a very rare find," began largely by accident, and it is leading to a dramatic change in the

long-term plans for the area.

Four years ago, with the bicentennial the Lewis and Clark expedition fast approaching, work was beginning on a new riverside park designed to celebrate the explorers' first stop upon reaching the mouth of the Columbia in November 1805.

A stretch of U.S. Highway 101 just to the northwest of the Astoria-Megler Bridge was to be shifted inland to free up a swath of land along the river that marked the site of historic Station Camp, where Lewis and Clark's expedition stayed for nearly two weeks.

Impact studies had been completed, state money had been set aside and a vision that was borne seven years earlier finally was under way.

Then everything came screeching to a halt.

In September of 2005, while digging a trench for fiber optic cable, a contractor discovered centuries-old bones of Chinook Indians, the tribe that once controlled trade up and down the river and enjoyed years of success thanks to its strategic location.

"That shut the project down," said David Szymanski, superintendent of Lewis and Clark National Historical Park. "It became clear that putting a road on or near a known burial site would be inappropriate, insulting actually."

And so the original plan was scrapped. The target date of early 2006 came and went, as did the bicentennial. The site re-

mained unchanged—the curious and historic St. Mary's Church sitting amongst a field of grass beside the highway.

What has changed, however, is the scope of the project.

"We were so caught up in the Lewis and Clark Bicentennial, it probably made us miss the other stories that were equally important," Szymanski said. "I think we can focus on the true significance of the site."

Instead of getting frustrated by the delay, planners returned to the drawing board re-energized by the archaeological findings and excited by the new possibilities. The pressure of the bicentennial deadline lifted, officials could now expand their focus for the park.

Wilson's crew gave them

plenty to work with.

Excavations, now complete, revealed remains of a Chinook plank house, as well as thousands of artifacts ranging from trade items to sturgeon bones. The site gives archeologists their first good look at a Chinook summer village, Wilson said. The tribe would spend winters inland and move to the coast for the warmer months, trading with Europeans and Americans when ships arrived at the mouth of the Columbia. The dig uncovered many high-status items, which offer an indication of the tribe's experience in trade.

Chief Concomly, the legendary one-eyed leader of the Chinooks, was the principal figure of trading along the Columbia.

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