Chicagoland Archaeologists believe they found remnant of Civil War site in Near South Side park

By Mitch Smith
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Just east of 32nd Street and Rhodes Avenue on Friday, on a patch of Near South Side parkland that had been undisturbed for generations, Scott Demel dug toward a forgotten piece of the Civil War.

There's a sidewalk a few feet away and a high-rise apartment building across the street — nothing to suggest that below the moisture-starved grass is where about 30,000 captured Confederate soldiers were held prisoner, many ill or dying.

But under 150 years worth of accumulated dirt, Demel and his team of mostly volunteer diggers uncovered limestone that likely made up the foundation of Camp Douglas, the most important legacy of Chicago's role in the War between the States.

"It's exciting," said Demel, a Northern Michigan University archaeologist, as he stared at a piece of Camp Douglas poking through the dirt for the first time in more than a century.

After Demel and other archaeologists spent several years mapping out potential sites, a team from Northern Michigan, Loyola University Chicago and the Camp Douglas Restoration Foundation homed in on what is now Lake Meadows Park and dug for four days last week.

Named after U.S. Sen. Stephen A. Douglas, who owned the 60-acre site where the camp's 200 buildings stood, Camp Douglas was initially a training site for about 25,000 Union soldiers, many of them black.

In 1862 it was adapted as a prison camp. In 1864, anti-war activists staged the "Camp Douglas Conspiracy," a failed attempt to free prisoners in hopes of disrupting that year's presidential election, according to the Encyclopedia of Chicago. By the end of the war, more than 4,000 rebel soldiers had died there — and the final resting place for many of them was Oak Woods Cemetery, where such famed black Americans as Harold Washington, Jesse Owens and Ida B. Wells are buried.

Camp Douglas was demolished after the Civil War, the wooden posts and limestone structures that remained eventually sinking into the Near South Side earth.

Now a small but enthusiastic group of academics and volunteers is trying to bring Camp Douglas back into the city's consciousness.

"This is probably the most significant Civil War site in Chicago," said historian Robert Girardi, who was at the dig site early Friday morning.

The Camp Douglas Restoration Foundation hopes to one day construct a replica barracks with a museum commemorating both Camp Douglas and the broader role of African-Americans in the Civil War.
Last week marked the first known excavation of the camp.

The archaeologists endured the hot weather while digging three holes until most of them could stand inside, their eyes below the surrounding grass.

Two holes were mostly empty, with some artifacts and pipes turning up, but nothing that could be traced definitively back to Camp Douglas, said David Keller, the foundation's managing director.

The third hole, a 6-by-6-foot excavation led by Demel, was more promising.

Using surviving maps of the fort, dig leaders knew they were near the site of the old headquarters building.

On one end of Demel's plot, the earth was deep black. That area bordered a line of bricks, which bordered limestone.

The black area and the bricks were likely remnants from a series of now-demolished homes built there during the turn of the 20th century.

But the limestone next to it, which Demel believes survived mostly unscathed in a side yard between two of those former houses, appeared to be from the Camp Douglas headquarters building.

"This is a like a shot in the dark, trying to find a remnant of the wall in between two houses that used to be there," Demel said. "We think we have."

Camp Douglas Restoration Foundation leaders want to hold more digs, perhaps on the grounds of nearby John J. Pershing Elementary or Olivet Baptist Church. Keller would like to involve Chicago Public Schools students in the excavation.

In the meantime, Keller said, he's thrilled that they've found what they believe to be a portion of Camp Douglas.

"Now we can say, 'Physically, we've done something,'" he said. "It's more than a dream."