

AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF THE 23 ACRE MATAGORDA COUNTY  
BIRDING NATURE CENTER IN NORTH-CENTRAL  
MATAGORDA COUNTY, TEXAS

Texas Antiquities Permit Number 2182

by

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AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF THE 23 ACRE MATAGORDA COUNTY  
BIRDING NATURE CENTER IN NORTH-CENTRAL  
MATAGORDA COUNTY, TEXAS

BVRA Project Number 99-07

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## **ABSTRACT**

Brazos Valley Research Associates (BVRA) conducted a 100% pedestrian survey of a 23 acre tract of land, the site of the proposed Matagorda County Birding Nature Center in north-central Matagorda County, Texas on May 9-10, 1999. Both State and Federal agencies were involved in this project that was conducted under Texas Antiquities Committee permit number 2182 and COE permit 21610. The project area was investigated by shovel probing and backhoe trenching. No prehistoric or historic sites were identified in the project area, and it is recommended that construction be allowed to proceed as planned. Copies of the final report are on file at the Division of Archeology, Texas Historical Commission and Texas Archeological Research Laboratory in Austin, Texas; the Corps of Engineers, Galveston District; Matagorda County Nature Center, Inc.; and BVRA in Bryan, Texas.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

BVRA is appreciative of the assistance provided by the Matagorda County Nature Center, Inc. throughout this project. Jack O. Brannon, representative of the Nature Center, provided maps and was present during the entire field survey to ensure that major construction areas were tested. He also arranged for a backhoe and operator. Special thanks to Dennis A. Mueck, District Conservationist with the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service for visiting the project area and sharing his knowledge of local soils. At the state level, Jean Hughes, Assistant Curator of Records at the Texas Archeological Research Laboratory (TARL) in Austin, Texas checked the TARL files for previously recorded sites in the project area. Bryan Guevin of the Corps of Engineers, Galveston District, and Ed Baker of the Texas Historical Commission, Archeology Division, were the reviewers for this project. All figures present in this report were prepared by Lili Lyddon of Lyddon Illustrations of Wellborn, Texas.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Matagorda County Nature Center, Inc. proposes to construct a park on a 23 acre tract of land in north-central Matagorda County, Texas (Figure 1). The project area is bounded on the north by State Highway 35, on the south by the Colorado River, and on the east and west by private land (Figure 2). The project area is depicted on the Markham topographic quadrangle, dated 1995 (Figure 3). Proposed construction consists of a River Outdoor Educational Facility, trails, bridges, prairie restoration, wetlands, butterfly garden, parking lot, flower garden, and kiosk.

Matagorda County contains numerous significant archaeological sites, both prehistoric and historic, and the area has been the subject of several major cultural resources investigations. Realizing the potential for sites within the proposed park area, the Texas Historical Commission, Division of Archeology, requested an archaeological survey by a professional archaeologist. In order to satisfy this requirement, the Matagorda County Nature Center, Inc. retained BVRA to conduct the survey that was performed under Texas Antiquities permit 2182, Corps of Engineers (COE) permit 21610 and BVRA project number 99-07. The Principal Investigator was William E. Moore.

The following general discussion of Matagorda County was taken from the 1984-1985 Texas Almanac (Kingston and Harris 1983) and a biological assessment of the Matagorda County Birding Nature Center (Brannon 1999). Matagorda County is situated in Southeast Texas and consists of 1157 square miles. Elevation in the county varies between sea level and 70 feet above sea level. Overall, the topography is characterized as flat broken by bays. The county is drained by the Colorado River, which bisects the county, and numerous creeks. Annual rainfall averages 47.29 inches. The January minimum temperature is 48 degrees, and the July maximum temperature is 90 degrees. These climatic conditions create a growing season of 296 days. The biological assessment (Brannon 1999) contains an in-depth discussion of the native plants within the project area.

There is no current soils book for Matagorda County. According to the local Natural Resources Conservation Service office (NRCS) in Bay City, the soils in the county are currently being reassessed.

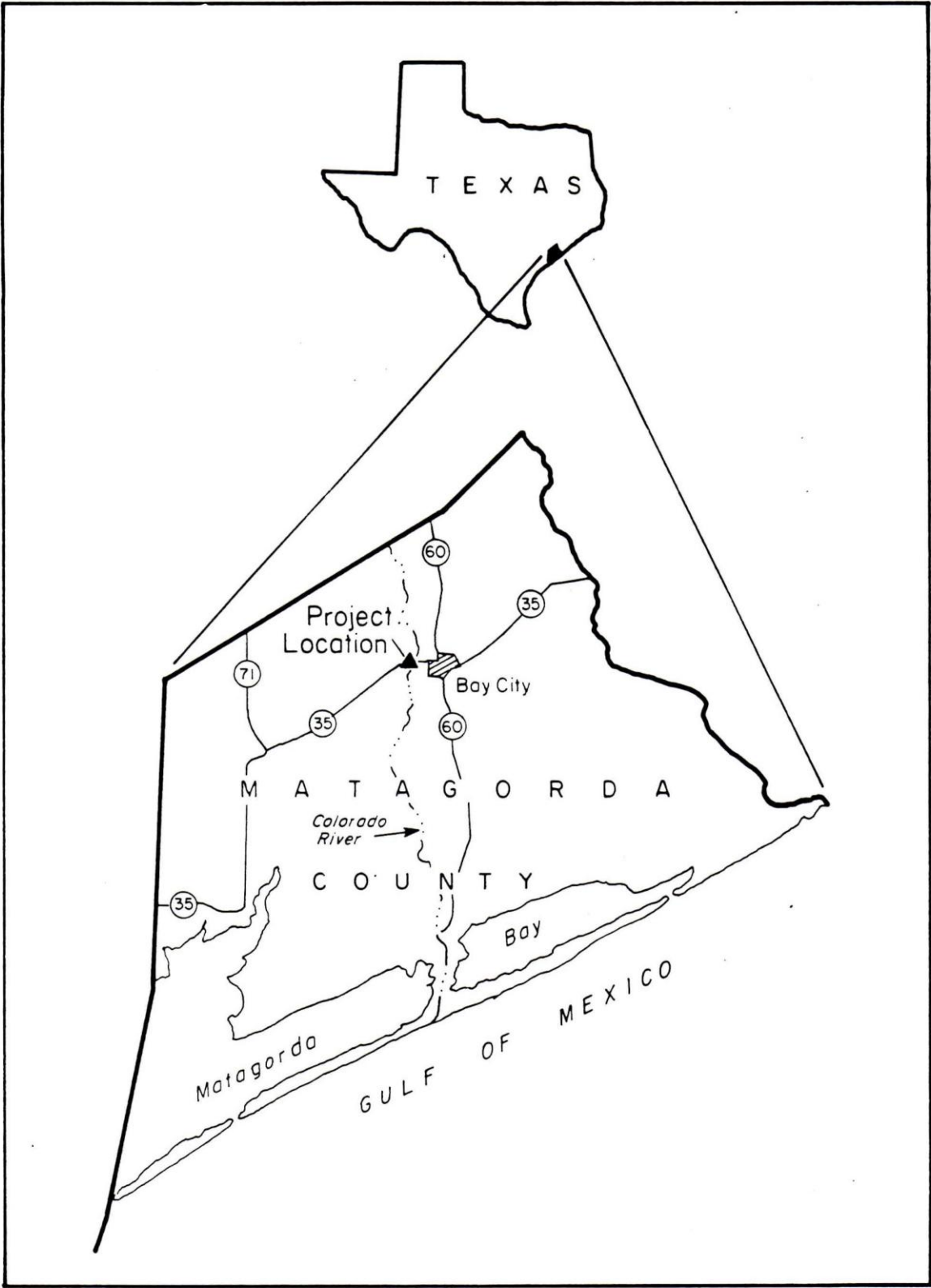


Figure 1. General Location Map

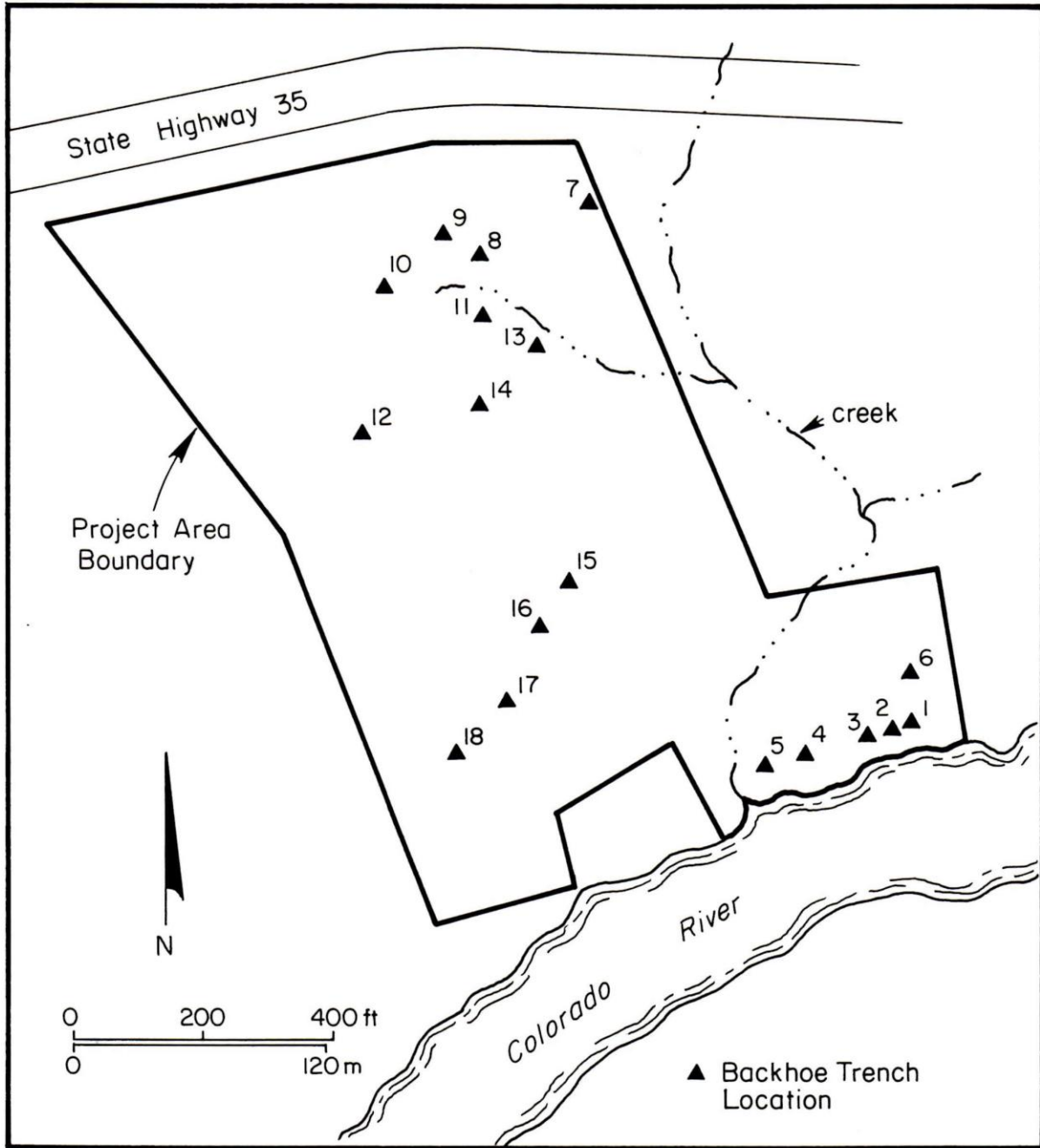


Figure 2. Project Area Map



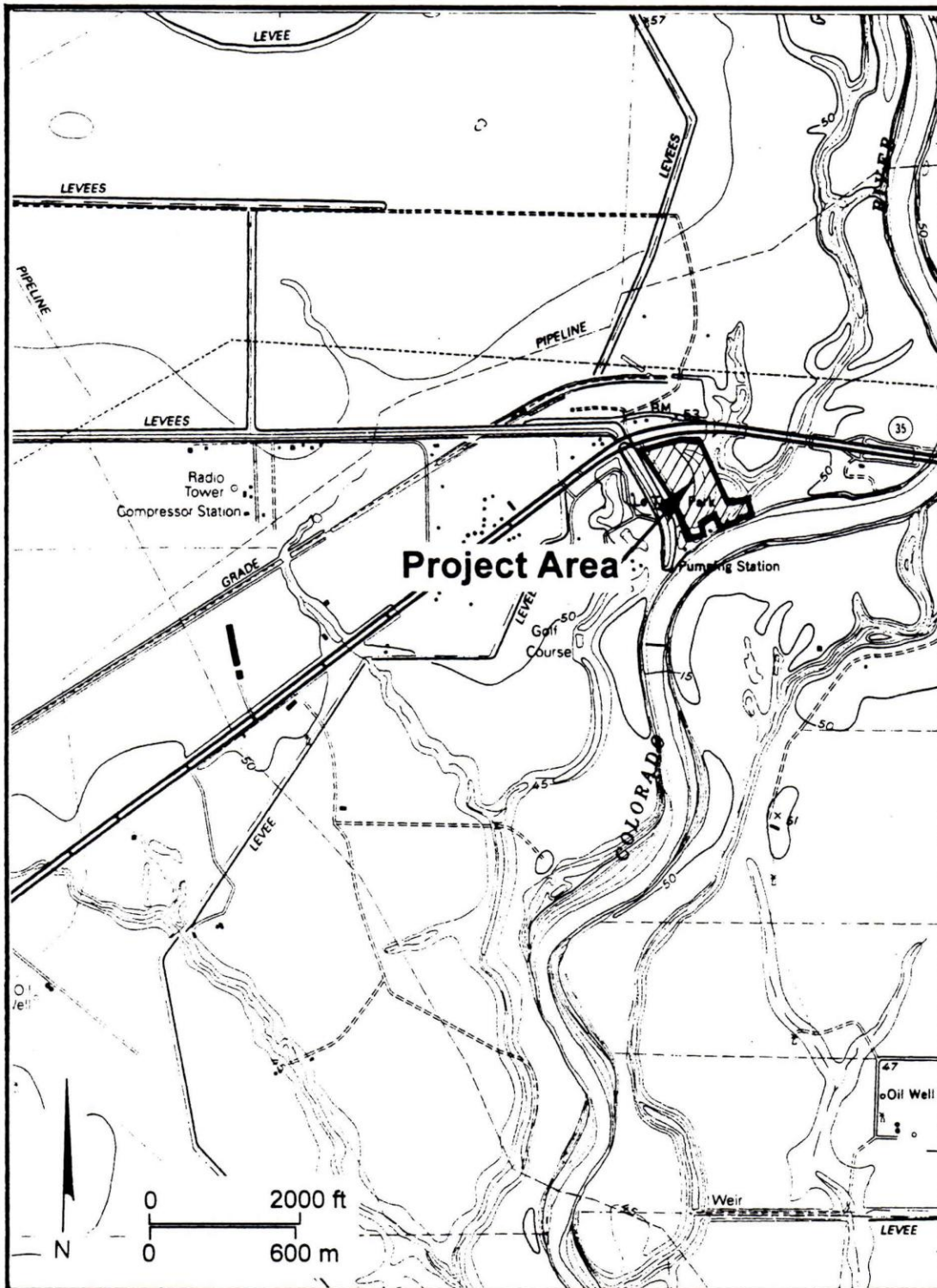


Figure 3. Project Area as Depicted on Topographic Map

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND

According to a recently published planning document for the Central and Southern Planning Region of Texas (Mercado-Allinger et al. 1996:Figure 1.1.4), Matagorda County is situated within the Southern Coastal Corridor archeological study region. In 1985, according to a statistical overview prepared by the Texas Historical Commission (Biesart et al. 1985:159), Matagorda County contained 26 recorded sites. The site files at TARL revealed 116 recorded sites at the time of this survey. In 1985, no sites in the county had been excavated, 2 had been tested by hand, and all 26 had been surface collected. Fourteen recorded prehistoric sites in the county were Late Prehistoric and five sites were listed as Archaic (Biesart 1985:165).

It is beyond the scope of this report to discuss in detail the archaeological background of Matagorda County, especially when numerous contract reports are available. The interested reader is referred to the statistical overview (Biesart et al. 1985), the planning document published by the Texas Historical Commission (Mercado-Allinger et al. 1996), and an article entitled *A Model for Cultural Succession for the Coastal Bend Area of Texas* (Corbin 1974) for more detailed information regarding the archaeology of Matagorda County.

The first archaeological examination was conducted in 1932 when Woolsey recorded the Battle Island site (41MG1). In 1941, G. E. Arnold of the University of Texas at Austin reported finding one large prehistoric campsite and three shell middens. In 1971, when Alton K. Briggs published *Archeological Resources in the Texas Coastal Lowlands and Littoral*, only four sites were known in the county, and one had been destroyed by Hurricane Carla.

One of the early (and most extensive at the time) studies in the county was a survey of the Matagorda Bay area which included an inspection of the lower reaches of the Colorado River (Fritz 1975). This study used a shallow draft boat for a preliminary investigation of the Colorado River as the Pleistocene terraces could only be easily examined from the present river channel. No sites along the Colorado River were seen from the boat; "the cut banks were devoid of visible archeological remains" (Fritz 1975:10). Also, spot checks on foot at various points along the Colorado and its West Branch yielded negative information, and local residents knew of no prehistoric sites along these drainages. Therefore, no further work along this drainage was conducted.

In 1980, archaeologists from The University of Texas at San Antonio surveyed an area adjacent to the lower reaches of the Colorado. No sites were found along the river, and the prehistory of Matagorda County was classified as "poorly understood at present" (Gibson and Gibson 1980).

## FIELD METHODS

This project was performed using the 100% pedestrian survey method supported by backhoe trenching. Selected areas were examined by 5 shovel probes, and it was determined that the project area could best be examined with a backhoe. Eighteen backhoe trenches were excavated across the project area (Appendix I), and it is believed that the 23 acres were more than adequately sampled. Prior to commencing the field survey, the site records at TARL were checked for the presence of previously recorded archaeological sites in the project area and vicinity. No sites were found to exist within the project area. In fact, no sites are plotted along the Colorado River on the Bay City and Markham quadrangles! Excavated matrix (a sample from each bucket until clay was reached) from each backhoe trench was screened using 1/4 inch hardware cloth, and the data obtained were recorded in the field journal and on a log. The location of the backhoe trenches along the river were measured from the confluence of the creek and the river using a 30 meter tape. These measurements were used to plot the approximate location of the backhoe trenches on the project area map (Figure 2). The remaining 12 trenches were plotted with the assistance of Mr. Brannon and their locations are approximate.

## RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The site records at TARL yielded no previously recorded archaeological sites in the project area. A review of the literature revealed that significant prehistoric and historic sites are present in Matagorda County. No archaeological sites in the county are listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). There are, however, two sites in the county that are listed as a State Archeological Landmark (SAL). These are the Mad Island Marsh Preserve (41MG60) on the coast and the Caney Creek Historic Shipwreck (41MG32). Numerous pre-twentieth century shipwrecks are known in the county. This investigation examined 23 acres, and no archaeological sites were found.

A series of aerial photographs dating from 1943 to 1995 were provided by the NRCS office in Bay City. They confirmed that the levee to the west of the project area was in place in 1943 and that little change has occurred with the exception of more trees present between 1981 and 1995 suggesting that the area may have been used in the past for agricultural practices. In 1943, there were wooded areas to the north and west. It appears that the project area and an adjacent section to the east may have been cleared at one time. This would severely disturb any shallow sites present, if any, in this area.

Six backhoe trenches (1-6) were excavated on the bank of the Colorado River, and not one contained cultural materials. The upper stratum in each of the six trenches consisted of a dark loamy clay between 45 and 60 centimeters below the existing ground surface. Below that is dark, dense clay that extends beyond the depth of the proposed construction. This clay stratum resembles basal Pleistocene clays similar to the Beaumont seen along other rivers by the Principal Investigator and confirmed verbally to be Pleistocene by Dennis A. Mueck; therefore, no sites should be found beneath the loamy clay. The remaining 12 trenches were excavated mainly in the areas of proposed wetlands (several in floodplain settings) where extensive earth moving will occur and randomly across the project area on low rises above the floodplain. Not one of these trenches produced cultural materials, and each of the backhoe trenches away from the river contained hard clay at the surface with no sandy or loamy soils present. It is, therefore, believed that the 23 acre tract is a low probability area for prehistoric sites. This statement is based, in part, on the study by Fritz (1975) in which numerous sites were found along lesser drainages but not along the Colorado River or its west branch. This suggests that a pattern is emerging that point to this section of the Colorado River as an area that may be void of prehistoric occupation.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Based on the absence of archaeological sites in the project area, it is recommended that construction be allowed to proceed as planned. It is always possible that archaeological sites are missed during any archaeological survey. Should evidence of a prehistoric or historic site in the project area be discovered during construction, all work should cease immediately. The Archeology Division, Texas Historical Commission, should be notified so that this find can be evaluated before continuing with this project.

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## Appendix I: Backhoe Trench Log

Trench	Length	Width	Depth	Results
01	4 meters	24 inches	1.5 meters	sterile (0-60 cm dark loamy clay; 60-150 cm dark clay)
02	4 meters	24 inches	1.6 meters	sterile (0-60 cm dark loamy clay; 60-160 cm dark clay)
03	4 meters	24 inches	1.5 meters	sterile (0-60 cm dark loamy clay; 60-150 cm dense clay)
04	4 meters	24 inches	1.5 meters	sterile (0-50 cm dark loamy clay; 50-150 cm dense clay)
05	3 meters	24 inches	1.6 meters	sterile (0-50 cm dark loamy clay; 50-160 cm dense clay)
06	3 meters	24 inches	1.4 meters	sterile (0-45 cm dark loamy clay; 45-140 cm dense clay)
07	2 meters	24 inches	.5 meters	sterile (clay at surface)
08	2 meters	24 inches	.5 meters	sterile (clay at surface)
09	2 meters	24 inches	.5 meters	sterile (clay at surface)
10	2 meters	24 inches	.5 meters	sterile (clay at surface)
11	3 meters	24 inches	.5 meters	sterile (clay at surface)
12	3 meters	24 inches	.5 meters	sterile (clay at surface)
13	3 meters	24 inches	.5 meters	sterile (clay at surface)
14	3 meters	24 inches	.5 meters	sterile (clay at surface)
15	3 meters	24 inches	.5 meters	sterile (clay at surface)

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Trench	Length	Width	Depth	Results
16	3 meters	24 inches	.5 meters	sterile (clay at surface)
17	3 meters	24 inches	.6 meters	sterile (clay at surface)
18	3 meters	24 inches	.6 meters	sterile (clay at surface)

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