

Hickory Bluff: High-tech look at the past

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Kevin Cunningham, archaeologist with the Delaware Department of Transportation, said the state has investigated 15,000 sites in the last 20 years; he estimates that Delaware contains 25,000 prehistoric sites and 200,000 historic sites.

"This is the most significant that we have found to date," he said.

The people whose artifacts are being unearthed lived between 1,000 and 5,000 years ago (humans first came to what is now Delaware 10,000 years ago). They were very mobile, camping at various sites throughout the year, and were attracted to the banks of the St. Jones by abundant food and a navigable waterway. In addition to pieces of pottery, Petraglia and his team of archaeologists, working at the site for eight months, have discovered circles of fire-cracked rocks — ancient hearths — and projectile points.

They have also carefully scraped out dirt from what were once post holes — shelters were constructed by shoving bent saplings in the ground and covering them with bark and branches — and storage pits. Chris Egghart of Richmond, Va., said charcoal from fires often filled in old post holes. Age of the site is determined through carbon-dating, accurate to within 50 years, of that charcoal.

Petraglia said the 5-acre site is unusual because a good portion of it, the part nearest the river, has never been cultivated. Ninety-five percent of Delaware's land has been tilled. "This is a fantastic site," he said. "It's like, the day the fire went out, the hearth is still there. It is almost Pompeii-like in that respect."

"And this is state-of-the-art analysis that we are doing here," added Cunningham. "This is not being done anywhere else in the nation. This is a hotbed of experimentation."

For example, new technology allows the excavated soil to be analyzed chemically for residue from decayed organic matter.

"If they were eating rabbits, we will be able to tell that," said Petraglia. "If they were eating plants or roots, we will be able to tell that. The matter may be degraded, but the chemistry is still there."

Archaeologist Ned Heite, owner of Heite Consulting in Camden, occasionally drops by the site.



Dawn Corbett of Hartly catalogs artifacts uncovered at Hickory Bluff, where the soil had never been cultivated.

"We are actually getting a look at what people have theorized about," he said, gazing into the depths of an ancient storage pit. Comparing Hickory Bluff to other sites, he said it is the "difference between knowing all about one house versus knowing all about one town. They've got the whole town here."

Cunningham said the state Department of Transportation tries to preserve important sites as much as possible. A storm-management pond that was planned for part of the Hickory Bluff site, for example, has been relocated and the area for which it was planned will remain untouched.

And the excavation itself is a form of preservation. Petraglia said. All artifacts will be stored in state archives and all reports, analyses and field notes will be compiled into a book which will be available to the public.

"In the past, we were very sheltered and now we are wide-open," he said. "Reports used to be written so that only professionals

could read them, and now we write them for everyone."

In addition, laymen are welcome to visit the site, even to do some digging. "We are going to new levels to get to everybody," said Cunningham. "It's taxpayers' money that we are spending here" — cost of the project so far has been \$500,000 in state and federal grants — "and they deserve to be a part of it."

"This is a way of conveying infor-

mation about our collective heritage and history. We get a better sense of our lives if we can take a look at what came before us," said Petraglia.

"All of us here love archeology," he said. "We have sacrificed a great deal to be archaeologists. When you start finding tools, pottery and arrowheads, you really get a sense of who these people



Michael Petraglia, who is directing the excavation, calls the site "almost Pompeii-like" in its preservation.

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Hickory Bluff is behind the Delaware Department of Transportation building on U.S. 113, Dover. It will be open to the public through the summer from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and other weekdays by appointment. For details or to arrange group tours, call Diane Halsall, (703) 934-2339. For general information, call Kevin Cunningham, 739-3926.

we're. We are bringing this site to life, putting flesh on the bones. We are trying to understand life, to understand our condition. That is really what it is all about."

2062

Dig it: Ancient campsite found

DEL
STATE
NEWS

6/19/98

By **Carlos Holmes**
Assistant editor

DOVER — The preparation of the St. Jones River area for the construction of the future Puncheon Run connector has uncovered a major Native American campsite dating as far back as 5,000 years ago.

Located on the banks of the river about a half-mile southwest of the Delaware Department of Transportation, the site — known as Hickory Bluff — has become one of the largest archaeological excavations on the East Coast, said D. Michael Williams, DelDOT spokesman.

Since archaeologists began excavating the site in January, over 50,000 artifacts have been unearthed — including pottery, stone tools, cooking implements, ancient outdoor fire hearths and the remains of what are believed to have been temporary homes.

Because the site is on a bluff overlooking the river, it was one of the few areas in Delaware that has never been cultivated. "It was a good place for nomadic people to encamp, as it was close to water, food and to a trail which animals used," Mr. Williams said.

"The Hickory Bluff site is almost Pompeii-like in its preservation," said Dr. Michael



Staff photo/John King

Jody Rosentel searches for artifacts at the campsite.

Petraglia, excavation director of Parson Engineer Science, which is conducting the dig. The preserved state, he said, has allowed for the study and conservation of what was a series of ancient campsites.

Mr. Williams said the site reveals much about how Native Americans lived which had only been theory until now. "The primary goal is to extract as much history and information before the Puncheon Run construction is started," he said.

Construction on the Puncheon Run connector — which will connect traffic from U.S. 13 and

South State Street extension to Del. 1 — is expected to begin during the first half of 1999.

Mr. Williams said the excavation will continue throughout the summer into the early fall, and schools, clubs and other interested individuals will be welcome to tour the site and even take part in the dig.

The site excavation takes place from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Friday. To arrange a tour, call Diane Halsall at 760-2129.

Carlos Holmes can be reached at 644-6320 or at carlosh@newszap.com.

Archaeologists discover major Native American site



SIFTING FOR HISTORY: Archaeologist Ian Henry sorts stone fragments found at Hickory Bluff. Photo by Joanna Wilson.

Archaeologists working for the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT) have uncovered a major Native American campsite — dating from 1,000 to 5,000 years ago — along the banks of the St. Jones River in Dover.

Known as "Hickory Bluff," the site has become one of the largest archaeological excavations on the East Coast. Over 50,000 artifacts have been unearthed so far. These include pottery, stone tools, cooking implements, ancient outdoor fire hearths, and remains of what are believed to have been temporary homes.

Because the site is on a bluff overlooking the river, it is one of the few areas in Delaware that has never been cultivated.

Dr. Michael Petraglia, excavation director, said, "The

Hickory Bluff site is almost Pompeii-like in its preservation," allowing study and conservation of what was, in essence, a series of campsites.

The site also reveals much about expanding lifestyle information that had only been theory until now. Carbon dating, plant studies and chemical analysis from decayed organic matter are among the sophisticated state-of-the-art scientific techniques being used to understand native activities.

Schools, clubs and other interested individuals or groups are encouraged to tour the Hickory Bluff site and even take part in the dig. Site hours are 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday to Friday. To learn more about the dig, call Kevin Cunningham at 760-2125. To arrange for a tour, call Diane Halsall at 760-2129.



AN IMPORTANT FIND: John Rutherford holds up a fragment of a soapstone bowl found at Hickory Bluff. Photo by Joanna Wilson.



PREHISTORIC PIT: Archaeologist John Rutherford, who is supervising the dig at Hickory Bluff, explains a deep pit uncovered may have been used for storage by the ancient migratory people who passed through the area. To help keep the contents dry, sand was added to the pit for drainage. Photo by Joanna Wilson.

Indian site discovered in Delaware

50,000 artifacts
uncovered so far

7/1/98

Baltimore
Sun

FROM WIRE REPORTS

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