

A Contemporary Native American Sweat Lodge and Its Archaeological Implications

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In 1998, the Delaware Department of Transportation sponsored the archaeological mitigation of the Hickory Bluff site (7K-C-411) located along the St. Jones River in Dover, Delaware. During the course of the investigations, representatives of the Delaware Nanticoke Indian Tribe became involved in the project. At the close of the fieldwork, members of the project team were invited to participate in a sweat lodge ceremony on the site. The ceremony was held to purify the site prior to its scheduled destruction a few days later. The paper describes the sweat lodge experience as well as the physical trace left by the ceremony. These observations are used to assess potential archaeological evidence for sweat lodge activity on other sites in the region. Moreover, the paper seeks to articulate the personal and archaeological insights gained by the author from participation in the sweat lodge ceremony and the on-site interaction with local Native Americans.

The Hickory Bluff site was located along the St. Jones River in Dover, Delaware. **(Slide of Site)**. The site was centered on the apex of a wide bend of the St. Jones where the meandering river cut a low bluff into the adjacent terrace. At the time of the investigations, the site was forested in open mature hardwoods, with hickory dominating. Excavations at Hickory Bluff were sponsored by the Delaware Department of Transportation and undertaken by Parsons. During the course of the investigation, members of the Delaware Nanticoke Tribe became aware of, and took interest in the project. At the close of the fieldwork, individuals from the Parsons team and a representative from Del-Dot were invited to participate in Sweat Lodge Ceremony on the site. The ceremony was held to purify the site prior to its scheduled destruction a few days later. The sweat lodge was conducted by then Nanticoke Assistant Chief Charlie Clark IV.

This paper details the sweat lodge experience from the archaeologist's perspective and describes the physical residue left by the ceremony. These observations are used to assess potential evidence for sweat lodge activities in the archaeological record. More importantly, however, this paper seeks to articulate the personal, as well as professional lessons learned by this presenter from interacting with Native Americans about, and on the location of, a prehistoric archaeological excavation.

At the start of the ceremony, the area chosen for the sweat lodge was cleared of forest litter (**Slide of pit construction**). A shallow pit was excavated and the rim pit lined with cobbles. The fire for heating the lodge stones was constructed by laying wood in cross-hatch configuration. (**Slide of fire/bison head**) Stones were placed between alternating tiers of wood. While the stones were being heated, yellow poplar saplings adjacent to the site were cut, trimmed and used to construct a wig-wam-style structure over the lodge pit. The domed frame was covered with multiple plies of cotton and wool blankets, euphemistically termed “skins” (**Slide of Lodge Structure**). The finished lodge was roughly circular, with a diameter ca. 2.75 meters. Maximum height was approximately 1.40 meters. The pit in the center of the structure left just enough space for the eight participants to sit with their backs against the wall. An accommodation for a doorway was provided on the east side of the structure facing the fire (**Dark No Slide**). At full dark, the ceremony began with an offering of tobacco and the participants entered the lodge. The limited space inside forced the participants to sit around the lodge pit shoulder to shoulder, either cross-legged or in an upright fetal position.

The sweat lodge ceremony was composed of four segments, each lasting approximately one hour. Known as “doors” each segment was devoted to a cardinal direction. During a “door”, specific prayers, songs and incantations were dedicated to the spiritual association of the respective direction. At the beginning of each segment, the fire tender waiting outside passed three to five rocks into the lodge. Each batch of stones was greeted with a respectful salutation, as well as animated expressions of approval for the degree to which they had been heated. Using a deer antler, the facilitator carefully

arranged the stones in the lodge pit. When first brought in, the stones glowed bright red and cast a dim incandescent light throughout the small space. In the absence of any other illumination, the stones took on a translucent, plasmatic visage. Faint fluctuations in hue gave them pulsating appearance. A loud sizzling hiss accompanied the addition of water, after which the stones became streaked in darkened red. As the stones cooled further, they appeared to fade in color before going dark and leaving the lodge totally devoid of light. Throughout, the facilitator intermittently ladled water over the stones, filling the lodge with a steam that taxed the archaeologist participants to the limits of endurance. While the facilitator took the lead in incantations and drum songs, lodge decorum was open and all participants were encouraged to speak freely of themselves, the ceremony, or of personal reflections or experiences. The mood varied from somber and introspective, to jovial as songs, prayers and incantations were interspersed with stories and even humorous antidotes. At the completion of the four-hour ceremony, the participants exited. After drying off and donning warm clothing, the participants reconvened around the ceremonial fire where a pipe ceremony was held to thank the Creator for the privilege of a having performed a successful sweat lodge.

Use of the sweat lodge was wide spread throughout Native North America and the practice can be seen as a trait common to great number of otherwise geographically and culturally disparate groups. "Sweats" could be taken for social, hygienic, medicinal, or ceremonial and religious purposes. For many peoples, the sweat lodge played an important role in the social and spiritual life of the group. While the sweat lodge is widely reported ethnographically throughout much of the United States, much less is

known about the practice among the Coastal Algonquins. Roundtree describes the sweathouses among the Virginia Algonquins as consisting of small oven-like structures made of samplings and mats. **(Slide of River)** Roundtree also suggests that sweathouses were usually located immediately adjacent to a riverbank. This may account for the paucity of archaeological evidence for sweat lodges in the region.

The lack of archaeological evidence in the Middle Atlantic may also be the result of simple oversight **(Slide of F-98)**. Small shallow pits containing thermally altered stones are not uncommon finds. An example is Feature 98 on Hickory Bluff. Such features are typically interpreted as fire hearths, or as earth ovens in which heated stones were used for indirect cooking. These features, however, bear a striking similarity to the central pit inside the Hickory Bluff sweat lodge.

On the Great Neck Site, 44VB7, a proto-historic village located on Broad Bay just a few miles north of this hotel, this presenter identified and reported a small, nearly circular pattern of 16 plow truncated post molds, measuring 2.37 by 2.13 meters. This structure pattern was interpreted as a specialized storage facility associated with a large, complete Late Woodland longhouse located just to the north **(Slide of VB7 Structure 1)**. In size and form, however, the small post pattern **very** closely resembled the footprint of Hickory Bluff sweat lodge. However, a possible sweat lodge, or other ceremonial association for the small structure was never considered.

While having participated in a contemporary sweat lodge piqued my interest in the possible archaeological evidence, the sweat lodge experience as a whole, as well as the opportunity to interact with Native American on, and about the site being studied, provided by far the greatest insights and reward. There are, of course, limits to what we can learn from contemporary Native American in regard to interpreting archaeological data. On the other hand, there are members of the archaeological community who would question if anything can be gained at all. Some may argue that contemporary Native Americans in the Middle Atlantic have been so assimilated that there is nothing left in the way of folk knowledge that would be of archaeological use. **(Slide of feather dress)** Many individuals, some with extensive formal anthropological training, glibly, derisively even, point to local Native Americans donning feather headdresses and other Great Plains inspired regalia at pow-wows and similar events. I would counter that it is not what one wears on the head, but what one carries in the heart that defines who it is . . . that you are. While relatively little folk knowledge of aboriginal lifeways may have been retained by the outwardly assimilated Native Americans of the Middle Atlantic, **folk values** clearly remain. These values have been sustained and reinforced within relict Native populations, tenaciously clinging to their heritage and identity for centuries, while living along the margins of an institutionally racist society; a society that has largely refused to even acknowledge these peoples' existence. It is from these folk values that we as archaeologists may have the most to learn.

During my on-site discussions with Charlie Clark, it became clear that when an archaeologist and a Native American examined a particular site finding, what is likely to

emerge are almost polar views of that finding's meaning. However, it is through this disparity of view that Middle Atlantic archaeologists and Native Americans could learn from each other. For example, when showing Charlie Clark a small pit into which a set of small, formal cobble tools had been placed together with several large ceramic sherds (**Feature 202**), I referred to the feature as a cache pit; in which the items were stored for future use. Charlie Clark articulated a very different interpretation for the purposeful burial of artifacts. Citing the Native tradition of reverence for the earth, Charlie Clark proposed that certain artifacts may have been buried in the ground in order to "recharge" a spiritual essence--that very act of burying an items in the ground may have carried with it significant religious or ceremonial implications. This Native American interpretation should perhaps be carefully weighed in regard to archaeological finds such as gorgets, tobacco pipes and similar items that clearly have a ceremonial association but are often recovered outside direct mortuary contexts. When I described another finding consisting of discreet area of very low artifact counts, I suggested that the phenomenon represents a maintained area kept clear of debris as domestic space. Charlie Clark countered that such spaces could represent dance circles. He elaborated on the importance of dance in everyday Native American life; and of how dance was a forum open to all members of the group. Again, this Native interpretation should be considered. Dancing among Native Americans was not only as an important social bonding event, but also likely served as a venue for individual expression within the confines of a social and economic system in which the very survival its members depended on conformity and collective behavior. Dancing also likely served to as an outlet for young, unmarried males, whose considerable energies might otherwise be manifested in negative ways. Again, the

archaeologist sees a particular site finding in straight practical or economic terms, while the Native American sees the same archaeological phenomenon as the result of behaviors that fulfill societal, or spiritual needs.

Interaction with local Native Americans at Hickory Bluff site was also not always fully amicable, at least at first (**Generic Excavation Slide**). Central to Native American views, attitudes, and perceptions about archaeology and archaeologists is, of course, the issue of human remains. One specific point over which the Delaware Nanticoke were particularly impassioned, was a characterization in the regional literature of prehistoric people having been buried in “trash pits”, thus implying that they thought of their dead as no more than household waste. Presumably, use of the term “trash pit” was based on the presence of artifacts such as fire-cracked rock, flakes and ceramic sherds. What is perhaps most flawed in this assessment is the conception of what constitutes “trash”. One must consider that the presence of mundane, every day artifacts may have carried meaning when in a mortuary context. While some archaeologists might consider domestic debris trash, some contemporary Native Americans express a very different view. Earl Evans, speaking for the Nanticoke Lenni-Lenape at the 2002 Middle Atlantic Conference, characterized the artifacts recovered from the Black Creek Site in New Jersey, not as trash, but as the physical expression of a way of life—material culture in the truest sense. Charlie Clark more prosaically articulates a Native view of the lithic—“*Stones are the bones on the Earth*”. In considering this saying, one must ask whether the inclusion of lithic artifacts in burial fill, even if they constitute the castoff trappings of everyday

Native life, might have been a ritual gesture or be reflective of societal values and/or religious beliefs.

One of this presenter's most provoking field findings (**Slide of Burial 418**) reported by McLearn and Mouer on the Jordan's Journey Site Complex along the James River below Hopewell, was this Late Woodland burial, Feature 418. The older adult individual was interred in a flexed position. Three fingers of the right hand were curled around a quartzite fire-cracked rock, and the individual appeared to have been clutching the object. (**Overhead View of Burial 418**). Interestingly, the burial was situated adjacent to a large rectangular prehistoric pit containing charcoal, a mass of calcine bone capped by a broken Gaston vessel section. The rectangular pit was surrounded by an arcing cluster of large prehistoric post features. This configuration strongly resembles the well-known depiction of the "dance circle" with the totem posts in the late 16th John White watercolor of Secotan. (**Slide of Burial F-465**). A second Native American burial, Feature 465 was excavated just to the northeast. This individual was interred in an extended position together with a Gaston vessel section. These two burials clearly represent what some might consider "trash" -- fire-cracked rock and ceramic sherds, as a primary deposits in mortuary context. Feature 532 on the same site (**Slide of Burial F-532**) was an early 17th century historic burial containing an older adult male, possibly Samuel Jordan. Resting on the chest area were two rows of nail heads and a small brass plate. One should ask if archaeologists from a completely alien culture would see these items as coffin accouterments, and perhaps the remains of a sacred Christian text, or if they would see

the items as household waste? (*As always, the role of poor organic preservation in the region cannot be overstated.*)

I was also intrigued by a remark made by Charlie Clark concerning the configuration of doorways on traditional Native American houses (**Slide of Model House Door way**).

According to Charlie Clark, a southeast aspect assured that one greeted the sun when one arose. This same theme was expressed by Earl Evans who recalled the traditionally held custom of prostrating oneself to the new day as one exited through a low doorway, typically located on the southeast facing side of a shelter. In the dozens of complete Native American house patterns I have uncovered on various sites, a gap in post spacing along the southeast facing side, while not universal, was by far the most common configuration (**Slide 522 Bridge Structure**). Previously, I regarded these probable doorway locations as having been chosen for lighting and/or passive solar heating considerations. Again, the archaeologist views a phenomenon in purely practical terms, while a Native American observer sees evidence for the expression of values.

Perhaps the greatest personal gain made from listening to Native American voices (**Slide of JR and Joe**), is having been reminded that in their traditional ways, everyday Native activities may have religious or spiritual implications. The simple act of taking an animal, constructing a shelter, or burying an item in the earth, may have spiritual meaning or purpose. Therefore, as archaeological manifestations, evidence of Native American economic activities and ceremonial behaviors, lie intertwined. It is my belief, that evidence for Native American ceremonialism exists on a large number of prehistoric

sites in the region, and that this evidence can be brought to light by closely examining mundane aspects of the archaeological record.

What was also driven home to **this** archaeologist, by having had the privilege of participating in a Native American sweat lodge, and given opportunity to listen to Native American views of the site findings, was the full realization that as archaeologists, we are charged with studying **people**--that behind the cracked rock and broken ceramic is the human experience with all its enigmas and complexities. This human experience that produced the archaeological record, did not follow an orderly time line, but followed the path of all of human history with its constant cycles of movement, conflict and assimilation, with these elements played out in various permutations of order-- a process still ongoing today. Finally, it was made clear that contemporary Native Americans **can** help us to better understand the archaeological record. It matters not if their knowledge was handed down through the generations locally, or if it was in part inspired by interaction with Western US tribes, or even if some of it was provided by ethnographers and pioneering archaeologists. The fact remains, that amongst us are individuals who are living stewards of Native American knowledge, values and beliefs. If we choose to draw on this cultural resource we are sure to better understand the people we profess to study.

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