

# Spanning the Gap

## Archeology in the Minisink Today



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*Spanning the Gap*  
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by John R. Wright

The search for the past intrigues the very essence of all of us, whether it is our own family genealogy, or the mere interest in what occurred before us. Because the natural resources of the upper Delaware River basin have supported human occupation for more than 10,000 years, the cultural history of this area and, in particular, its archeological record, are especially rich. How we have looked at that record, however, has varied greatly over time and with different cultural norms.

*Minisink Historic District* consists of more than 1,320 acres of land in Pike County, Pennsylvania and Sussex County, New Jersey, including Minisink Island, one of the largest islands in the Delaware River. The District received National Landmark status in 1993, one of the few archeological historic landmarks in the Northeast, but it has been the focus of archeological investigation for more than 100 years.

Here, as throughout the world, archeological digs first centered on the "relics" of the past, the "antiquarian" study of artifacts and monuments. An "archeologist" was anyone with the intellectual curiosity and the financial resources to conduct a dig. While credit must be given to those who realized that archeology was not just about Greece and Rome, little thought was given to the *cultures* of ancient populations. For the Native American, whose history was unwritten and whose damp Northeast habitat spared few materials and even



(Above) Sifting through the soil at the Manna Site in the Minisink District in the Spring of 2003.

fewer structures, this grand scale of archeological thinking was particularly unsuited. Not until the middle of the 20th century was serious research on the Native American based on the development of chronologies, context, and function.

Around 1900 a physician, Edward Dalrymple, first excavated Indian burials from the Minisink, unearthing European and native funerary objects that included a copper kettle, a silver spoon, 11 thimbles, a necklace of shell and glass beads, a bell, and 8 copper bracelets. A few years later, excavations sponsored by the Geological Survey of New Jersey and the Museum of the American Indian in New York recovered more than 60 Native American burials, plus one burial of a European apparently of Nordic blood. Definitively, contact between Native Americans was demonstrated, but what did this say about daily life of the native people?

In 1916 Ales Hrdlicka of the Smithsonian Institution demonstrated one way to move beyond the collecting of artifacts when he analyzed 57 of the individuals themselves who had been buried: 34 adults, aged 24 to 70 years, and 23 adolescents. Skeletal remains were almost free of injury or disease; however, a high proportion of dental cavities and abscesses among the adults indicated a diet of complex carbohydrates - maize, beans, and squash - whose sugars can foster tooth decay.

The "antiquarian era" was not over, however. The publication of earlier excavations sparked collectors of antiquities to descend upon Minisink Island and the farmland along the riverbanks. In 1922 Charles Philhower, a New Jersey educator, purchased a portion of the Bell farm on the New Jersey side of the river and, over the next 40 years, indiscriminately excavated his property searching for the "fortress of t'Schickte-wacki," a feature shown vaguely in the area on colonial maps. Philhower made only cursory field notes and collected only "perfect Indian relics" without noting their context or provenience. As a study collection for modern



Working with a *transit* (an instrument used to measure angles)



Pot sherd excavated from Manna Site within the Minisink District. A find such as this would have been discarded before modern archeological techniques were established in the recreation area.

archeologists, his horde is of little worth.

Ironically, it was the anticipated flooding of the Minisink by the proposed Tocks Island Dam that ushered in the modern era of professional archeology in the area. University investigations identified not only 22 burials on the New Jersey side, some with European trade items, but also post molds for a house 13 feet in diameter. Unfortunately, being salvage-driven, these investigations ceased in 1975 when the proposed dam was put on hold.

Since then, additional technology has come into play, as the examination of aerial photographs from 1979 and 1997 revealed that the lower portion of Raymondskill Creek had migrated as much as 50 feet southward from its 1979 course. This southward migration eroded substantial bank sediments on the first and second terraces, location of the Manna Site, a contributing site to the Minisink National Landmark with cultural components that date from 3,000 BC to 1720 AD.

To combat the erosion of the bluff edge, the National Park Service has entered into a cooperative agreement with the Department of Anthropology, Temple University, for them to provide archeological assistance and to stabilize the bluff edge. Stabilization excavations began this spring, archeological evidence has been collected, and archeological field schools from Temple University will continue this work for the next several years.

***John R. Wright is park archeologist and Chief of Visitor Services and Cultural Resource Management at Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area.***



Pot sherds excavated from Manna Site are matched and packed.



A European kaolin (white clay) pipe from Manna Site excavation has been carefully catalogued and stored.

*(National Park Service photos by Lori Rohrer)*