



Ancient Native Americans in Rock Creek Park

The Whitehurst Freeway Sites

At the mouth of Rock Creek, the Whitehurst Freeway ends in a tangle of ramps and embankments. This does not seem like a likely place to find a Native American camp site; if you imagine the highway under construction, with cranes, backhoes, and other heavy equipment tearing up the ground, it is easy to assume that any traces of people who once lived here must have been destroyed. Maps from the early 1900s only make this seem more likely, since they show that the area was an industrial district. But an archeological study of this area found important Native American sites, including one remarkable burial. It seems that a large amount of earth was dumped on the site before the factories were built, protecting the Indian site from the later construction of the Whitehurst Freeway.

Potsherds and stone tools found throughout the area show people camped here between 5,000 and 500 years ago. The burial that makes the site so exciting was found only a few feet from the freeway and Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway. This pit contained the cremated

remains of an adult, probably a 30- to 40-year-old woman. Her scattered bone fragments had been placed in a shallow pit measuring about two feet across. Along with the bones were a comb carved from antler; two stone pendants; a carved sandstone phallus; a triangular knife; 14 great white shark teeth, 12 fossilized and two apparently recent; a bone from a large bird; six antler disks; a wooden bead; and cloth woven of fibers from pawpaw and grass. Radiocarbon dates put this burial at AD 640-790.

The Whitehurst Freeway burial closely resembles burials made in upstate New York around the same time. The resemblance is so strong that either the woman who was buried here or her parents may have come from the north. This connection is fascinating to archeologists and historians because it fits with other evidence pointing to migration from the Great Lakes region to the Chesapeake around that time. The Indians who lived in coastal Maryland and Virginia in the 1600s spoke Algonquian languages closely related to languages spoken around the Great Lakes. Iroquoian languages were also spoken in both regions. The Whitehurst

burial reminds us that Indians were great travelers and that whole Indian peoples sometimes moved hundreds of miles in search of new homes.

The Palisades

When professional archeologists first worked around Washington, in the 1870s and 1880s, the city was rich with ancient Native American remains. Large sites lined both banks of the Anacostia River, and they stretched for miles along the Potomac from Rock Creek to above Little Falls. The early archeologists called these sites "villages," but most of them were not villages at all. They were simply places where hunter-gatherers camped again and again for thousands of years, each time leaving behind a few traces of themselves, until the accumulated material looked like the remains of a town. A few bits of the sites that once lined the Potomac bluffs survive in Palisades Park and other green spaces, and homeowners in nearby neighborhoods sometimes find spearpoints in their gardens, but most of those sites were long ago destroyed by development.

In 2004 archeologists exploring a small stream valley just below Little Falls made a startling discovery. Native Americans generally camped on bluffs or by the river's banks, not in narrow valleys, and these archeologists had no plans to do formal testing in this valley. Until, that is, they happened to inspect the root ball of a tree that had recently fallen across the stream. Such root balls provide a glance at the soil hidden under leaves and undergrowth, and sometimes archeologists might see an artifact or two on the exposed soil, hinting at the presence of a site. But on this particular root ball there was much more than just one or two artifacts: three spearpoints and a piece of decorated Indian pottery. This was the first clue to what have turned out to be amazing archeological sites.

The stream is so small that in places you can hop across, and the valley floor around it is no more than 50 feet wide. When archeologists dug test units on the flat areas by the stream they found

thousands of artifacts. In one 3x3-foot test unit they found 24 spearpoints or knives, 182 potsherds, and 1,673 other artifacts (mostly waste flakes from making stone tools). The sites along this stream were used over a period of about 4,000 years, from about 2500 BC to AD 1500.

What accounts for the repeated visits to these spots over such a long time? The stream enters the Potomac not far below Little Falls. People traveling by canoe upstream might have landed here rather than fight the current. Canoes could have been portaged around the falls along the stream, which provides a convenient route through the steep bluffs. But these sites were probably not merely short-term camps. Many ceramic vessels were used,

suggesting that women prepared food here. A large pitted stone was used for grinding nuts. Stone tools were made and repaired here. A large grooved ax shows us that people chipped wood, maybe for dugout canoes.

The people who visited the site between 400 BC and AD 1000 left dozens of crude points on the site. These tools have a "throwaway" appearance, as if they were made, used, and discarded in a matter of minutes. The people who made these points also used pottery. These sites must have been visited often in this period, possibly by family groups; the stone spearpoints imply the presence of men, pottery the presence of women, and the valley is too narrow to have held a large camp or village. Historic Indians lived in large villages for only part of the year, during the seasons of planting and harvesting corn. In the summer and winter, smaller parties left the villages and went on hunting, fishing, and gathering expeditions. The sites on our little stream may have been used mainly by wandering bands in the autumn. The large nut-grinding stone certainly points to the fall, and cold weather would also help explain the choice of these sheltered spots, flanked by steep hills.



Decorated Potsherd, about 700 Years Old, from a Site Near Little Falls.



Archeologists Digging a Test Pit Beside the Fallen Tree that Revealed the Location of the Little Falls Sites.



Archeologists Recording a Test Unit in Rock Creek Park.



Crudely Made "Selby Bay" Spear Points or Knives from a Site Near Little Falls.



Artifacts from the Whitehurst Freeway Site, about 1300 Years Old, including an Antler Comb, Sharks' Teeth, and a Stone Phallus.

PROTECT OUR SITES

The Archeological Resource Protection Act makes it a federal crime to damage archeological sites on federal lands or to remove artifacts from federal property. Unauthorized metal detecting and artifact collecting are strictly forbidden in the park and on all other federal property.

Report Crimes and Park Emergencies to 1-866-677-6677 Toll Free