

Indian village yields 600-year-old clues

By Frank D. Roylance, Sun Staff Writer

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Note: The photo on p.2 is scanned from original press clipping.

SYCAMORE LANDING -- More than 100 amateur and professional archaeologists digging in a corn field near the Potomac River in Montgomery County have uncovered the remains of a walled Indian village nearly 600 years old.

Scientists say traces of the wall, or palisade, uncovered here Sunday are the first found in Maryland since the 1930s.

"These palisades are funny things," said Joe Dent, an assistant professor of anthropology at American University who, with doctoral candidate Chris Jirikowic, has been studying the site since 1990.

"You would think it would be saying something about their relationship with their neighbors not being too good," Dr. Dent said. "But I don't know that was the case. It may be just a symbolic way of separating the people and the village from the outside world."

During 10 days of digging, participants in the Archaeological Society of Maryland's 28th annual field session uncovered thousands of artifacts. Their field laboratory processed dozens of stone tools and "arrowheads," and thousands of bone and pottery fragments left over from Indian meals consumed about 100 years before Europeans arrived on the continent.

But for the American University archaeologists who led the dig, the most exciting discovery was the line of dark, round soil stains found along the bottom of a 20-foot trench.

The stains are all that remains of a segment of the wooden stockade that encircled the village, Dr. Dent said.

Most villages of the Late Woodland period, just before the Europeans arrived, are believed to have had circular palisades. The first Europeans described such villages and said the Indians they encountered were in a more or less constantly at war with their neighbors.

But the only Late Woodland palisade found in Maryland until Sunday was at a village excavated in Accocek, Prince George's County, in the 1930s and reported in 1959, Dr. Dent said.

A hint of the wall at the Montgomery County site first turned up on Saturday at one section of a long east-west trench. Artifacts were abundant just east of the stains but became scarce just west of them.

That suggested that the stains marked the western edge of the village.

It wasn't until Sunday, when a new trench was extended to the north and south, that the pattern of stains could be seen to continue in both directions, forming the village's western perimeter.

"I was so afraid they weren't going to show up," Dr. Dent said.

After the discovery, he realized that his excavations during the summers of 1990 and 1991 had come within two feet of the palisade's remains without finding it.

MENTIONS:

- Joe Dent, an assistant professor of anthropology at American University
- Chris Jirikowic, doctoral candidate
- Tyler Bastien, State Archaeologist
- Brad Apling, volunteer (photo)
- Dennis Curry, volunteer (photo)
- ASM 28th Annual Field Session
- Sycamore Landing
- McKee-Beshers Wildlife Management Area, Montgomery County, MD

"But in archaeology, if you let that start bothering you, you're going to have an ulcer really quickly," he said.

Dr. Dent had only praise for the volunteer help he received from participants in the Archaeological Society's annual field session.

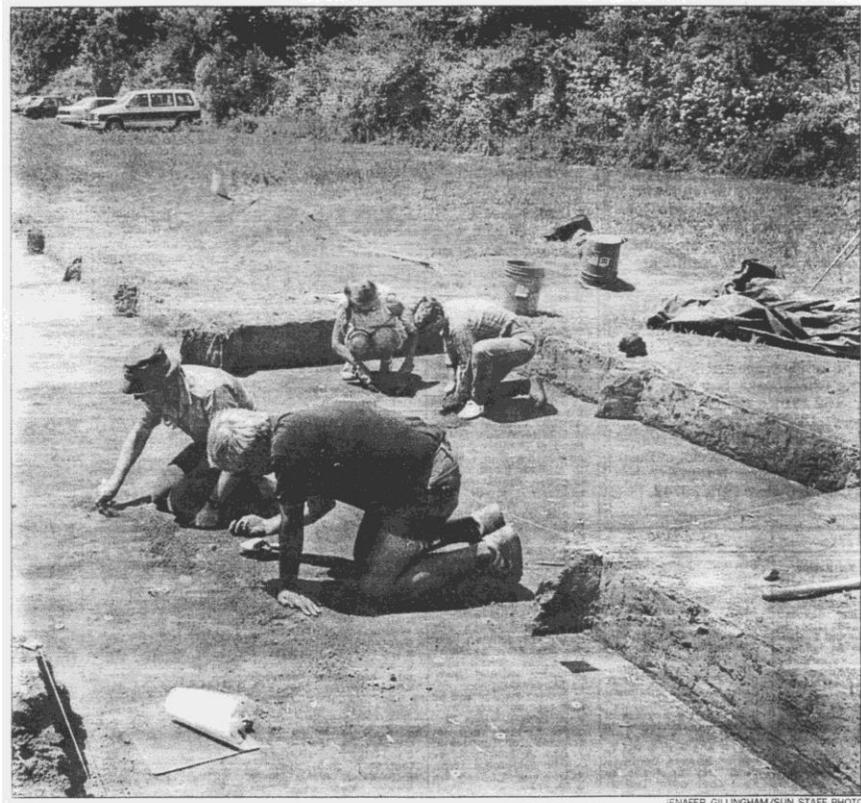
"It has allowed us to open three times as much area within a single year as we could normally do," he said. "The other thing is, it's really fun to see people do archaeology just for the fun of it."

State archaeologist Tyler Bastien, who took part in the dig, called it "very successful. . . . It was an interesting site with lots of artifacts and a few features to keep people interested."

About 100 visitors -- many of the bird watchers and bicyclists from the nearby Chesapeake and Ohio Canal bike trail -- stopped to tour the site.

The Indians who lived at this spot, about 250 yards north of the Potomac River in the state-owned McKee-Beshers Wildlife Management Area, are believed, based on their pottery, to have migrated to the area from the west.

Dr. Dent said they mixed the crushed shells of river mussels into their clay to "temper," or strengthen it. So did Indians to the west and from the Pittsburgh area. Others living just to their east used sand.



JENAFER GILLINGHAM/SUN STAFF PHOTO
Volunteers Brad Apling (right front) and Dennis Curry (left front) scrape around remains of a timber pole.