

American Indian artifacts found

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While many today consider Potomac their home, in 3000 B.C., so did early Americans.

Temporarily, at least.

Archaeologists and volunteers this summer are excavating a prehistoric "rock shelter" within the Blockhouse Point Conservation Park in Potomac, and learning more about the American Indians that lived near the overhanging rock formation where the prehistoric people once lived.

"Rock shelters are like prehistoric hotels," explained county archaeologist Jim Sorensen, who attended a dig at the site Friday.

The nomadic people probably chose the spot, near the Potomac River, as a temporary shelter while they hunted and gathered, Sorensen said. Then, they would move on. Based on clues from small pieces of pottery and projectile points sharpened pieces of stone - collected at the site, it was used from 3000 B.C. to 1600 A.D.

Small caves are carved out of the surface of the yawning rock formation, tunneling back into the structure, which is about a storey high. At the mouths of the caves, black marks indicate where the American Indians who used the shelter made their fires.

"You can see why they liked it," said Heather Bouslog, an archaeologist with the cultural resources stewardship section of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission's stewardship division.

When her team excavated the site in the rain, the rock formation kept the group well-protected, she said.

The site is being excavated as part of a yearly field session conducted by Bouslog and Sorensen's group. The goal of the field sessions is to gain more information about the county's prehistoric population, while at the same time educating residents about archaeological methods.

Residents pay \$20 a day to take part in the field session, which takes place for two weeks. Each year, a different site historic or pre-historic - is chosen for the field session. The group has excavated site including Oakley Cabin, a former home to slaves in Brookville; Dowden's Ordinary, a tavern from the French and Indian War era in Clarksburg; and another pre-historic site in Gaithersburg.

The group also has a year-long volunteer program run out of the historic Needwood Mansion in Derwood.

"It's interesting to know it's not just a plot of land, but people have lived here for thousands of years," said Beth Sokoloff, of Germantown, who participated in the dig for the first time this year.

Sokoloff said she has been interested in archaeology since she was introduced to it by her fifth grade teacher. "I fell in love with the idea of finding history in items," she said.



The last time the Potomac site was excavated was in 2004, though it was discovered in 2002. "You knew it was used by prehistoric people because you can see the artifacts right on the surface," Bouslog said.

So far, one of the most significant finds has been a Savannah River spearhead, discovered by Vivian Eicke of Hillandale.

The projectile point was used around 3000 B.C.

"I just kept thinking, the last time somebody held this was 5,000 years ago," said Eicke, a long-time volunteer with the program. "It gives you goose bumps."

When it comes to an archaeological dig, context is everything, according to Sorensen. Clues to the prehistoric people who used the site can be found not just through artifacts, but through their location in the site and how deep in the ground they are buried.

"Moving an item out of a site is like moving an item out of a crime scene," said Sorensen.

At the site Friday, the soil was squared off into 3-foot by 3-foot sections, and participants measured its depth by a tenth of a foot to try to better gauge the time period. Volunteers carefully sifted through the soil, looking for artifacts, and carted much of it away to be tested in the lab for more clues. "When you hit new soil, you're in a different time period," explained Sorensen.

Field session participants also get a chance to take part in field trips and workshops. Recently, the group heard a presentation by Keith Colston, who heads of the Maryland Commission on Indian Affairs.

The planning commission hopes to learn to be more sensitive to artifacts that hold significant cultural importance to American Indian groups, Bouslog said. Bouslog said it may be a preconception that only American Indian burial sites, rather than artifacts, hold spiritual significance to native groups. Dig sites such as the Potomac rock shelter not only burial sites are meaningful, she said. "They have a deep spirituality about the artifacts themselves," Bouslog said.

Eicke said that she often encounters surprise that the history of the area expands into the prehistoric period. "It's good to show people there's a lot more to Montgomery County history," Eicke said.

For more information or to volunteer with the county's archaeology programs, visit www.parkarchaeology.org