

Unearthing Rockville's past

Mar. 2, 2005, Noelle Barton, Staff Write

College archaeologists finding evidence of former settlers

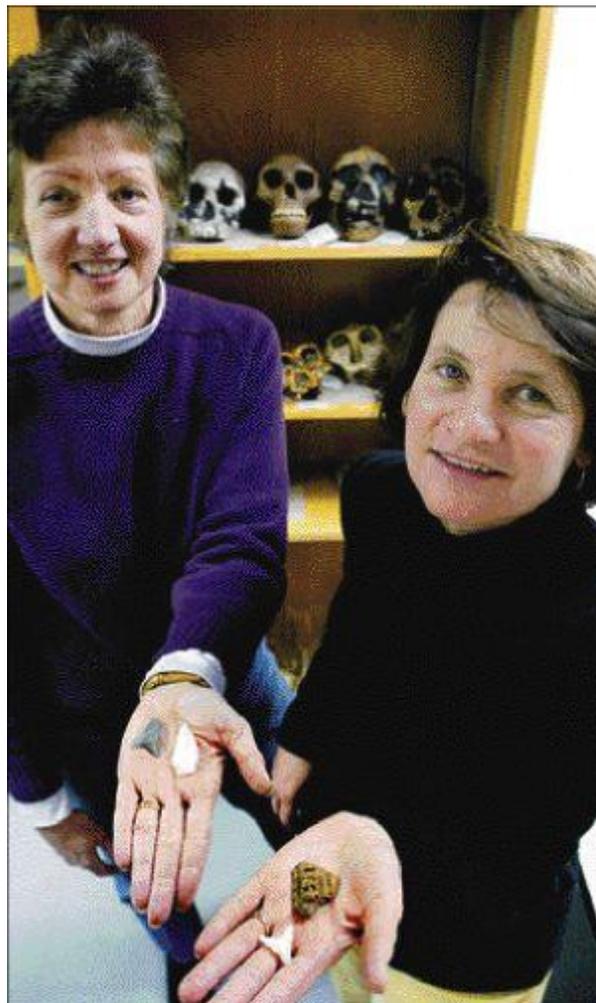
About 700 or 800 years ago, groups of people who made the Potomac River beds and areas in what is today Rockville their home left their marks on the world.

In the form of scrapings of the stone pieces they carved into arrow points and the clay they shaped into pieces of pottery, some of the area's settlers during what archeologists call the late Woodland Period left just enough evidence that would intrigue researchers a few hundred years later.

In Rockville, researchers from Montgomery College and their students continue to dig for evidence of earlier times two decades after the first historic relics were found near part of the Watts Branch streambed, which runs from Wootton Parkway north to King Farm.

Digging up Rockville's past has become a topic of discussion lately as the city and researchers have kept an eye out for significant finds in the unearthing of Town Center to make way for the massive redevelopment efforts.

At Watts Branch they have found numerous stone points, broken pieces of pottery and other evidence of those earlier people, said Dr. Mary Gallagher of Montgomery College.



Laurie DeWitt/The Gazette

Archaeologists Drs. Mary Gallagher and Genie Robinson of Montgomery College have found arrowheads and other simple tools dating as far back as 3000 BC in a Rockville streambed.

Gallagher knows one thing: the amount and the types of items being found at the Watts Branch location indicate that clans of local people stayed at the location for a period of time and made it their home. This is unusual given that all other discoveries from that time period in Montgomery County are of communities along the Potomac.

"Why they would be coming to this place, I don't think we know," Gallagher said.

Gallagher and Dr. Genie Robinson, both anthropology professors who have worked on the site since 2002, will spend a few hours this month training seniors at the Rockville Senior Center interested in archeology to be volunteer researchers with the work.

"Digging is just the tip of the iceberg," Gallagher said in a recent interview.

She said the volunteers and researchers would wash and sort the artifacts, enter each piece's information into a database, and start to analyze the items to see what might have been going on in the area. Researchers have found the artifacts from the surface of the ground to about two and a half feet deep.

Gallagher said the Watts Branch site is the only site to be found in Montgomery County from the late Woodland Period that is not located along the Potomac. A Montgomery College student discovered the site in the early 1980s and found artifacts in the eroding streambed walls.

Others in the late Woodland Period, around 1200 to 1300 AD, lived as farmers in villages along the river. When they came into the rest of what is now Montgomery County, they stayed in rock shelters or hunting camps -- just temporary lodgings.

But it was the discovery of pottery chippings -- the edges of clay pieces with patterns formed in them -- that piqued Gallagher and Robinson's interest. If the ancestors bothered to lug heavy pottery around with them, it generally meant they were going to stay a while and settle in an area, the professors said.

Often it is not until the researchers get items back to the lab that they can get really excited about them.

"We spend a lot of time trying to determine if it's a rock or pottery," Robinson said in the lab on a recent Friday morning.

Another discovery last summer really made them wonder what it was about Watts Branch that had such allure to different groups of people. They found evidence of a clear, second settlement of the area from the late Archaic Period, around 3000 BC.

Gallagher and Robinson said they know this because they found a lot of very old points from items like spears, and through comparison dating to the discoveries of other researchers were able to pinpoint the time period they came from.

At that point in history, the pair says, the settlers were still hunters and gatherers, and had not progressed to farming. They said Montgomery County has mostly Archaic Period sites.

Robinson said the area near the creek bed where they have been locating artifacts, just an area of about 30 feet by 15 feet, is "unusually dense in terms of artifacts," which indicates repetitive and intensive use.

But why would the people who used the area leave so much evidence of their stay?

The answer reveals itself with close inspection of the arrow and spear points. Many have broken or damaged tips and edges, and show much wear from being used.

In taking students to the site to dig over the summer months, Robinson and Gallagher find joy in watching students react to finding artifacts.

In one pit they dug last summer, they found 15 points.

"It just seemed like every time you turned around there was a point," Gallagher said.

A variety of classes at Montgomery College, both for credit and through the college's Lifelong Learning Institute, focus on local archeology and this site in particular. The classes for new volunteers at the Rockville Senior Center start this month. For more information, visit the Montgomery College Web site at www.montgomerycollege.edu