

# **Whispers from the Past: Lessons from the Archeology of Indigenous Peoples' Life in the Central and Lower Connecticut River Valley**

by Verena Harfst

## **Introduction**

Largely unknown to the public, the Connecticut River Valley is rich with an abundance of ancient human settlement sites spanning some 12,000 years. Taken together, these sites are an archeological treasure. Each of them speaks to a different chapter of the millennia during which Indigenous peoples inhabited the area prior to the first European contact in the 1500s.

Historians divide this era into three distinct periods, starting with the Paleo-Indian Period, followed by the Archaic Period, and concluding with the Woodland Period, which ended with European arrival.



The region's geological transformation and accompanying climate change during this timeline profoundly affected human lifeways. With radically changing environmental conditions and consequent changes in their food source, the peoples along the Connecticut River were forced to adapt, and readapt again, to survive. Unlike today, however, when climate change seems to emerge within just a few decades, Indigenous peoples had hundreds, sometimes thousands, of years to evolve, affording us the opportunity to witness the complexity of human adaptation in slow motion.

Much of this compelling story of human ingenuity and resilience in the face of environmental turbulence can be discerned from a close examination of the archeological sites along the Connecticut River. But the lessons that can be learned from this inquiry cannot be taken for granted, as the sites themselves are imperiled by development, neglect, and ignorance.

## **A Personal Encounter**

It was a sunny October day in 2019, when I first stepped back in time some 12,000 years. I had been invited to accompany David Brule, a descendant of the Nehantics of the Lower Connecticut River Valley, to an ancient archeological site. David is chairman of the board of directors of the *Nolumbeka Project*, a non-profit organization dedicated to honoring Northeastern tribal heritage. He had offered to show me an archeological site in Massachusetts that sheds light on the earliest human activity along the central part of the Connecticut River. We were accompanied by Gary Sanderson, a retired local journalist.

In due course, we approached a grassy patch next to two weathered tobacco barns. Behind the flat ground, a low ridge overgrown with trees and shrubs separated the small area from a

swamp, part of a large-scale industrial complex with sprawling modern factory buildings and parking grounds. It was here, in 1995 and 2013, that many Paleo-Indian stone tools and spearheads were excavated.



Gary Sanderson and David Brule inspecting the archeological site hidden under a thick layer of soil and grass

The spot belongs to a cluster of similar sites that have been found within a fifteen mile radius of the *Sugarloaf* site, first discovered in 1978. It is named after nearby Mount Sugarloaf, a distinctive cone-shaped mountain rising steeply from the flood plains of the central Connecticut River Valley near Deerfield, Massachusetts. Paleo-Indian hunters used this site and others in the vicinity as temporary hunting encampments. The *Sugarloaf* site is the largest Paleo-Indian encampment currently known to archeologists.



Mount Sugarloaf. Indigenous peoples believed that the mountain had once been a giant beaver that had taken to eating people. Hobomuck, a powerful but benevolent spirit, had come to their rescue. Hobomuck had hunted down the beaver to the middle of a huge lake, throwing dirt and rocks at the monster. Finally, Hobumuck delivered an enormous blow with his club that landed on the back of the beaver's head and killed it. The vast indentation can be seen to this day.

Exposure to the site, once nearly destroyed by the industrial development adjacent to it, quickly awakened my curiosity. I wanted to know what made this part of the Connecticut River so attractive to these earliest hunters. Why did they choose this place to gather, sharpen their tools and weapons, and prepare for a big hunt? The answer, I learned, lies in the dramatic geological and environmental history of the Northeast.

### **The Connecticut River Valley: A Microcosm of Evolving Indigenous People's Life**

The *Sugarloaf* site, while unusual in its scope, is by no means unique. The remnants of other Indigenous settlements along the Connecticut River are an archeological bonanza shedding light on each of the three phases of the history of pre-contact Indigenous peoples. While the *Sugarloaf* site exemplifies the earliest Paleo-Indian Period, the Lower Connecticut River Valley is dotted with other sites that illustrate life particularly well in the subsequent Archaic and Woodland Periods.

While generalizations are difficult, it is possible to discern some general themes in the transitions that took place over this timeline, as reflected in the sites archeologists and others have discovered. The transition is rooted in the subtle interplay of environmental change and human adaptation.

**The Paleo-Indian Period:** When the Ice Age receded some 11,700 years ago, it gave rise to an arid climate, although still much colder than today. Initially, a tree-less tundra covered the land. The melting Wisconsin Glacier that had once covered the Northeast at a depth of up to a mile high left behind a 185-mile-long narrow lake in what is today the Connecticut River Valley. This so-called "Glacial Lake Hitchcock" stretched from Vermont as far south as below present-day Hartford. At first, terminal moraines blocked the melt water from reaching the sea, but when those moraines broke and the lake drained in several stages, newly created ponds and wetlands dotted the landscape.



Map of Glacial Lake Hitchcock stretching from Northern Vermont almost to Long Island Sound (source: <https://www.nps.gov/saga/learn/nature/images/Map-of-Lake-Hitchcock.jpg>)

As temperatures slowly rose, the rich sediments of the lakebed favored the emergence of more diverse plant life. Between 13,000 and 12,000 years ago, boreal forests of pine and oak began to cover what is now southern New England. As soon as frigid winters set in, large herds of caribou sought shelter in these boreal forests from the open grasslands of what today is northern New England and the Canadian Maritime Peninsula. During these seasonal migrations, Paleo-Indian hunters searched for “geological bottlenecks” to use to their advantage. The ravines and narrow passageways of the Connecticut River Valley near Deerfield provided the ideal conditions. Here, the penned-up caribou made for easy prey for the hunters. In addition, the *Sugarloaf* site and other spots nearby featured sand dunes, formed by the winds. They provided elevated, dry platforms for human encampments.



Life-size recreation of Paleo-Indians hunting caribou at the Mashuntucket Pequot Museum in Ledyard, CT

Standing on the grassy patch near the tobacco barn with the hidden Paleo-Indian site beneath me, I try to imagine how these earliest people experienced the landscape and its environmental transformation. Nearby, I discover what looks like a small ravine, largely overgrown with trees and shrubbery. Was it here that thousands of anxious caribou were once met by the spears of the Paleo hunters?



A ravine near the Paleo-Indian encampment site

**The Archaic Period:** The Archaic Period that started 9,000 years ago experienced dramatic climate change. It included a stretch of 1,100 years during which average July temperatures were possibly as much as 8 percent higher than today, but with colder winters. What followed was a 2,000-year period distinguished by a hot and arid climate when many inland wetlands and smaller rivers dried up. The tundra of northern New England was now replaced by dense evergreen forests, and the caribou herds in search of open grasslands retreated further north.

A major food source for Indigenous peoples along the Connecticut River Valley was now increasingly remote.

By the end of the Archaic Period some 3,000 years ago, southern New England was covered with mixed forests of oak and hickory that provided rich nut harvests. Prehistoric hunters along the Connecticut River now pursued animals such as moose and deer as well as smaller mammals. These animals did not migrate over large distances; hence the need for a nomadic lifestyle gradually ceased. The hunters were also able to supplement their diets with an abundance of acorns, nuts, berries, and other plant food. Importantly, highly productive salt marshes had formed along the Connecticut coast, complemented by brackish and fresh-water marshes along the Lower Connecticut River Valley.

As they do today, the marshes supported a rich fauna of fish, crustaceans, and birds. Native people took up fishing for saltwater and freshwater fish. Dugout canoes were used for transport and fishing in Long Island Sound and on the rivers. Fish weirs made of brush and stone came into use along the shoreline of the Connecticut River. Small family bands occupied settlements along the coast and the rivers in spring, summer, and fall. During the winters, they retreated into the woods further inland for more protection from the harsh elements.

**The Woodland Period:** The pace and scope of environmental change slowed somewhat in the Woodland Period, which commenced some 3,000 years ago. Human adaptation and innovation in response to the opportunities presented by more temperate climate conditions persisted, nonetheless. Agriculture was introduced about 1,500 years ago, and corn, squash, and beans were grown in fields. Having turned into farmers, Indigenous peoples now settled in villages for longer periods of time. With stable food supplies, populations grew. Clay pottery and pipes for smoking tobacco were widely used. The Connecticut River and Long Island Sound became major trading routes, with dug-out canoes traveling up and down the eastern seaboard as well as upriver to places further inland.



Replica of an Indigenous village from the Woodland Period with a bark-covered longhouse at the Institute of American Indian Studies in Washington, CT

Once again, archeology tells a vivid story about this part of the history of early human life in the Lower Connecticut River Valley. The Haddam Neck peninsula, located on the eastern side of the Connecticut River, provides a prominent example. It contains a highly significant cluster of settlements spanning some nine thousand years of human activity. During a seven-year study of the so-called *Salmon River Cove Archeological District*, archeologists could trace the evolving activities, life practices, and settlement patterns of the Indigenous people in the region over a protracted period running from the Archaic Period through the end of the Woodland Period.

Native peoples had made formidable use of the abundant natural resources of the River and fertile lands along its banks, hunting, fishing, and collecting a wide variety of plants that they ground, baked or dried for storage. The archeologists were able to identify summer and winter base camps occupied by several families and marked by cooking hearths, tools associated with food preparation, shards of soapstone and pottery vessels, as well as calcined animal bones.

The remnants of seasonal fishing camps on the riverbank were also found on this site, as were temporary upland plant processing camps used by women, small hunting look-out stations, nut-harvesting and berry picking locations, and quarry workshops and woodworking camps. The site evidences how a relatively complex social organization had emerged in response to the environmental changes, using more advanced tools to produce food and trade goods.

### **Connecticut River Valley Archeology: The Challenge Ahead**

The *Salmon River Cove Archeological District* is a testament to the ability of professional archeology to bring to life the history of pre-contact peoples. However, such large-scale studies are the exception not the rule, and many archeological sites are likely to be found only on private, largely inaccessible land.

Ordinary citizens have played their part in archeological discoveries along the Connecticut River. Amateur archeologists, property owners, farmers, builders, and even inquisitive children have found many more ancient artifacts, often by chance. An unusually productive example came to light only recently, in the summer of 2018. A parcel containing some 23 Indigenous artifacts, mostly quartz projectile points, as well as a few scrapers and other small biface tools, arrived from Wyoming at Essex Historical Society in Essex, CT.

The parcel was accompanied by a letter from retired Episcopalian Bishop Kenneth Kinner. In it, he explained that he had found these artifacts in 1959 while working as a vicar in Ivoryton, one of three villages comprising Essex. Bishop Kinner had discovered most of the pieces near the back wall of a rock overhang on the banks of the Falls River, a tributary to the Connecticut River. Kinner described the overhang as small and low, some 3 ½ to 4 feet deep with headroom ranging from 4 to 4 ½ feet. Outside the overhang, he had also excavated what appeared to be multiple fire pits along with fire-cracked stones. His report was detailed, with pencil drawings of the location and two yellowed black and white photographs.



Quartz projectile points found by Bishop Kinner in 1959 under a rock overhang along the banks of the Falls River in Ivoryton, CT. The rock overhang had been used as a temporary hunting shelter by Indigenous peoples between ca. 5,000 to 4,000 years ago. A small number of these tools suggest later use between 2,000 and 1,000 years ago.

The significance of Bishop Kinner's find was confirmed a few months later when then Connecticut State Archeologist, the late Dr. Brian Jones, examined all Indigenous artifacts in the collection of Essex Historical Society, including various tools of everyday life, such as axes, knives, scrapers, adzes and gauges for woodworking, and soapstone shards from pots or pestles. Dr. Jones determined that the projectile points found by Bishop Kinner dated from the Late Archaic Period, with a small number of them suggesting temporary use between 2,000 and 1,000 years ago.

Bishop Kinner's find is in some ways the exception that proves the rule. Many artifacts found by hobby archeologists and residents alike end up in private collections, or worse yet, are discarded with basement boxes over time. In both cases, they are a lost legacy, inaccessible to scientific study or re-appropriation by the descendants of Indigenous peoples. Their origin and the history of the people who made them are gone forever. Often, no records remain where artifacts were found, and hundreds of archeological sites are still being destroyed in the course of building projects or simply because of human ignorance about their historic significance.

### **The Way Forward**

Descendants of Indigenous people are taking action. The *Nolumbeka Project*, for example, is seeking to protect important Indigenous archeological sites from unauthorized digging and destruction. It has purchased certain properties for this purpose and kept their locations



confidential to prevent pilferage. This is an especially sensitive matter because such sites often comprise ancient ceremonial and burial grounds that Indigenous people regard as sacred.

Professional archeologists are taking a similar approach. While maps published in professional journals of archeology indicate the general area of Indigenous sites, their precise locations are not publicized. If the grounds, usually on private land, are suspected of holding more, yet undiscovered artifacts, they are carefully backfilled with soil after the archeologists have finished their dig.

Useful as they are, such steps cannot substitute for a more fundamental rethinking by the general public about the importance of the archeology of the Connecticut River Valley and its implications for understanding the history of our region. This archeology tells the story of a people meeting the environmental challenges of their time, a tale that surely resonates and possibly even holds lessons for us today. Greater appreciation and respect for the journey of our Indigenous forbearers may well help enlighten us as we determine our own destiny.

**Interested in learning more about Indigenous peoples in the Connecticut River Valley?**

Please follow this link to Verena Harfst's 2018 research paper posted on the Essex Historical Society website: [\*"A Brief History of Native Americans in Essex, Connecticut"\*](#).