

Archaeologists find Burning Springs treasure trove



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Countless artifacts are buried throughout western New York as remnants of Native Americans and Europeans who once lived there. Hardly any of it ever gets unearthed for research, but in Bristol, Ontario County, a treasure trove of findings shed light on the area's ancestors.

A property called "Burning Springs" on Bristol's Case Road — named for the flammable gas which bubbles up through a stream on the property — is known as an ancient spiritual location for Native Americans and a settlement of some of town's first pioneers.

Archaeologists only recently began an excavation of the site, and found pounds of material dating back hundreds of years.

"We use the objects to tell the story of their lives," said local archaeologist Ann Morton, who has assisted in excavating the site since 2009. "We speak for those who are no longer able to speak for themselves."

Objects found include cookware and housing items, coins, glass and Native American projectile points, which could have been used for arrows or spears. Morton has been working on the site herself and brought a class of Finger Lakes Community College students to help dig this year.

There were at least three homesteads on the property throughout the 18th and 19th centuries as settlers moved into the area from other places in the colonial U.S. Before that, it was populated by members of the Seneca Nation of Indians.

“If you grew up anywhere around the area, you knew about Burning Springs — it was just part of the culture,” said Bristol Historian Beth Thomas.

Records say the Burt family was the first to live at the site, followed by several other local families. A Massachusetts land company bought many of the parcels in the late 1700s and sold them to Massachusetts settlers moving west to farm open land.

The plot’s recent owners knew there was historical significance to the area, as relatives of its one-time inhabitants visited regularly over the years, said Alan Jones, who grew up on the property and now lives in Rochester.

“My mother used to walk around up at the old cabin site and pick up pieces of pottery,” said Jones, adding that a member of the New York State Archaeological Association suggested excavating the site.

“I said, ‘sounds like fun, I’d like to know what’s under there,’” he said. Archaeologists thought they’d find only remnants of Native American culture, but ended up finding much more, said Morton.

One of the last owners of the property, the Parsons, did away with much of the housewares left there by previous owners by throwing it into a backyard dump at the turn of the 20th century. The dump, or midden, is where much of the excavated material was found.

Archaeologists do much of their work in response to potential construction, so it’s unusual to be excavating a site simply for local historical purposes, she said.

“We are very aware of the responsibility that we have to sites — it’s not a playground,” she said. “What is in the ground is a reflection of somebody who really lived and really died.”

Having the site on town grounds gives nearby residents a hands-on look at who founded their hometown and why, said Thomas.

"The magic that was recognized by the Native Americans was magic to the people that settled here too," she said. "Now we're finding it all over again."

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