

The Wickers Creek Shell Midden – not just garbage – is the Rivertown’s oldest built feature

“Shell mounds, like the one at the Landing in Dobbs Ferry, are nothing but garbage dumps. They are leftovers discarded by Indians after feasting on the good part.”

I have heard that sort of appraisal a few times, and agree with it-- IF a long string of caveats is added.

For one thing, shell mounds signify climate change, although a happier one than what we’re dealing with today. They became common beginning about 8,000 years ago with the melting away of the last ice age. Rising sea levels primed the Hudson River as suitable for oysters. And people could settle down and concentrate on resources easily available. As such the Wickers Creek Shell Midden testifies to the region’s gradual transformation from nomadic to a more settled pattern of human habitation.

The Wickers Creek Shell Mound is made up of layers from successive visitors over thousands of years, as though to certify this as a special place. One archaeologist speculates that outer layers of shells may have been a way of messaging to others—“this is what we found, now see what you can do.”

One of the most diligent students of the Wickers Creek Shell Mound was the late Hans Schaper of Hastings. He emphasized that only further excavation, which was not allowed, could have established whether the mound is of a “kitchen” variety, consisting of camping debris left by roaming bands; or “processing,” with focus on the supplying of oyster meat for base camps, bartering, or tribute obligations.

Another perspective is from Karen Hartgen. As President of the New York Archaeological Council, and using data from the developer’s archaeological study, she wrote: “The samples from the shell midden ... provided mammal bone, fish bone, nut fragments, other shell fragments and charcoal. Thus the...shell midden portion of the site has yielded new data which could provide new interpretations on subsistence in coastal New York.”

One of the most intriguing finds is by Mark DiMiceli, an artifact collector from Irvington. He has shown “clay baby” effigies, broken in two, that he reports he found in the midden.

Does anything else suggest ceremonial activity in the proximity of the midden? We know that Steve Yarabek, a former Dobbs Ferry Planning Board member, recalls that one of the Sisters of Mercy, the order that used to own the property, told him a Native American burial was uncovered about 400 feet east of the shell mound. Also, Schaper argued that postholes found in a now destroyed part of the larger Wickers Creek Site could indicate a burial scaffold. (Others argue for a drying rack or a palisade.) Finally, Jim Tobias says an archaeological communiqué regarding the outskirts of the shell mound describes “a ceremonial fireplace for a sacred fire in which ashes and charcoal are later moved,...which would indicate that this fireplace is near burial sites.”

Tobias, who is a member of the Moravian of the Thames Band of the Delaware Nation (closely related to the last indigenous inhabitants of the Westchester County area), also says that the fact that coyote bones were inventoried from the shell mound indicates that ceremonial activities went on there. Archaeologist Cheryl Claassen, who did extensive work up the river at Dogan Point, suspects there was some feasting event at each one of the Hudson sites.

Historians of religion and anthropologists have written much on the worldwide significant symbolism of shells and of shell mounds. Fertility and rebirth are words we use to describe something that preliterate persons perhaps experienced without words. And New York archaeology notes several examples of Indians buried in shell pits.

Catherine Walter, who was an ethno-archaeologist with the Museum of Natural History and a Dobbs Ferry resident, wrote that the Wickers Creek site’s nickname as “the place of the bark kettle” has religious overtones. She cites a description of natives in New York City who had a sacrificial ceremony presided over by a ‘Devil-hunter.’ They would put some of their treasures into a kettle, and then put the kettle into a hole in the ground. They imagined that a terrible Horned Snake of which they were in constant fear would crawl into the hole and would take possession of their offerings.

The Wickers Creek Shell Midden was part of a larger Archaeological Site when Friends of Wickers Creek Archeological Site (FOWCAS) came on the scene thirty years ago. Since the midden is all that was left by the Landing developer, it is that which was nominated for listing on the National Register of Historic Places. This is the only such nomination acknowledged by the Lenape themselves. It was accepted by the authorities but remains in abeyance because the Landing Homeowners objected.

FOWCAS and the Landing Homeowners teamed up with the Village to erect a plaque at the base of the shell midden. The words were chosen in consultation with the historian of the Moravian Delaware: "The shell mound before you is a testimony to the Lenni-Lenape who harvested fish and oysters which the waters produced in abundance. Share their love of this land."