

Wickers Creek
Archaeological Site

What You Should Know...

THE FRIENDS OF WICKERS CREEK ARCHEOLOGICAL SITE

DOBBS FERRY, NEW YORK

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BOX 178
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Dear Friends and Neighbors,

We offer you this information booklet discussing the Wickers Creek site so that you may discover, as we are discovering, the importance of this "window to the past." The site is currently slated for development and we are working toward the possibility of modification of development plans to protect the integrity of this approximately one acre site.

Information which lies buried at this site is of particular importance to three professional groups: archaeologists, anthropologists, and historians. Three FOWCAS members discuss for you their knowledge of the Wickers Creek site as it relates to these disciplines:

Anthropologist **Cathryn Walter** gives us an overview of the peoples who have lived at Wickers Creek as she discusses "Wickers Creek Native Americans."

Hans Schaper, an avocational archaeologist who has worked on digs at the site, discusses "The Lower Hudson Valley: Shell Middens as a Source of Prehistoric Information."

Judith Holzer, a history student who is researching local history, describes historical events surrounding "The Castles of the Weckquaesgeeks."

We at FOWCAS feel that, in addition to academic significance, the site at Wickers Creek holds a personal

value...a part of our heritage we would like to see explored further. For those of you who share this desire with us, we encourage you to express your feelings to the Dobbs Ferry Village Board, 112 Main Street, so that they can pursue modification of development plans to preserve this precious legacy.

Sincerely,

The Friends of Wickers Creek Archaeological Site

WICKERS CREEK NATIVE AMERICANS

The people who lived in the Wickers Creek area lived off the land, and so their activities and their food supplies were dictated by what was seasonally available. The Dobbs Ferry site was particularly well situated for exploiting resources. From the Hudson, shellfish and saltwater fish were caught. From Wickers Creek, freshwater fish were available. Hunting of land animals and of birds was also a major food source. Throughout the wooded land, nuts, berries and seeds were gathered.

In the winter, the group moved inland to be more protected from the icy winds. The large summer group broke into smaller winter bands. Thus, the social structure was altered year to year in a cyclical pattern. A more sedentary lifestyle was possible with the adaption of cultivated plants such as corn, squash and beans. and over time, large semi-sedentary villages grew, such as the one in Dobbs Ferry.

There were five stages of development in our area from 4500 B.C. to 1600 A.D. During the archaic stage, up to 1300 B.C., there were two main phases. One phase emphasized hunting over shellfish exploitation, and the other emphasized shellfish exploitation over hunting. It has been difficult to prove which phase came first in this area. Further investigations of the Wickers Creek Shell middens could answer this question. The Transitional Stage, from 1300 B.C. to 1000 B.C. marks the beginning of innovations, with the appearance of soap stone vessels and with new varieties of projectile points. Shellfish

were the primary food source. The Early Woodlands stage, from 1000 B.C. to 300 B.C. is the stage with the highest number of innovations, as well as being, inexplicably, the stage with the lowest number of archaeological sites. The first pottery appears, as well as copper ornaments, smoking pipes and a well developed mortuary ceremonialism. The pottery found at Wickers Creek is unique to this site in the world, and has created a new classification of pottery (to be called "Wickers Creek" pottery). In the Middle Woodlands stage from 300 B.C. to 1000 A.D. the pottery is stamped with design, complex smoking pipes are used, and , late in this stage, cultivated plants made village life possible.

In the Late Woodland stage, from 1000 A.D. to 1600 A.D., when Henry Hudson arrived, the native Americans here were organized into regional networks which linked people by language, by kinship, by totems and by trade. They lived in towns and villages, and they had a complex ideology as well as an extensive agriculture. All stages of native development are represented at our site, and there is still information to be gained from it. It is a regionally crucial site and there is no replacement for it once it is destroyed.

Cathryn Walter

April, 1988

ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERIODS OF NATIVE AMERICAN DEVELOPMENT IN THE NEW YORK AREA AT THE TIME OF
EUROPEAN CONTACT

PERIOD	CULTURE	PHASE	CHARACTERISTICS
Archaic 4500 BC - 1300 BC	Laurentian Susquehanna	Sylvan Lake Snook Kill	Hunting Fishing Gathering
Transitional 1300 BC - 1000 BC		Orient	Preceramic Soapstone New Projectile Types
Early Woodlands 1000 BC - 300 BC	Adena	Middlesex	Copper Ornaments Pottery Pipes Mortuary Ceremonial
Middle Woodlands 300 BC - 1000 AD	Windsor	North Beach Clearview	Ceramics Agriculture Village Life

THE LOWER HUDSON VALLEY:
SHELL MIDDENS AS A SOURCE OF PREHISTORIC INFORMATION

Shell middens, the debris of oysters eaten by prehistoric inhabitants, were part of the coastal landscape of the Hudson valley. Ignored for a long time, the shell accumulations can yield a far greater amount of information about local and regional life of early residents than lithic tools or potsherds. The archaeologist Louis A. Brennan who pioneered shell midden archaeology in the Lower Hudson Valley stated: "the objective has been to discover the function of these riparian loci in the lifeway of the hunter-gatherers who discarded the shell there and to infer from that function how the lifeway was scheduled, ordered and conducted throughout the subsistence year within the territory of band exploitation."

Shell middens are heaps of oyster valves (*crassostrea virginica*), varying in size often from kitchen floor area to that of a house, with thickness from 30 to 100 cm or more. They are the result of random depositions by people moving through the Hudson valley for the past 6000 years.

Radiocarbon tests at selected points of a midden surface can establish the dates of various occupations - furnishing a prehistoric calendar of residence.

The season of the oyster's demise (when it was eaten) helps interpret human migration or sedentary life by means of oxygen isotope analyses, which, as Karl W. Butzer, professor of environmental archaeology at the University of Chicago,

notes: "record seasonal changes in isotope temperatures of the waters."

The different functions of middens appear during total excavation: Kitchen-middens are the left-overs of camping episodes of varying durations and often contain faunal or vegetal remains.

However, they may turn out to be Processing-middens where Indians shucked the oysters before removal to a base camp or used the smoked food for barter with other tribes - widely practiced by inhabitants of the west coast.

Faunal remains and pollen from the Kitchen-middens reflect former subsistence diets. Although bones often deteriorate in the acid soil of the east "the calcium of the shell stratum is responsible for partially restoring soil pH to a neutral level allowing better bone preservation," explains Dr. Amorosi, a bioarchaeologist from Hunter College.

The fertile Hudson valley was apparently the most populated area in the northeast as prehistoric groups ventured north along the Atlantic coast twelve thousand years ago, others migrated down from Canada, or arrived from the lake region.

But the shell accumulations in the Lower Hudson area fell victim to rapid urbanization and railroad construction before their importance for scientific research of historical events was realized. There are few shell middens left to tap for the missing Hudson valley history. To destroy knowingly the last remaining, undisturbed shell middens at Wickers Creek would be an educational tragedy.

Hans Schaper
April 3, 1988

NATIVE AMERICAN GROUPS IN THE NEW YORK AREA
AT THE TIME OF EUROPEAN CONTACT



THE CASTLES OF THE WECKQUAESGEEKS

Of the various cultures which inhabited the Wickers Creek area, the only one known to us historically is the group known as the Weckquaesgeeks.

Nineteenth century historians describe the three villages of these people as "entrenched castles" or "palisaded fortresses."



PALISADED VILLAGE.

There were three main ones: the first one was around the Saw Mill River, the northern one, around the Pocantico River in North Tarrytown, and the central one, around the Wysquaqua (Wickers Creek) in Dobbs Ferry (This central village housed the chief [sachem] and is described by one historian as having been guarded by eighty warriors.). While the western border was defined by the Hudson River, the eastern one (probably the Bronx River) is an issue of some debate.

A 1524 description of Hudson River Indians offers some unexpected observations: " They exceed us in size, and they are of very fair complexion; some of them incline more to a white, and others to a tawny color; their faces are sharp, their hair long and black, upon the adorning of which they bestow with great pains; their eyes are black and sharp, their expressions mild and pleasant; their women are of the same form and beauty, very graceful, of fine countenances and pleasing appearance in manners and modesty."

Children were treated with exceptional tolerance and affection and there was no discernable system of law enforcement (Dutch lawyer Adriaen Van der Donck once wrote, "How uncommon crimes were among the Hudson River Indians."). Yet another surprising fact is that it was not uncommon that, during attempts at repatriation of Europeans adopted by Indians (during conflicts, men were generally killed, women and children, adopted as members of the society), there was resistance in returning to Dutch society.

The arrival of European explorers brought devastation in the form of diseases to Native American cultures. Estimates of population decreases during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries run as high as ninety percent.

Tensions between colonists and Indians were greatly increased when a young Weckquaesgeek boy, travelling with his uncle and another man, were taking skins to New Amsterdam. On the way, several colonists murdered his uncle and stole the pelts. Several years later, when the boy reached manhood, he was mandated by Indian law to avenge his uncle's death. When Dutch wheelwright Claes Smit was murdered in his shop along the East River in Manhattan, the colonists were outraged and terrified by such a display of what appeared to be unsolicited violence. In response, a company of eighty men marched toward what is now Dobbs Ferry to "execute summary vengeance upon that tribe with

fire and sword." During their journey, however, they lost their way and had to return home. When the Weckquaesgeeks heard of this near attack, they quickly signed a peace treaty which included the turning over of the young man to the colonists. Fortunately, when the reasons surrounding this previously unexplained violence became clear, the colonists did not pursue the punishment of the young man.

The Dutch and Indian Wars of the Seventeenth century brought what would prove to be fatal problems for the Weckquaesgeeks. Increasing occupation of land north of New Amsterdam created a violent struggle for dominance. Historian E. B. O'Callaghan wrote, "The tomahawk, the firebrand and the scalping-knife were clutched with all the ferocity of frenzy, and the war-whoop rang from the Raritan to the Connecticut." While the Indians favored a patch of scalp as a war trophy, there is some indication that the Dutch preferred an entire head. E. M. Ruttenber, in his 1874 history, says, "Kieft received his free-booters and soldiers with thanks, rewards, and congratulations; while Van Tienhoven's mother, forgetful of the finer feeling which do honor her sex, amused herself, it is stated, by kicking about the heads of the dead men which had been brought in as trophies of the midnight slaughter." There are accounts, in addition, of the colonists' dismemberment of Indian children in their parents' presence, and of mutilations of Indian men. During attempts at peace, Indian children were at times retained by the colonists to insure Indian respect for treaties and other arrangements.

The culture was effectively eradicated by John Underhill, who met the Weckquaesgeeks (after having burned two of their three abandoned villages) while they were gathered with other groups near Bedford or Connecticut. Accounts of this massacre vary, but certain dramatic elements are consistent. An anonymous document filed in 1647 (three years after the massacre) in the Royal Library at the Hague, the Netherlands, states, "They demeaned themselves as soldiers and deployed in small bands, so that we got in a short time one dead and twelve wounded. Presently none durst come forth, keeping within the houses, discharging arrows through the holes. The General perceived that nothing else was to be done, and resolved to set the huts on fire, whereupon the Indians tried every means to escape, not succeeding in which they returned back to the flames, preferring to perish by the fire than to die by our hands. What was most wonderful is, that among this vast collection of men, women, and children, not one was heard to cry or to scream."



Massacre of the Weckquaesgeeks.

Several survivors lived in the area into the eighteenth century, but they then blended into other cultures, some moving West and some moving into New England and Canada. There are no direct descendants from the Weckquaesgeek culture known today.

Judith Holzer
May, 1988

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