

Colebrook's Possible Paleo Site

When I was young, we knew about Indians (or thought we did); we were told they never established permanent villages in the area, but rather fished and hunted mostly during the summer months as itinerant family units. They established a system of trails, some of which led to either Sandisfield, where they maintained hunting areas, or to Canaan, where they traded with New York State Native Americans. Occasionally someone would get lucky enough to find a stone arrowhead or perhaps a tool for farming or breaking bones. It was guessed that these artifacts were two to maybe four thousand years old. That was about it. Now it is a whole other world. Scientific research never ceases, and usually the general public's awareness of new discoveries or theories lags far behind this research, unless, of course, a truly astounding discovery turns up, such as the footprints in East Africa that proved to be upwards of 3,750,000 years old, in which case the news media have a field day and the whole world knows about it immediately.

This was not the case in New England, specifically Connecticut. Archaeology has always been a great love of mine, and as I recall, it wasn't until the early 1950s that our understanding of the people who populated our countryside took a dramatic leap backward. In 1951 in Ipswich, Mass., fluted points were found that carbon-14 dated to 10,000 years before the present. In the early 1960s a large amount of flint tools and hunting points was uncovered in Debert, Nova Scotia that dated to 10,600 years ago. As this was not long after the retreat of the last glacier, the chances of earlier human inhabitation probably won't be found. After the Debert discovery, points and tools began to show up all over the eastern half of North America.

Dutchess County, New York, right on Connecticut's doorstep, has yielded caribou bones cracked for the extraction of the marrow, have yielded dates of not less than 13,430 years before present, so it is easily within the realm of possibility that similar dates could apply to our area.

In Connecticut, the name "Paleo" means a cultural period from not less than 11,500 – 10,000 years before the present; "Late Paleo" is from 11,000 – 10,000; "Transitional Paleo" from 10,500 – 9,000; "Early Archaic" from 10,000 – 7,000; "Middle Archaic" from 7,500 – 4,000; "Late Archaic" from 5,000 – 3,000; "Woodland" from 3,000 – 1,300; "Mississippian" from 1,300 – 400 and "Historic" from 450 – 170 years before the present.

Let's go back a little and we will see how this set of dates apply to our area: The general consensus has been that the stone tools and points found locally came from the Woodland period and later. These consisted of quartz, a locally derived material, and red Triassic period material from the Connecticut River Valley, with liberal amounts of chert and other New York State-derived materials. Within the last ten years, at least two Paleo points have turned up in Barkhamsted, and since then, people interested in such things have kept their eyes peeled for more evidence of early inhabitants. This past November, while the archaeological dig was progressing in Robertsville, I happened to pay a visit to a Sandy Brook resident who brought out a small flake of a reddish material that had been picked up at the edge of the area that had been cleared when the house was constructed some years before. I was asked what I thought it might be, and after studying it for a few moments, I couldn't identify the material it was made from. I have a fair knowledge of the mineral materials that were used by Native Americans that had their origins in New

England and adjacent New York, and this was a mystery to me; I had never seen anything like it in the east. There is a mineral called jasper that was extensively used for stone implements, but the nearest deposits are several hundred miles to the west and southwest of Connecticut.

I asked to borrow it to show Dr. Marc Banks, the archaeologist working the Richard Smith site, and he immediately said “That’s Paleo, where did it come from?” He has been to a rock shelter that is located in Algonquin Forest along Sandy Brook. This site has been visited by Nick Ballentoni, the State Archaeologist, who had ventured a guess that it might be an archaic ceremonial site, perhaps in the 6,000 year-old bracket, although the site would have to be scientifically investigated before we would know for sure. His schedule is so tight that he will not be able to do the investigative work in the foreseeable future, so that has been the situation since that time. I told Marc that it had been picked up two or three hundred yards from the rock shelter. He was quick to point out that the near proximity to the shelter doesn’t necessarily mean anything. If it had come from the site itself, it might give more credence to there being a connection between the two. The only thing that will definitively establish a date for the habitation of the rock shelter will to carbon -14 date the charcoal in the firebox located in the center of the floor of the shelter.

Mark went on to explain why he had been so quick to identify the small fragment as being Paleo; The first people to penetrate into totally unexplored territory carried with them only one thing, and that was chunks of material from which points, scrapers and other tools could be made. They could kill animals and catch fish for food; they could clothe themselves with skins from their kills, but there was no way to replenish the precious stone that had the physical properties allowing them to be shaped into tools, so when the small family group moved into virgin territory, they carried with them stone that would be totally different from any to be found locally. Hundreds or even thousands of years went by, but after the first initial explorations, local deposits from which tools could be made became well known, and the resulting points, scrapers and other tools all took on a local, or perhaps regional look.

Mark identified the small flake as being a carefully constructed scraper, probably employed to separate an animal from its skin, or even to cut up the animal. He pointed out that the tiny nicks along the edges were in fact carefully constructed so as to create a serrated edge, making a sharper cutting edge. They still retain the ability to cut a finger if not handled with respect.

In the spring of 2010, a mortar stone was discovered a few yards from the shelter, broadening the scope of the site’s possibilities.

With this much information as background, you can see why we must not divulge the location of the potential site until it is investigated scientifically. Even if a visitor had no intention of removing anything, a careless footstep in the firebox, let us say, could depress the surface, thus destroying the archaeologist’s chances of obtaining a meaningful carbon-14 date. Considering that the state archaeologist will probably not be able to look into this site for who knows how long, we are going to attempt to see whether or not Mark could be designated to undertake the exploration of this most promising site. It will undoubtedly involve raising money, hopefully by means of a grant along with local assistance.

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