

Indian settlement uncovered in dig

Hunting, fishing camp found near the Rhode River

By MICHAEL CODY
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An Indian meat and seafood packing operation, with markets in parts unknown, has been uncovered near the Rhode River.

Mounds of oyster shells, plus bones, pottery and stone tools from a month-long dig in Edgewater, suggest a fishing and hunting camp occupied by migrant Indians 1,200 to 1,500 years ago.

But archaeologists may never learn to what group the local hunter-gatherers belonged.

"You tell me," said James G. Gibb, a consulting archaeologist from Annapolis. "Chances are the people didn't live there year-round anyway."

Paid and volunteer archaeologists directed by Mr. Gibb logged hundreds of hours on Smithsonian Environmental Research Center grounds in June. Mr. Gibb, who holds a doctorate from Binghamton University, is heading into the laboratory with the findings this month.

"We do some very old-fashioned things," he said. "We glue pot shards together."

Mr. Gibb and Smithsonian staff also will study pollen samples, bits of



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Carolyn Gryczkoski, left, sifts earth from an archaeological dig at the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center in Edgewater, near the Rhode River. From left, Matthew Croson, Denise Stephenson, Jim Gibb and Tara Gibb work in the background. The team is collecting evidence of a summer settlement by Piscataway Indians 1,500 to 2,500 years ago.

burned organic material found in soil, and evidence of parasites on oysters.

Aided by computers, they'll try to determine what plants predate colonization by Europeans in 1640, and

whether Indians may have overwhelmed their Chesapeake Bay fishery and woods nearby.

"If we find they were hunting younger and younger deer, that's not good," Mr. Gibb said.

Worn-out tools made of Rhyolite, a volcanic rock found in what is today Western Maryland, Pennsylvania and Virginia may have been brought here by migration or trade from 300 to 800

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A.D. — the Middle Woodland period, to Indian experts.

No new tools or tools in good condition were found, which means fishing-camp Indians from the Middle Woodland period used what they had until it broke down.

Mr. Gibb's crew found evidence of two settlement phases. The second, in the Late Woodland period, may have lasted from 1000 to 1200 A.D., and resulted in simple triangular arrows, tools of local quartz, and better-made pots.

"So they're not moving around as much, or not trading as much, at least

not into Western Maryland," the archaeologist said.

Nonetheless, the village never was a permanent one.

In the early 1900s, it lay under the Java dairy farm, which supplied milk to the Naval Academy. The circumstance was a lucky one, according to Mr. Gibb, because modern mechanical plows didn't disrupt the site.

The farmer planted his pasture in clover, and the artifacts beneath were preserved. An education center is planned after research is completed.

Mr. Gibb's "shovel tests" in January built on information gathered in 1968 and 1990.

"It was clear from the work (others) had done, they probably had an important site there," he said.

A selective dig six months ago located the heart of the settlement's shell midden, or garbage heap. The more intense dig last month turned up, among other items, bird, deer and turtle bones, flakes of stone used in making tools, and pieces of pottery made from oyster shells.

Long-ago residents may have built canoes, dugouts or rafts, and woven saplings together to make shelters. But they left no evidence of their housing — and not much trash aside from oysters, Mr. Gibb said.

"It won't be until the end of the year (that) we finish our analysis and put the story together," he said. "We haven't learned anything yet. We're just collecting data."