

THE PAST BENEATH OUR FEET*

The lands administered by the National Park Service in and around our nation's capital are renowned for their scenic beauty, monuments, statuary, and historic buildings. Less evident, but equally important, are the prehistoric and historic archeological sites found throughout the parks of the National Capital Region. More than 11,000 years of changing lifestyles and different cultures are represented by the archeological remains--prehistoric campsites, workshops, stone quarries, and villages; sites of 17th through 19th century manor houses, kilns, mills, forges, foundaries, and fortifications; numerous Civil War battlefield sites; and the ruins of a variety of 19th century canal structures. Yet this archeological potpourri is but a pallid reflection of the sites that once existed.

In 1897 a famous Smithsonian archeologist, W.H. Holmes, remarked upon "the multitude of inhabited sites from which our collectors have filled their cabinets with curious objects of art [artifacts]. The spot now the political center of the Nation was thus in prehistoric times a chief resort of the native peoples of the region." Many

remnants of the archeological record that escaped the 20th century destruction of urban development and suburban sprawl in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area did so only because they happened to be located on lands set aside for park purposes. In most instances the parks were created with little or no knowledge that archeological sites even existed. Blind luck, not foresight, saved what is left of the area's rich archeological record.

Some sites that survived are truly amazing. For example, Rock Creek Park is a beautiful wooded stream valley that slices through the nation's capital. Nestled in one of the park's glades, only 2 1/2 miles from the White House, is one of the largest prehistoric boulder quarries known along the entire Atlantic Slope. Here, some 4,000 years ago, Indians dug into the deposits of quartzite and quartz boulders. From the cobbles and boulders the prehistoric miners flaked the stone into large oval-shaped blades that were later worked into projectile points or knives.

The quarry was first reported in 1880, but not until 1889 did W.H. Holmes, the Smithsonian archeologist, begin systematic investigations of the site.

(continued)



Holmes carried out his research sporadically during five years. Then, for almost a century, the site was left untouched by archeologists.

Armed with contemporary techniques and methods and the knowledge gained in the decades since Holmes's work, archeologists returned to the quarry in the summer of 1981. Faculty and students from New York University and National Park Service personnel joined in a cooperative venture designed to test some of W.H. Holmes's earlier hypotheses and to gather information on an unexplored area of the site. They discovered three workshops where prehistoric stone knappers had settled down to flake the stone into finer, oval-shaped blades. Analysis of the artifacts indicates that a variety of tasks, including bone- and wood-working, were being performed at the site in addition to the main activities of mining and stone working.

While some members of the joint National Park Service/New York University archeological field school worked at the prehistoric quarry, others excavated at the nearby historic site of Blagden's mills—one mill for bone fertilizer and the other for wheat. Although Blagden's mill complex was the largest of seven mills gracing the banks of Rock Creek, little was known about it. The two mills were operating before 1850, but historians did not know how much earlier. Blagden's mills ceased operation in 1889 and afterward fell into ruin. Sometime in the early 20th century, construction of the Rock Creek Park road system supposedly obliterated the remains of the two mills.

Knowing that historical "facts" and archeological reality are often at variance, the archeologists excavated three five-foot squares at the presumed locale of the historic mills. They sought to discover whether early 20th century road construction had indeed destroyed all trace of these mills. After excavating through old road pavement, landscaping fill, and flood-

deposited silt, the archeological team came upon evidence of the raceway that had separated the two mills and of the builder's trench and footings belonging to one of the stone walls of the bone mill. These remains were buried some five to eight feet below the present ground surface. Amid the deposits was a solid layer of bone fragments that for some unexplained reason were never ground into fertilizer.

Across the Potomac River from the District of Columbia, at Great Falls Park, Virginia, are the archeological ruins of the Patowmack Canal and its associated town, Matildaville. This canal was George Washington's grand project designed to bypass the Great Falls of the Potomac along the river's southern bank in order to provide a commercial trade route to the west. Constructed between 1785 and 1802, the canal and its five locks provided a total lift of 76 feet in little more than one mile.

In 1979 stabilization work on the canal and locks required the removal of some silt (accumulated since the canal went out of business in 1828) from the bottom of lock #1. To the surprise of those involved, buried in the wet silt of the lower gate pocket were timbers and boards. Exploratory excavations the following year revealed that these artifacts are the remnants of the lock gates, left in a closed position when the canal was abandoned. Subsequent research indicates that these lock gates are probably the oldest surviving ones in North America.

The lock gates were salvaged in 1982 as part of the 250th anniversary celebration of George Washington's birth. The gates were uncovered by archeologists from the University of Maryland under contract to the National Park Service. After the gates were completely exposed, they were lifted out and taken to the visitor center at Great Falls Park, Virginia, where they are currently undergoing conservation treatment by National Park Service personnel. It will take two or three years to treat the water-logged wood in order to prevent it from disintegrating or drying. During this time, the gates will be on display in a

(continued on p.15)

(continued from p.12)

specially constructed room so the public can see this remnant of George Washington's engineering dream.

Ultimately, the value of archeology lies in its contribution to science and in the enrichment of public knowledge. Preserving, managing, and interpreting archeological sites provide the means of educating the public about the past and the ways it can be studied through the hundreds, and perhaps even thousands, of archeological remains in the National Capital Region.

Stephen R. Potter
Regional Archeologist
for the National Capital
Region of the National
Park Service

*Reprinted with deletions and revisions by permission of the National Parks and Conservation Association. Original article published in the March/April 1983 issue of National Parks magazine.

* * * * *