

Prehistoric site becomes victim of town bulldozers

Blame appears to rest on many shoulders

By PETER DAVENPORT

Two weeks have passed since town bulldozers completely destroyed a pre-Columbian archaeological site at Greenwich Point, and still the question of what to do with the 15-foot pile of dark earth and artifacts left by a forgotten culture is a matter of debate among conservationists and Town Hall officials.

The excavation was made by the Department of Parks and Recreation, which planned to create an asphalt parking area for the department's service vehicles. While the plan had preliminary approval from a number of groups, it did not receive the blessing of the town zoning board. The mistake and violation were discovered only after most of the site was stripped.

The site was part of a 140-foot-long "middens," or trash heap, used by native Americans between 1000 and 1200 A.D. Prior to being ruined, the artifacts lay in stratified layers, representing years of use from which archaeologists hoped to glean information about the area's aboriginals.

"We know that the bulldozed material comes from a number of different deposits," said Ernest Wiegand, associate professor of archaeology at Norwalk State Community Technical College. "We can get a little bit of information about the people who lived there," he noted, but for the most part "it was totally destroyed."

Sifting through the pile, Mr. Wiegand and five volunteers found a number of oysters, hardshell clams and other shellfish, as well as animal bones and shards of pottery.

"The pieces of pottery were the most significant finds at the site," Mr. Wiegand said. "The style and manufacture seems to date it to the late woodlands period, somewhere between 1000 A.D. to 1200 A.D."

Other than that, Mr. Wiegand explained, little could be interpreted about the site. The bulldozers ruined layers of stratification, making it impossible for scholars to determine how use

of the site changed over time, what foods predominated at what times, and how many people lived there during what seasons.

Officials at Town Hall have expressed regret over the loss of the site. Some have pointed at the parks department for negligence, but Parks Director Frank Keegan indicated that blame should not rest solely with his department.

"The storage/maintenance area has been an integral part of the master plan for Greenwich Point, which has been

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reviewed and approved by the Greenwich Point Committee, the Board of Selectmen and the Conservation Commission," Mr. Keegan wrote in a memo to First Selectman John Margenot.

Mr. Keegan said that the work of clearing trees began in December, more than three months before the excavations started. Funds for the project had been approved by the town finance board in 1991; however, it was postponed last year when the fierce December storm tore the Point apart. Mr. Keegan noted also that William Rutherford, an architect and member of the Conservation Commission, designed the site plan.

But Planning & Zoning Chairman Peter K. Joyce said the fact that these

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groups approved the plan did not excuse Parks and Recreation from obtaining the necessary Coastal Area Management approval and from coming before the commission with a site plan.

"There is a master plan for Greenwich Point, but that is not part of the town's plan of development," Mr. Joyce said. "From a land-use standpoint, even if it had been in the development plan, it still would have required an appropriate site plan."

Both Mr. Joyce and Conservation Director Thomas Baptist said that a dig probably would have been recommended before anything was done at the site.

The matter was supposed to have been discussed before the P&Z last week but it was postponed. Although the groups have talked over the issue, Mr. Joyce did not think the item would be taken to a public hearing before late May or June.

Zoning commission alternate Gerry Finn criticized the "eleventh hour" withdrawal of the item from the meeting last week. "The town should be held to the same standards as its residents," Mr. Finn said. "It should have no special

privileges. I'm not sure Mr. Keegan understands the importance of this issue."

A survey of the site was conducted in 1958 by Robert Carl Suggs, professor of archaeology at Hunter College. Tens of thousands of shells had been discarded at the site, as well as the bones of raccoon, puma, wildcat, deer, dog, beaver, and an immature bear and bison. Dr. Suggs concluded, however, that the "paucity" of significant artifacts such as stone tools, wampum, and a "poorly developed bone industry" indicated that the middens represented the remains of a seasonal camp used by around 20 persons.

But Mr. Wiegand said that these findings may have been misguided, and that evidence might have proven more extensive use. If the stratified layers had remained intact, the time of year the site was used could have been guessed by looking for consistency in the seasonal layers in bivalve shells, for example, or deer teeth. Other artifacts, such as nut shells or vegetable remains may also have yielded clues as to who lived there.

"Using modern breakthroughs, we might have been able to reject some of his interpretations," Mr. Wiegand said. "It's impossible now."