

'It's quite clear there was one darn good site there'

Archaeologist: Town should salvage artifacts

By Suzanne Sorrentino
Staff Writer

While town departments clashed two weeks ago over an archaeological site at Greenwich Point destroyed by an excavator's backhoe, a curator at the Bruce Museum was putting the finishing touches on the design of an exhibit of coastal archaeology in Greenwich.

Deborah Brinckerhoff, collections manager and curator of ethnography at the Bruce, had chosen from among the many sets of artifacts the museum owns to incorporate into the exhibit those excavated during an archaeological dig at Greenwich Point in 1955 by Columbia University graduate student Robert Suggs.

Coincidentally, as Brinckerhoff studied the pottery shards, animal bones and points Suggs had unearthed, which will help her tell the story of the lives of coastal Indians, the backhoe was digging through an extension of the Indian remains Suggs had uncovered.

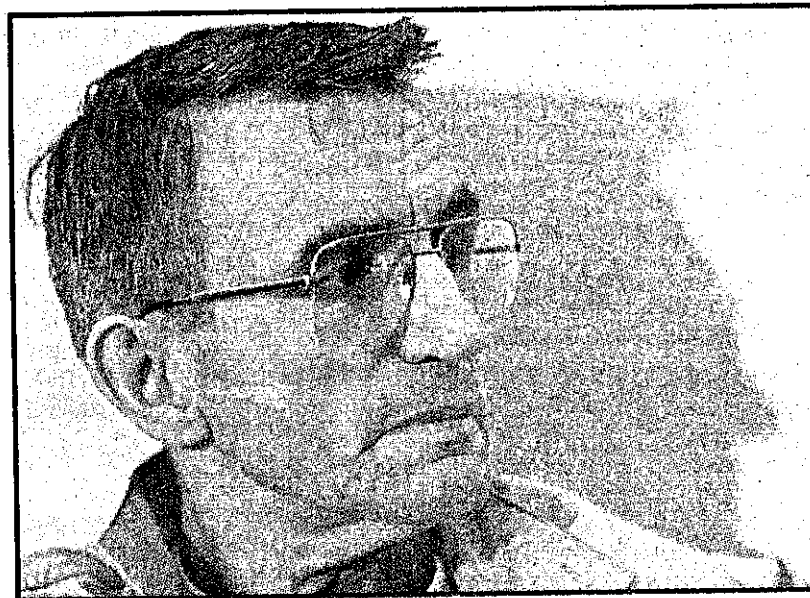
The backhoe's plow revealed dark earth speckled with shell fragments indicating a midden — an Indian landfill — had been struck.

Suggs returned to Greenwich Friday to help Brinckerhoff assemble the exhibit, but during his visit he also verified claims by local conservationists and archaeologists that the site destroyed at Greenwich Point was part of what he had discovered as a student.

The town Department of Parks and Recreation halted work to create a maintenance area at the beach 2½ weeks ago, when the staffs of the town Conservation and Planning and Zoning commissions became aware that the midden had been uncovered.

Suggs said the entire peninsula contains remnants of Indian habitation and said the town should make a plan to salvage some of the artifacts.

"What was bulldozed seems to be an extension of the midden layer running throughout the whole area,"



Richard Freeda/For Greenwich Time

Archaeologist Robert Suggs, who first discovered the midden on Greenwich Point, talks Friday at the Bruce Museum about the Indian artifacts.

Suggs said in an interview Friday at the Bruce Museum after he had visited Greenwich Point.

"There has to be a rational, sensible plan to explore the archaeological resources of Greenwich Point. This is one of the only waterfront properties

left in Greenwich that is not developed. And it's quite clear there was one darn good site there," Suggs said.

"It's conceivable you could get occupation there as much as 2,000 or 3,000 years B.C.," he said.

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Artifacts

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Human occupation along the Long Island Sound coast is known to date back to about 9,000 B.C., according to Suggs.

Suggs said he returned to Greenwich Point this week to show his old site to another archaeologist, Ernest Wiegand, a professor at Norwalk Community-Technical College who first discovered that the midden had been bulldozed.

"It wasn't my spot that was bulldozed, but it was an extension of my midden. I'm certain there are house floors there," Suggs said. "It would be very good to properly excavate because we know little about Indian house structures."

Suggs was working on his master's degree thesis in 1955 when, with town permission, he began digging at Greenwich Point.

He chose a site where a man-made berm extended about 100 feet along a ditch. He thought the berm and the

ditch corresponded to accounts he had read of Indian fortifications, so he began to scratch away layers of earth. About four feet from the surface he uncovered an abundance of buried shell fragments and four or five pieces of pottery, he said.

Suggs had struck a midden. But the fortification, it turned out, had been built during World War I, Suggs said.

About three months of excavation uncovered many animal bones including squirrel, bear, deer, mountain lion, beaver, muskrat and dog.

He also found several shards of pottery, some of which he had tested for carbon 14, a radioactive isotope used in dating fossils. These tests showed that Indians were living at the site in about 1200 A.D.

Suggs said he also found unfired pieces of pottery which indicated that pottery making was occurring at the site.

Under the midden, Suggs said,

there was some evidence of fire pits and "post holes," a circular pattern of darkened earth that is left behind when a post decays. The posts could have been from a shelter or a drying rack.

Suggs concluded from the results of another test that the Indians were using the site as a seasonal camp. But tests available now indicate the Indians may have lived there throughout much of the year, he said. For example, certain tests can now be performed on shells that will indicate the month in which the clam or oyster was consumed.

Suggs said tests could now be made on soil from the middens that would identify tree pollen, which could give a complete idea of the flora and fauna in the area at the time.

After about three months, Suggs covered over his midden, wrote his thesis, which was published in 1958 in the Bulletin of the Archeological

Society of Connecticut and headed for French Polynesia.

Suggs, 62, is a 1949 graduate of Greenwich High School. He earned his doctorate in archaeology from Columbia after his work in Polynesia.

After study in Polynesia, where he discovered one of the oldest inhabited sites in the Marquesas Islands, Suggs went to work for the U.S. government and is now retired in Alexandria, Va.

Suggs was disappointed that the site at Greenwich Point had been destroyed but was optimistic that more could be learned at the site in the future.

"I'm sorry this has happened, but I think if the town adopts a rational plan, further damage can be prevented. Let's not cry over spilled milk, but let's do something sensible there," Suggs said.

The museum exhibit is scheduled to open Oct. 1.

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