

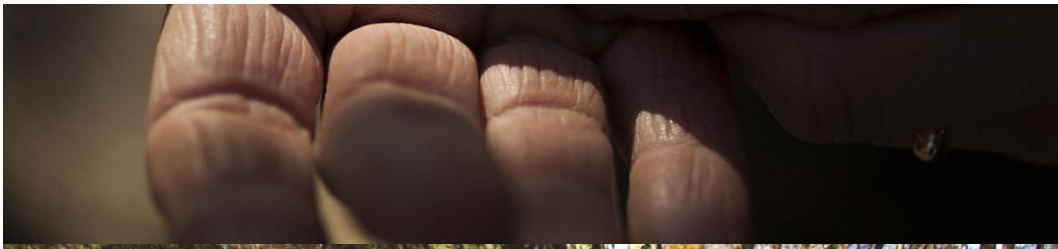


# Archaeologists uncover Native American artifacts in Virginia Beach's Great Neck

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**V**IRGINIA BEACH

High on a natural bluff near the Chesapeake Bay, archaeologists over the past two months have unearthed fish scales, seashells, pottery shards and the teeth of two small children.

Native Americans settled off Great Neck Road 1,500 years ago, and the finds give a glimpse into what life might have been like for them.

This week, state archaeologists finished digging at the 1-acre site that overlooks Long Creek.

The private property owner who is selling three lots for residential development invited them to explore, said Michael Clem, an archaeologist with the Virginia Department of Historic Resources.

“We would have liked to have had a lot more time,” archaeologist Michael Barber said Thursday afternoon as he loaded a large plastic container of notebooks filled with data into his truck. “But to have any information on how people lived 1,500 years ago is pretty important.”

Barber looks like a character out of an Indiana Jones movie. His boots have a perpetual dusty finish. His long, gray beard tapers at the end, shaped perhaps by moments of deep thinking. Barber is comfortable with a trowel in his hand.

The people who lived at this site probably didn’t stay long, possibly returning seasonally for a couple of decades. Their descendants may have moved toward the south shore of Broad Bay. In the 1980s, before the development of the Green Hill Farms and Meadowridge subdivisions, archaeologists uncovered evidence of a larger settlement there from the Late Woodland period of prehistory about 1,000 years ago.

The area is one of the largest and most significant sites in the region dating from the Woodland period of prehistory, according to a state report.

People living during the Middle Woodland period in the Coastal Plain relied on food from the waterways.

The Great Neck site is one of the highest natural places in Virginia Beach, about 30 feet above Long Creek. It could have had a clear view of the ocean a thousand years ago.

Excavation began with clearing the top layer of soil to reveal dark features in the subsoil, which can indicate cooking pits, for example.

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Over the past eight weeks, researchers found scales of sharp-toothed garfish and sturgeon. They unearthed layers of oyster shells and even periwinkle shells, to Barber's surprise. The small, marine snail wasn't typically consumed during this time. Maybe the people living there had been on the edge of starvation, he said.

They found thousands of pieces of pottery, including one complete pot. The trove includes some oddities: an arrowhead made of chert, a type of stone that is not local and may be around 8,000 years old; and Savannah River points made of quartzite, predating the pottery found at the site by 1,000 years or more.

They also exhumed the teeth of two small children who had been buried side by side. Those remains will be given to the local Nansemond Indian Tribal Association for reburial, Clem said.

Local volunteers from the Archaeological Society of Virginia helped every day.

"This scrapes nicely," Sonja Ostrander said, as she shoveled into the wall of a 3-foot-deep hole. "It's compacted, but not hard."

Oyster shells neutralized acid in the soil and helped preserve some of the animal bones they found in the pits.

Bev Barker and Cynthia Hansen held a screen, sifting dirt to find pieces of pottery. Some had markings. The people who lived there may have pressed fishing net into the clay to give it texture, Clem said.

Hypothesizing about the people who lived there is all they can do for now. Soon, they'll analyze their findings.

Radiocarbon dating will provide insight into the timeline. Close examination of the white-tail deer bones, charred plant material and pointed tools will help piece it together. They already see similarities to ceramics found in settlements along the James River.

They hope to hold a field school for archaeology students at the site in the spring.

"It's exciting," Hansen said. "We're adding to the knowledge of this period of time."

