

ARCHAEOLOGY: Preserving the Past, Seeking a safety net for Native American artifacts

By Russell Drumm

Mary Miller remembers one of her students practically lying on a sifter tray that she her husband, Mel King, used to separate Native American artifacts and lesser crumbs of information about how life was lived in the distant past.

"There was this small boy, Jason Engel, picking little fish bones from the dirt," said Ms. Miller, who today might be seen as East Hampton's first "official" archaeologist.

It is in the dirt that the history of the South Fork can be found, and, unless and until it can be carefully and respectfully revealed, there are those who believe strongly that underground is where it should stay.

"Dutch" Miller, as she is known to family and friends, was speaking, in this case, about the ground in East Hampton's Northwest Woods, on the banks of Northwest Harbor, where she, a teacher at the Springs School, and Mr. King discovered "two Colonial levels," that is, one settlement with one Colonial age sitting above another Colonial age, as well as, below those two levels, evidence of Indian life from at least 1,000 years ago.

The boy picking fish bones from the sifter was most likely hooked on archaeology, Ms. Miller said, or at least was, from that time forward, in the habit of looking down. She said she recognized the instinct.

"I grew up in Squantum, Mass., part of Quincy. It became an island once a day when the tide came in. We were free-roaming. I always kept my sight to the ground looking for arrowheads. I heard folk stories. Never much liked history in school, but when people would tell me things, I was there."

When she moved to East Hampton her future husband's father, "Grandpa Selden LeRoy King, would always go out in the field this time of year when it was deeply plowed down to the next level to look for arrowheads, scrapers, and pestles. I would go out in the fields too."

Eventually, Ms. Miller and Mel King formed the Sebonac (the Algonquian word for ground nut, a type of tuber) Chapter of the New York State Archaeological Association, and functioned for 10 years as an arm of the East Hampton Town Planning Department.

The department is often involved in archaeology because most discoveries of Native American sites occur when land is cleared for building. "Archaeology is being determined by bulldozers," in the words of John Strong, a professor of history at Southampton College and author of several books on local native peoples.



X East Hampton has been credited for doing more than other Long Island municipalities to protect ancient sites, in part because for many years Dutch Miller and Mel King acted as liaisons between developers and the town. They developed a similar relationship with state and county parks departments.

In the late 1970s and early '80s, builders were not legally required to alert a municipality when artifacts were found. However, the husband and wife team was able to gain the cooperation of developers at various places around town: on the west side of Three Mile Harbor, at the Culloden Point subdivision in Montauk, on the banks of Georgica Pond, and in East Hampton's Northwest Woods.

Larry Penny, director of the East Hampton Town Natural Resources Department, recalled that protecting another fort and an adjoining burial ground was a "watershed moment" in the town's, and, it turned out, in the state's, legal protection of Native American sites and artifacts.

|| In 1983, a housing development was planned for Fort Hill in Montauk overlooking Fort Pond Bay. The bulldozers had begun to roll when Indian burial remains were unearthed. Native Americans in full ceremonial dress visited Town Hall in protest.

The project was stopped when town officials found a town law that prohibited the disturbance of any abandoned cemetery. The town fathers who approved the ordinance might not have had Indian graves in mind, but the law slowed the subdivision application. Eventually the land was condemned by the town, and the sacred place became the present town-managed Fort Hill Cemetery.

X Not long after, with the help of Ms. Miller, Mr. Penny, and State Assemblyman Fred W. Thiele Jr., an East Hampton planning board attorney at the time, the town pressed for including protection of archaeological sites when the local version of the new State Environmental Quality Review Act, or SEQRA, was created.

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"The law had protection of culturally significant things in it, but very vague, with no specificity. The state law gave us authority to amend the local version. We did that and added the protection of culturally important sites in the open spaces law too," Mr. Thiele recalled.

From that point on, whenever a project required a review for a special permit on environmental grounds, a rudimentary search for historical significant items was required. If the state's map of archaeologically sensitive areas indicated such finds were likely, the developer was then required to hire a contract archaeologist to do cursory "shovel tests." If these bore fruit, a more extensive search was called for.

But, while SEQRA review provides a safety net, the net's mesh is too large and things can fall through, in the opinion of Mr. Penny and of Lisa Liquori, the former head of East Hampton Town Planning Department and now a planning consultant. Robert Cooper, a former town councilman who professes to be the current chief of the Montaukett people, agrees and has been working behind the scenes to make sure that future review will be done with the help of the descendants of those whose stone arrow points and fire pits continue to be discovered.

Unfortunately, when the Kings stopped digging in the early 1980s, no one picked up their shovels and sifters. Now efforts are being made to continue their work and to make it part of East Hampton's official fabric.

|| Ms. Liquori has recommended that the town hire its own archaeologist, who would undertake the equivalent of a stage-one search of areas believed to be archaeologically significant. The state's

"map of sensitivity" was far too broad, she said, not specific enough.

Having an archaeologist narrow the field "would save the applicant money and give the assurance that it was done in a comprehensive way," she said. It would also prevent planners "wrestling" with private archaeologists, as has happened in the past. The archaeologist's work would also "refine the state map," Ms. Liquori said, even on state and county parkland.

Mr. Penny said that even before an archaeologist was hired, the town needed to create a law to protect sites and artifacts. He recommended that a committee be formed including Native American members "to address Native American concerns."

Numerous studies had already identified most of the important areas in town, but there was no protection, he said. Artifacts were simply being dumped with piles of soil when land was cleared, or were being taken away by archaeologists for hire and others.

He said that despite the efforts of his department, and of Chief Cooper when he was a town councilman, the town board had not risen to the task of creating a protective law, nor had the town created a depository or museum for artifacts, something Dutch Miller said she had been waiting for since she stopped digging.

For now, Ms. Miller said, the maps of her and her husband's archaeological finds were in a safe place, out of public view. "We did survey maps of the whole town, but they were never released because of their sensitivity," Ms. Miller said.

"We are so rich in history. It's like living in a museum," Ms. Liquori said. "We do need to come up with a protective system. Until we have a repository, a museum, those things should be kept in situ, in the ground where they are - like a safe."