

Spirit of the Agreement

Tribe to oversee digging at site of possible ancient village

By Anne Fullam and Mitchell Freedman
STAFF WRITERS

The discovery of what could turn out to be a 1,000-year-old Indian village in a Southampton hamlet has led to an unusual cooperation agreement between local officials and leaders of the Shinnecock tribe worried that the large-scale archaeological dig urged for the site could disturb human remains.

Responding to the concerns of the Shinnecock that the proposed dig — the largest in Long Island history — would disturb graves, town officials have agreed to allow the tribe to police the work and call a halt to it if a skeleton is found, so that a medicine man can be brought in to supervise a proper reburial at another location. Three tribal members are to be present at all times when any digging is done at the site, in the hamlet of Hayground.

"Our concern was, if they should find graves there, they have to be treated in a certain way," said David Bunn Siklos Martine, one of the three Shinnecoeks who signed the agreement with the town. "I don't want it disturbed at all. If it was up to me, it would be preserved. But they owned it already and arrangements had already been made for the excavation to take place before we were contacted."

The agreement, which officials said sets a precedent on the Island, also calls for all relics recovered from the site — slated for eventual residential development — to become the exclusive property of the tribe. They will be displayed at a cultural center to be built soon on the Shinnecock Reservation in Southampton.

Pottery, hearths, post molds and other signs of human occupation — including the outlines of wigwams — were unearthed last summer during a pre-development survey behind the vacant St. James Hotel on Montauk Highway. The discovery led New York State to recommend a full archaeological dig on about 40 percent of the 10-acre property, according to Bruce Fullem, a senior archaeologist with the state Department of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation.

But the dig will not take place until the owners of the property agree to the work. And, while the land cannot be developed until the archaeological questions are resolved, town officials have not heard from property owners Thomas James and Lorraine Klugh



Photo by Morgan Croka

Martine of Shinnecock tribe holds scale model of wigwam at dig site yesterday

Please see INDIAN on Page 27

of Water Mill for a year.

They could not be reached for comment this week, despite repeated calls.

Based on what already has been discovered, experts believe the site contains remains of a 1,000-year-old Shinnecock fishing settlement.

"It's significant," said John Strong, a professor of archaeology at Long Island University, Southampton Campus, and an expert on local Indian history. "It's a village site, with several wigwams and burials. The clues all point to it."

The proposed archaeological dig was prompted by the property owner's request two years ago to subdivide the land so they could build three new houses on lots near the water and sell the old St. James Hotel in Hayground, one of the oldest settlement areas in Southampton for Indians and colonists alike.

As part of a routine environmental review, officials looked for historical records about the site and dug test holes — which indicated it could be a major archaeological study area. Under the state's Environmental Quality Review Act, all proposed development must be reviewed for potential impact on all facets of the environment, including historical and archaeological aspects.

Chief among the clues that an Indian village might be buried beneath the meadow and bog adjacent to Hayground Cove and Calf Creek was the location itself — an area with freshwater and a long history of clamming and other shellfishing, said Tom Thorsen, director of the town's Department of Planning. "It's near the water . . . and there were legends that something was in the general area," he said.

An evaluation of the site and the information gathered from the initial digging prompted state officials to recommend a full exploration of four acres at the site. The town planning board made such a review part of its conditional approval to develop the site — meaning the land could not be subdivided or developed until the dig is completed.

The town has identified eight potential archaeological sites in Southampton, including a 7.5-acre site where the remains of a Shinnecock Indian fort are believed to be buried.

Precedent for the new agreement with the Shinnecoeks was set a few years ago in the state when Iroquois graves were uncovered at Fort Edward, north of Albany, where a sewer-treatment plant was being constructed, according to Joel Grossman, an archaeologist who helped work out that accord.

Grossman said: "I have a long history of working with the cooperative juncture of the law, science and Native American religious and belief systems. I don't see too much of a problem."

Newsday 4/13/91