

Two cultures uncovered

Native and colonial finds in same spot

By Gwendolen Groockock

SOUTHOLD—A cache of American Indian artifacts saw the light of day for the first time in at least 3,000 years, when archaeologists dug up four arrowheads, a scraper and a rare stone ax head in a square-foot patch of dirt on Ackerly Pond Lane on Saturday.

A tiny “bird point” arrowhead and an ornate metal piece from a gun dating from the early 1700s had been found two days earlier in the surface soil, early indications that the earth below could yield treasures, but no one expected a jackpot like Saturday’s, said Suffolk County Community College professor Lisa Cordani-Stevenson.

“It’s really exciting,” said the archaeologist, who has led digs in and around Bilberry Swamp, part of the site of a circa-1700s village in the vicinity of Ackerly Pond Lane, since 1999. “Ninety-nine percent of what we’ve found here to date, including a tombstone, has been colonial, so to find Indian artifacts makes this site even more important,” she said. “It’s an incredibly rich spot, and I think a comprehensive archeological survey should be done of the area. I’d love to open up the whole thing.”

It’s a mystery why the older items were found grouped together, she said. The ax head, or “celt,” is the most important object,



because it’s made of highly polished black slate and shows no wear on its sharp edge, leading the diggers to believe it was a ceremonial object.

“Slate is an extremely rare material for this area,” she said. “It could indicate that this is a burial site; we just don’t know. We have to see what comes up when we dig out the nearby units.”

Dig expert Jay Cobb, who has worked with top archaeologists in New York State for more than 60 years, pointed out the pitting and scoring that indicate how the celt was painstakingly chipped into shape and then polished with sand and leather.

“It would have taken someone years to get this so well-shaped and smooth,” he said. “Clearly, it was a highly prized possession.”

The metal object has been identified as an escutcheon plate from a flintlock gun, similar to those made in the early 1700s in what’s now Germany, said Ms. Cordani-Stevenson.

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Suffolk Times photos by Gwendolen Groockock

Above: Jay Cobb with the cache of artifacts found on an Ackerly Pond Lane, Southold, site. Left: An escutcheon plate from a circa-1700 gun.

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Hessian mercenaries fighting for the British in the Revolution camped in the area, but it's unlikely that they would have brought over such an old gun, she said. The small, white quartz bird point actually fell through a sifting screen and was spotted in the waste pile by nearby resident Gary Laube. It's probably about 700 years old, said the archaeologist.

The big excitement started Saturday morning, when one white stone arrowhead after another turned up in a layer of dirt at least 3,000 years old. The "points," as they're called, are a Bear Island point, which is plentiful on Long Island; a "pretty common" Lamoka point; an unidentified point; and a LeCroy point, which is very rare on the East Coast, according to Ms. Cordani-Stevenson. The fifth item is thought to be a scraping tool made of Cossackie flint, mined from a well-known American Indian rock mine in upstate New York.

Ms. Cordani-Stevenson notified state officials about the findings on Monday, she said.

Whether the site was ever home to American Indians, or whether they just passed through, is under debate, but Ms. Cordani-Stevenson thinks some kind of permanent encampment could have been located there.

"It's close to fresh and saltwater, and it's on high land," she said. "It's a perfect site."

A nearby restored 1700s building called the Doctor's House was for a time a school, and many slate pencils and broken slates, as well as buttons, pipe stems and other colonial artifacts