

LONG ISLAND OPINION

By GREGORY J. BLASS

ON the afternoon of a chilly but pristine fall day, our caravan of government and private cars pulled up alongside a wide, peaceful creek on the North Fork. We climbed out of our modern, climate-controlled cocoons for a moment to gaze through the almost golden vegetation, across the water to the place, "the principal place" as its people knew it hundreds of years ago.

It appeared as a stretch of forested hills along the graceful creek, a perfect spot, almost subdued by the blue sky and autumnal quiet. The trees were bare of any leaves by this early day in December.

Our group looked at maps and chatted as others who were more experienced pointed out features. As some of us followed the creek with our eyes in its path to Peconic Bay and Robins Island, we looked back across to the woods and asked where "the fort" would be, where, even from this one-mile distance, we might catch a glimpse of Fort Corchaug, the Indian word for "the principal place."

Eager to move on, we made quick work of the stopover. The caravan was under way again and a score or so of private citizens, academics, officials of the Town of Southold and Suffolk County, along with the media, found themselves in one of those rare moments when they traveled by automobile at no more than 20 miles per hour. The country roads and bridge over the creek would allow no faster pace than that.

Eventually we came to the edge of the woods and upon the farm of which the woods were a part. Here we were

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at last on the 104-acre property that local government hopes to buy. We talked as we grouped together, having parked amid the rye grass, of how various acquisition programs could be combined to raise the money if the price was right.

One couldn't help but think, as we entered the woods, of how the Indians who lived here in a past age might have reacted to this group, as it pondered aloud about bonds, appraisals, getting the votes in the County Legislature, and wondering if the seller's price would not put it beyond reach even for a town and county. Would the Corchaugs have laughed or been puzzled? Would they have shaken their heads in despair or disdain? A culture of fishing and farming people had lived here from prehistoric times until Europeans arrived in the 1600's.

Within 50 years the Indians were almost gone, the land "bought" when

Buying the site may help to right wrongs that began 350 years ago.

the settlers found it convenient, after first arriving, then building houses and establishing themselves. The terms were never good, the prices never fair.

Deeds exist bearing such Corchaug tribe signatures as Momoweta, Paucamp and Ambriscow. Records suggest a pitiful decline, as finally in 1764 Indians filed a complaint with officials of the day, our predecessors, to be given "satisfaction for, or recovery of, their land." These records do not reveal how local officials, academics, private citizens and the media then responded, but it was more likely not at all.

Now it may be different; today a debt might be partly paid if this land could be saved. The Indians could never have imagined our modern,

A Debt

clever ways of peeling the skin off the earth, paving it with blacktop and condos. We could turn the creek and Peconic Bay into a chemical sewer in no time. Or we could place it in public ownership, perhaps restore the fort, and interpret it in a scientific way so that future generations may truly know what Long Island was before our arrival.

Not much has happened in these woods since the Indian settlement. An archaeologist remarked in 1891 that the site had been undisturbed, and it continues in that state. Of course, we could see no traces of the fort, but old sketches were brought out and we found we stood right where the fort had been.

We stand at this point where some casual digging, as had been done in years past to a very limited degree, would reveal a worth of artifacts. Past digs showed that the Corchaug tribe, a part of 13 Algonquin tribes that inhabited Long Island, farmed and manufactured wampum out of seashells and made decorated pottery from clay deposits.

They had the entire North Fork to themselves until our ancestors moved in. It was this site the Indians selected as their home, their "principal place." Standing here, we could certainly see why. It has a commanding view in all directions and offers fresh water springs above the high water mark near the creek.

To the south, Peconic Bay swept out to the horizon. The fort itself measured 210 feet north and south and 160 feet east and west. During a careful removal of brush in 1937, scientists easily traced an embankment that was then about 15 feet wide and about 1½ feet high. Their shovel tests, on file in the Cutchogue Free Library, indicated that the Corchaugs lived in wigwams outside the fort, moving in only when hostile tribes from Connecticut sent raiding parties across the Sound.

But tribal warfare alone did not bring an end to this quiet, noble race. It was a combination of white settlers who took away their desire to live (the slightest "infraction" meant involuntary servitude for the Corchaugs with the local farmers, who suffered a labor shortage), and the European diseases that took away their ability to survive.

"It had been generally observed," wrote Daniel Denton in 1670, "that

TOPIC

to Pay at Fort Corchaug



Rendering of the Corchaug Indian settlement on the North Fork.

where the English came to settle, a Divine hand makes way for them, by removing or cutting off the Indians, either by wars one with the other, or by some raging mortal Disease." In 1659, an epidemic is known to have wiped out almost two-thirds of Long Island's Indian population, having almost no effect on the white settlers who were the carriers of the disease.

The fort testified to the Corchaugs' ingenuity as well as their industry. The walls were a palisade made up of two or three rows of tree trunks, enclosing almost three-fourths of an acre. Since they lacked metal tools, the Corchaugs brought down trees by setting fire to a band around their trunks.

With tools made of wood or stone, they dug trenches and filled them with double rows of trunks and dirt. Logs the width of a man's thigh and more than 20 feet long were set upright, at an angle in the ditches so they crossed each other at the top, forming a vee, in which more logs

were placed. Scaffolding was placed on the interior so defenders could shoot arrows at the enemy.

Similar forts were built by other tribes at Massapequa and Montauk, but those sites have been plundered, plowed over and lost to development.

As we congregated within the fort boundaries, we agreed that the walls were gone perhaps, but the spirit of Fort Corchaug was still with us, and could endure long after we depart. That, however, depends on the success of public acquisition and careful management. Those in our party who saw this place and felt this spirit for the first time were convinced.

After our visit, I sponsored a resolution that provided for the appraisal of Fort Corchaug and the Downs Farm on which it is located. It received unanimous support in the Suffolk County Legislature.

Before negotiations begin with the owner, an obstacle confronts us: the owner says the property is already sold, after having urged government

officials to take an interest in the place. If the motive is to raise the price, the owner is wasting his time. When negotiations start, we shall see if a meeting of the minds is possible.

As we left Fort Corchaug that day, a silence came upon the group. The anticipation of our impatient arrival gave way in our departure to a heavy awareness of the task that lay ahead. While the leaves crackled beneath our feet, and as the vines and brush offered far less resistance than beforehand, we understood more than ever what is at stake.

Here we were, a group of citizens, journalists and officials, a microcosm of the earlier, greedy society that disrupted a people and a place so much in balance with one another. Will we undo the terrible things we brought about here? Can we save the remains of one of the last Indian forts on the East Coast? Is a higher authority giving us a chance to pass some sort of test, offering us an opportunity to make things right?