

Digging Back Through Time

Vassar Researcher Conducts Archaeological Dig at the Mohonk Preserve

For most people, the words "archaeological dig" conjure up images of the windswept sands of Egypt and pith helmeted archaeologists from the past century, not current-day scientists working on the rocky, wooded slopes of the Mohonk Preserve. But that's just where you'll find Dr. Lucy Johnson, Professor of Anthropology at Vassar College, leading an intrepid band of students on a "dig" of a prehistoric Native American rockshelter at the "Trapps Gap" near the Preserve's Visitor Center.

This fairly modest rock overhang located along one of the Preserve's well traveled trails was most likely a way station and shelter for generations of Native Americans - from prehistoric times up until just before European settlement. "This rockshelter is located along an ancient Native American footpath across the ridge that dates back some 10,000 years," said Paul Huth, the Preserve's Director of Research. "Dr. Johnson's work should help us learn more about the lives, hunting habits, and movements of the earliest peoples of the Shawangunks," he added.

At the time of European contact (in the first half of the 17th century), the Mid-Hudson region was home to a large and vibrant native population of an estimated 60,000 people, living within range of the Hudson River, between what is today the town of Catskill and southeast New York, into New Jersey.

Known later by European settlers as the Shongum Path, this ancient route was still a critical pedestrian and horse passageway in the 18th and 19th centuries. The original location of the path through the woods can still be seen today. Current-day Route 44/55, and its precursor, the 1856 New Paltz Wawarsing Turnpike, used part of this same passageway to strike a path across the ridge.



Dr. Lucy Johnson begins to excavate a new grid square at the Upper Trapps Rockshelter, an archaeological study site on the Mohonk Preserve in Gardiner. Photo by Johanna Batman.

When analyzed at Vassar, the artifacts from this significant rockshelter may reveal where native peoples traveled and the extent of their trade with others in the relatively distant areas of western New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey. The dig will help the Preserve understand how they used the ridge for hunting and possibly in which seasons. It will also help track their presence through time, starting as early as some 11,000 years ago - shortly after the retreat of glacial ice, the recovery of plants, and the return of big game.

"We've already found some artifacts dating from about 7,000 years ago to the end of the prehistoric period," said Dr. Johnson. "Most have been found inside the shelter, although we expect that the natives also used the apron in front for activities. On the floor of the shelter,"

she continued, "there is a large slab of roof rock. This may have fallen in prehistoric times, burying artifacts and protecting them from disturbance by later occupants or visitors."

This is the first time the site has been excavated since the early 20th century. Artifacts uncovered to date by the Vassar team include several arrowheads or spearpoints and other signs of an ancient human presence on the ridge, including prehistoric pot sherds. A clay pipe stem and decorated clay pipe bowl indicate early historic period use of the shelter. The artifacts discovered during the dig will add to the Preserve's extensive prehistoric collections, which already include a wide variety of arrowheads, spearpoints, and other stone tools.

"Because of the very public location of this rockshelter, it's critical that we unearth, analyze, and permanently protect these important clues to prehistoric life on the ridge," observed Huth. "This excavation will provide information that is no longer available from the valley below, where the lands have been tilled and built upon for generations, obliterating traces of earlier peoples," he noted.

"This important archaeological study will complement two other studies of prehistoric vegetation and climate currently underway on the Preserve," said Glenn Hoagland, the Preserve's Executive Director. "Correlating these with Dr. Johnson's cultural history work will enable us to paint a more complete picture of the world these early ridge dwellers inhabited," he observed. "We hope that visitors will respect and help protect the site while Dr. Johnson and her students pursue this important work that will shine a light on the early history of our region," he added.

Weather permitting, the dig will con-

tinue through the month of November and is interpreted to the public on Saturdays by a member of the Vassar student team.

At Vassar since 1973, Dr. Johnson has conducted archaeological research focusing primarily on hunter-gatherer populations throughout the world, in areas ranging from Peru, Chile, and Egypt to several states in the U.S.

Dr. Johnson is one of the Preserve's 50 visiting Research Associates who conduct field research projects in the Shawangunks every year. In all, hundreds of undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students have conducted a wide variety of research projects using the Preserve as a vast, natural laboratory and information resource. Also, dozens of faculty and over 850 students a year from area colleges and universities use Preserve lands as an outdoor study site for class visits and for faculty and student research.

Although it is primarily known as a land trust and recreational destination, the Preserve is also dedicated to protecting and interpreting the cultural heritage of the ridge, dating back to Paleo Indian rock shelter encampments and spanning more than 10,000 years of local history. Over 30 years ago, the Mohonk Mountain House and the entire Preserve landscape were designated a National Historic Landmark.

For more information about the Preserve and to see an on-line slideshow of Dr. Johnson's dig underway, see www.mohonkpreserve.org/index.php?researchstudies.