

WORKING TOGETHER

Native Americans have often been suspect of archaeology. But when the Eastern Pequot Tribal Nation wanted to learn more about their history, they consulted an archaeologist.

BY ALISON STEIN WELLNER

At 7:00 a.m. on an August day a caravan of cars and SUVs rolled onto the Eastern Pequot Tribal Nation reservation in North Stonington, Connecticut. Near the tribe's ceremonial circle—a clearing in the woods rimmed by a double row of posts and with a fire pit in the center—14 college students piled out of the vehicles. They all set about spraying their arms and legs with insect repellent, the first of many attempts to keep the mosquitoes and ticks at bay on this hot and humid day.

Amidst the minor melee, it was not easy to spot Stephen Silliman, the University of Massachusetts, Boston archaeologist who ran this field school. "Look for the old guy with a beard," one of the students remarked. Silliman, 33, is hardly an old guy. Intense, wiry, with a brown close-clipped beard, wearing a loose t-shirt and hiking boots, he didn't look that much older than the students he supervises. Silliman stood near the spot where the crew entered the woods, clearly eager to get down to business. The field school was entering its fifth and last week on this day, wrapping up its second season.

Chief Hockeo raises a ceremonial hand-carved wooden peace pipe as a blessing at the Eastern Pequot Tribal Nation's annual pow-wow celebration. The archaeological team was invited to, and recognized during, this community event.



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Archaeologist Stephen Silliman, Tribal Councilor Kathy Sebastian, and Tribal Historic Preservation Officer Roy "Two Hawks" Cook discuss the significance of an ancient projectile point and stone celt, which are believed to be several thousand years old, that were found in a trash pit dating to the 1800s. These discussions, both in the field and out of it, have been critical to the success and direction of the archaeological project.

The crew trooped down a steep slope into the heavily wooded land that makes up the bulk of the Eastern Pequot's reservation, which is one of the oldest in the nation. The Pequot Indians once controlled all of Connecticut, east of the Connecticut River, as well as portions of the coast, and most of Eastern Long Island, New York. In 1637, colonial soldiers staged a surprise ambush of the Pequot's fort in Mystic, Connecticut. Some 500 to 600 Pequot were burned alive or otherwise killed by colonial soldiers, a conflict that has become known as the Pequot War. The colonial government dispersed survivors. Some were sold into slavery, while others were placed under the supervision of other tribes. In 1683, the colonial government settled the remaining Eastern Pequot Tribal Nation on these 225 acres, and records show that the land has been occupied ever since.

Another group of Pequots, the Mashantucket, were settled on a different reservation not far from the Eastern Pequots. They are now a separate tribe, although the Eastern Pequot view the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation as cousins. It's the Mashantucket Pequots who founded the

extraordinarily successful Foxwoods Resort Casino, which looms near the woods where Silliman and his crew worked. And not far from that casino is the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center, a much-lauded institution that houses, in part, the results of over two decades of archaeological research, the fruits of a long-term relationship that the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation have had with Kevin McBride, an archaeologist at the University of Connecticut. It was McBride who recommended Silliman for the Eastern Pequot Tribal Nation's archaeology project.

In 2002, the Eastern Pequot's tribal council began planning for historic preservation programs and potential development on the reservation. They determined that an archaeological investigation could help them identify sacred areas that they didn't want to disturb, while deepening their knowledge of the tribe's culture and history. "Since we never before had an archaeological project on our reservation, we didn't know exactly what was here," said Kathy Sebastian, Eastern Pequot Tribal Nation Councilor and Historic Preservation Advisor.

For his part, Silliman was intrigued by the idea of studying an area continuously occupied by the tribe for several centuries. “The land has great long-term significance and potential evidence of 321 years of community persistence and change,” he said. While there are plenty of historical documents showing that people occupied the land since 1683, there was a great deal to learn about what transpired during that time. How did the Eastern Pequot relate to the Euro-Americans? Were they buying goods or making some of their own, growing crops, hunting and gathering? How did they use the land and build their homes? “There is an oral history, but once you get back into the early 1700s and 1800s, there are not quite as many stories, probably because of the passing of time,” he said. The Eastern Pequot’s interests and Silliman’s converged nicely.

Down the hill, through the woods, scrambling over moss-covered rocks, ferns, and fallen branches, the crew arrived at a feature they were excavating. A foundation sill and a pile of rocks that could be a collapsed chimney indicated that a house once stood here. It was likely a European-style frame house, said Silliman, roughly 15 square feet in size. About half of the students set to work here, digging excavation units. The other half were dispatched to a second feature, another, smaller house located further downhill.

During the project’s first season, Silliman’s crew conducted a survey of the entire reservation and dug approximately 230 shovel-test units. In 2004 they dug about 250 more. The tribe knew of about six houses on their land prior to this project, sites that were obvious because of visible foundations, cellars, or chimney falls. After the first season, that number more than doubled. “Most tribal members hadn’t realized quite how much history is buried out there,” said Silliman.

As the crew settled into work that day, sounds of scraping and clinking mixed with the amiable buzz of typical college student conversation: baseball, weekend exploits, food, the occasional flirtation. Linda McCall, a member of the Eastern Pequot Tribal Nation who worked alongside the students that summer, listened and smiled almost imperceptibly. Sunbeams filtered through the trees as McCall screened excavated dirt in search of small artifacts.

The recovered artifacts associated with the European-style house include buttons, knives, spoons, bent nails, gunflint, window and bottle glass, glass beads, fragments of stoneware, redware, pearlware, and creamware. “The

artifacts point to the place having been occupied in the end of the 18th century or early 19th century,” Silliman stated. These finds, along with similar artifacts found at the smaller house site, suggest that the Eastern Pequot were acquiring goods as well as making their own during the early 19th century. Silliman believes that they purchased these goods, rather than acquired them by trade. Historical documents show that some tribal members earned wages working off the reservation as farm laborers, whalers, and serving in the military, and that some Eastern Pequot made and sold wood-splint baskets. Analysis of the coins recovered from the site could reveal more information about the commerce that took place there.

The discovery of fish, pig, sheep, and cow bones gave a glimpse of their diet. At the smaller house site, stone walls that once likely formed an animal pen suggested that



Student Melissa Smith uses a laser transit to map rock fences, foundations, stone enclosures, and topographic features. The laser transit gathers very precise distance and elevation measurements.

they practiced agriculture. There’s also evidence of hunting game. “We found those two gunflints in the main house we are studying this summer,” said Silliman. “Someone was using that gun for something, and there’s every expectation that it was probably for hunting.” Various pipe stems and bowls of Euro-American manufacture indicated the Eastern Pequot were using tobacco.

The crew also found a projectile point, soapstone bowl fragment, and stone celt that likely date to the Late or Terminal Archaic, roughly somewhere between 5,000 and 2,700 years ago. These items were discovered in a 19th-century trash pit, which suggests they were

embedded in a much older site that was disturbed when the pit was dug or that they were the possessions of the 19th-century inhabitants.

The participation of tribal members such as McCall and Darlene “Tubby” Fonville was an integral part of the agreement between the Eastern Pequot and Silliman that resulted in a remarkably cooperative and productive relationship. Native Americans have often been at odds with archaeologists. America’s first scientific archaeologist, Thomas Jefferson, had his slaves excavate a native burial mound on his property in Virginia in the late 1700s. With this, Jefferson pioneered the basics of the scientific method of archaeology. By turning a sacred cemetery into a laboratory, Jefferson’s project served as a precursor to the 19th-century anthropological approach that considered Native people as less-than-human objects of scientific study, specimens of the natural world, not unlike a mastodon, wrote David Hurst Thomas, in his book *Skull Wars*. This approach deeply offended many Native Americans.

As the science of archaeology expanded far beyond Jefferson’s backyard, the precedents established there

were continued. Eastern museums developed an appetite for Native artifacts, and Westward expansion fed that appetite. In the infamous Sand Creek Massacre in 1864, the skulls and bones of Natives massacred by the U.S. Army were defleshed and sent to Washington D.C. for study and display. Nineteenth-century archaeology was marked by a disregard for the value of Native American’s knowledge of their past and present—their spiritual tradition, oral history—in favor of what could be determined through archaeological study, according to Thomas.

While modern archaeologists are far more sensitive to the concerns of Native Americans, generally speaking, the latter still view the former with distrust. The Eastern Pequot Council was mindful of this troubled history, but based on their observation of the partnership between McBride and the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation and their discussions with Silliman, who conveyed his desire to honor their land, traditions, and contemporary practices, they concluded archaeology could serve their purpose. Even so, the Tribal Council was not **entirely** at ease with the idea of an archaeological project at first, explained



Student Elizabeth Swinning uses a tape measure and line level to measure the depth of an excavation unit. Swinning and another researcher were excavating a rich 19th-century trash deposit near a collapsed house foundation. The crew often had to contend with large tree roots and rocks while excavating.

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Darlene "Tubby" Fonville, one of the Eastern Pequot interns, takes a break from her screening tasks. Fonville has participated in both field seasons of the archaeological project.

Sebastian. "Our primary concern was to avoid any digging in our known burial grounds or grave sites," she said. "We also wanted to be sure the ground wouldn't be disturbed in any big way, with big equipment like bulldozers, and then, of course, we wanted to be sure that anything that was found would be treated carefully, and would be treated according to our traditions."

As a result, Sebastian recommended a detailed protocol to the Eastern Pequot Council to guide the tribe's relationship with the archaeological research team. The protocol addressed such issues as the discovery of human remains and the handling of artifacts. If human remains were found during the course of excavating, the digging would stop immediately. Thus far, no human remains have been discovered. Silliman is allowed to analyze and house artifacts at the university, but he has agreed to return them to the Eastern Pequot upon their request. At least one tribal member worked with the crew at all times, learning about archaeology while keeping a separate inventory of the items taken out of the ground—a "check and balance," Sebastian said. Hence the presence of tribal members McCall, Fonville, and Royal Cook, Jr., who goes by the name "Two Hawks."

Two Hawks played an important role in assuring the council that the archaeological project would honor the

Native Americans and Archaeology

The relationship "needs to be maintained," observed archaeologist Jonathan Damp. The relationship he referred to is the delicate one between Native Americans and archaeologists. Native Americans, for various reasons, have often held archaeologists in low regard. But there are some indications that the relationship is indeed being maintained.

Davina Two Bears said it's incorrect to define this relationship as being between Native Americans and archaeologists, given that a growing number of Native Americans are archaeologists. Two Bears, the manager of the Flagstaff, Arizona, office of the Navajo Nation's archaeology department, happens to be a Navajo archaeologist. "I think Native Americans have always been interested in archaeology. It's our history," Two Bears said. Becoming an archaeologist is a way to "respect and protect" archaeological sites.

Her office (the Navajo archaeology department has two others) is affiliated with Northern Arizona University. Working with the university, the Navajo archaeology department hires and trains Native American students, most of whom are Navajo, in archaeological field methods and Navajo culture. There are about 30 employees in the three offices.

Two Bears said that, in the minds of many Native Americans, archaeologists are stigmatized as grave robbers. Nonetheless, she thinks the Navajo are becoming more accepting of the science. "We are constantly explaining to our own people the benefits of archaeology," she said.

Damp, who is not a Native American, is the director of the Zuni Heritage and Historic Preservation Office as well as head of Zuni Cultural Resources Enterprise, a cultural resources management firm owned by the tribe. "In many ways it's very rewarding," he said of his work with the Zuni, adding that the tribe is very supportive of the archaeological work. The two organizations employ approximately 30 people, and the great majority of them are Zuni. "I think some of them are the finest field archaeologists I've ever worked with," he said, though they don't have degrees in the discipline.

Archaeologist Stephen Silliman, who works with the Eastern Pequot, believes that archaeologists and Native Americans have gotten along better in the last 10 to 15 years. He said the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act was "the catalyst" that prompted additional discussions between the two parties. He noted that the highly publicized legal battle between Native Americans and scientists over Kennewick Man can give the impression that the two parties are in constant conflict, but Kennewick Man is "a unique situation" that has little bearing on archaeologists who do not work on ancient human remains.

Miranda Warburton, who preceded Two Bears as manager of the Navajo's Flagstaff office, described the relationship as being only "marginally" better than it was in the past. Most archaeologists "don't care what Natives have to say," stated Warburton, who is not Native American. "It's a real uphill struggle for the Natives to have a voice in the practice of archaeology."

—Michael Bawaya



This fragment is from a 19th-century refined earthenware ceramic vessel. The design and color suggest that the piece is likely "mocha ware," a pottery style that was common from the early-to-mid 18th century.

tribe's traditions and beliefs. Before the field school started, the students participated in a half-day orientation at the tribe's longhouse that included a smudging ceremony, administered by Two Hawks, to purify them. When the crew finished excavating a unit, Two Hawks performed a special ritual. "I take a handful of tobacco, and I say a **prayer, and** I let it drop slowly [into the unit], until the **prayer is done,**" he said. "We're making an offering back to **the land,** back to the Great Spirit and the Mother. We're **offering** it to them, and hoping they accept our offering for disturbing the land and their peace. I'm letting them know that I love them, that we love them," he said.

The Eastern Pequot Tribal Nation's protocol meant that Silliman accommodated requests that he wasn't used to. For example, "at the end of the day, the tribal council wants one of their key tribal members out there, like Two Hawks, to get a count of all the bags of artifacts, and to do this on a daily basis. That's something that no one has ever asked me to do **before,**" Silliman noted. "I don't take that as questioning my professionalism, or that they're thinking that I'm dishonest and going to run off with something. I know that **some** tribal members were uncomfortable with the removal of cultural objects at first, and this accounting shows them that everything is **okay.**" He also agreed to return anything that he's collected that's not an artifact, such as a rock, or a piece of wood. "Normally, if you find that in the lab

and realize it's nothing of archaeological significance, you throw it in the garbage. I mentioned that to Tribal Council, in an attempt to be as honest as I could about how the lab work would probably go. Their reaction was, 'Do not throw that stuff away; we want it back.' The land is a key element to them as a community," he said.

Silliman tried to keep the community as involved in the project as possible. For example, during the field school he sent the tribe weekly e-mail updates about the dig. He would like to arrange for tribal members to come to his lab at the university to observe the work that takes place there during the year.

As the day ended, the students readied themselves for the long uphill hike back to their cars. Two Hawks and McCall reflected on the field school. "At first," Two Hawks said, "I didn't know what to expect." McCall nodded. He wondered whether the students "would **have a feeling** for the land." But he was surprised and pleased by the **caring** they showed. "They wouldn't kill a bug, **they wouldn't** cut a branch," he said. "They're just **students. But** in their hearts, they are dedicated to the land."

The respect that developed between the crew and the tribe has been remarkable. This summer, **Two Hawks** made each member of the crew a medicine bag, just like the one he wears around his own neck. "It's a token of honor," he explained. "A token of the bond that we've formed."

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Student Julie McNeill and Eastern Pequot intern Linda McCall map a 19th-century house. The large rocks that surround them are the house's collapsed chimney, which they subsequently excavated portions of.