

‘... Only the archaeologists are telling the story of my people. Both archaeologists and Native Americans working together is how we get the whole picture.’

Edith Thomas, a member of the dig team and the Gila River Indian Community in Arizona



Students, tribe uncover past



A circa 1760-1790 key found on the Eastern Pequot Tribal Nation reservation.

Archaeologists dig on Eastern Pequot reservation land

By **BRIAN WALLHEIMER**
Norwich Bulletin

NORTH STONINGTON —

For more than 300 years, a few piles of rock have sat in a valley on the Eastern Pequot Tribe's reservation without getting much attention.

But for the last five weeks, students from the University of Massachusetts Boston, along with tribal members, have dug through and around those rocks to chart the tribal history that once stood all around them.

“We had no idea the complexity of this site,” said lead anthropologist Stephen Silliman, an assistant professor at UMass Boston. “A lot of things were going on here.”

The dig is of historical significance to the tribe, which uses artifacts found to enhance the oral teachings to tribal youth.

“It makes it a more holistic education,” Tribal Councilor and Historic Preservation Adviser Katherine Sebastian Dring said.

It's the second year the dozen students and Silliman have been at the site and the fifth year they've been excavating on the reservation. In addition to the artifacts that have been excavated, a somewhat unique friendship has formed.



Photos by **John Shishmanian**/Norwich Bulletin

Ralph Sebastian, 21, of Ledyard, an Eastern Pequot, and **Kristina Larkin, 25**, a UMass Boston anthropology student, work an archaeological dig Wednesday on the Eastern Pequot Tribal Nation reservation.

Pequot: Archaeologists, Eastern Pequots work to preserve tribe's culture, history

FROM A1

Edith Thomas, a member of the Gila River Indian Community in Arizona, is on the dig team. She said her tribe, and many others, do not let outside anthropologists dig on their lands. She said there is a deep distrust because non-American Indians have desecrated important Indian sites throughout the years.

"There is a movement for archaeologists and Native Americans to work together," Thomas said. "But doing and saying are different things."

Thomas hopes she can take a positive experience at the Eastern Pequot dig site back to Arizona to spur her tribe into opening up to the idea.

"In my community, only the archaeologists are telling the story of my people," Thomas said. "Both archaeologists and Native Americans working together is how we get the whole picture."

Level of distrust

Greg Walwer, director of Archaeology Consulting Services in Guilford, said he also sees a level of distrust between archaeologists and tribes. His group did work for the Mohegan Tribe at Fort Shantok about eight years ago.



John Shishmanian/Norwich Bulletin

Roy Two Hawks Cook, acting historic preservation officer for the Eastern Pequot Tribal Nation, performs a spiritual blessing, or smudge, Wednesday before entering an archaeological dig on the reservation.

Walwer said the main problem is the archaeological perspective on dig sites. He said tribes seem to find it too scientific and not respectful of the culture.

"In Western culture, there's this idea that bones are just bones and whatever you can learn from them is great," Walwer said. "The underlying bad feelings these days come from archaeologists

the Eastern Pequots.

"It changed my perspective of archaeology," Cook said. "(Stillman) has our interest at heart. They see what we're looking for in a connection to our past through our ancestors."

'Connection to the land'

Anyone who enters the site receives a ceremonial smudge, made from the smoke of sweet grass, sage and tobacco, to cleanse their souls.

Cook said all the workers are told about the traditions of the tribe and the importance of the digs to members seeking to uncover their roots.

Erin Alden, 22, of Missouri State University, is taking a summer class at UMass Boston specifically so she could dig at the Eastern Pequot site.

"It's a really good feeling," Alden said. "It would be a real different experience if I were working for a group that had no connection to the land."

The work has uncovered several interesting artifacts. Shilman believes there was once a house with a cellar, a possible root cellar and a trash pit from 1760 to 1790 there.

One of his favorite finds is a piece of glass that has its edges purposely chipped, as if someone were sharpening it to use as a tool. He said it's an example of the European colonists influenced the everyday lives of Indians.

"It's these kinds of adjustments we're interested in," Shilman said.

Sebastian Dring said she is most fond of arrowheads and glass.

"I have to look in a case at a museum to see artifacts normally," she said.

Because of the digs, the East-

erns now have an expanding collection of artifacts.

Youth members working with the college students said the lessons they have learned about their culture are invaluable. Shianne Sebastian, 16, said she has grown up near the dig site and never suspected such treasures could be found there.

"It really gets you in touch with your ancestors," she said. "It tells you about how they lived."

Ralph Sebastian, 21, said the dig helps "paint a picture" for him of his ancestors' lives.

"I learn more about what they eat, what they used to cook their food," he said.

He said he looks forward to passing on what he learns to his children some day.

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