Ancient Indian site found in Calvert County

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Mervin Savoy of the Piscataway-Conoy Tribe holds a piece of cord marked pottery dating from 900-1,100 A.D. found on the Biscoe Gray property near Prince Frederick.

Prince Frederick, MD - While an oyster shell midden might not be exciting to some, for members of the Calvert County Natural Resources Division, students from St. Mary’s College of Maryland and the Piscataway Conoy Tribe the discovery at Biscoe Gray Heritage Park in Prince Frederick, the discovery was immense.

A shell midden is what is left from Native Americans eating oysters hundreds of years ago and marked a historical site archaeologists have determined dates anywhere from 200 to 1,100 A.D. on the banks of Battle Creek.

“We originally thought that the site dated from 900 to 1,100 A.D., but then we found a chert Levenna point and that pushed the date back to 200 A.D.,” said interpreter Rebecca Webster.

Kirsti Unilia noted that before Calvert County purchased the property, Carter Gray, a Prince Frederick resident and amateur archaeologist, along with state historian Dr. Wayne Clark, walked the property back in 1994-95 and discovered the midden.

“We didn’t know where the property line was back then and we walked up on this bluff and when we looked down, it was obvious to us we were walking on a shell midden,” Gray said.

“It was larger than a football field,” Unilia added.

With a grant from Preserve America, archaeologists were able to determine there was a colonial site on the property, which Gray had already discovered previously.

“That was enough to get us started on a master plan for the site,” Unilia explained.

Through the efforts of Dr. Julia A. King, the county applied for a National Park Service grant of $47,000, which allowed the work this summer to proceed on the Native American aspects of the site.

“It was on this bluff that we found the highest concentration of oyster shell,” said SMCM Adjunct Professor Scott Strickland. “We were able to date the site by analyzing the artifacts found with the shell.”

He said the midden is about 75 feet long by 25 wide.

“It pales in comparison to others we have found,” Strickland admitted. “There is a midden over on the Wicomico River near Chaptico that is about 15 acres.”

Yet the site has yielded enough information to be considered an important pre-history project.

“It’s turning out to be a very rich site,” King said.

Clark is preparing to publish a book on how local tribes became established over time. He said the Potomac Indians and the Piscataways became sedentary around 500 A.D. and were Algonquin-based, originating from the New York region.

“The Patuxents arrived earlier, around 400 B.C.,” he said. “They were more estuarine focused than the Piscataway.”

Indian pottery found on the site reveals the difference on the types of pottery between the two cultures.

Piscataway pots were cord marked, where cordage would be wrapped around the clay when wet to create a design in the finished product.

Patuxent pottery was shell tempered with ground up oyster shell, which makes it easily distinguishable from other tribes.

John Smith’s 1609 map of the region shows a longhouse right at Battle Creek, where the Biscoe Gray site was found.

“They would probably live down by Battle Creek in the spring and summer and moved inland during the winter months where hunting was better,” Strickland stated.

An interesting aspect to the Patuxent tribes was that they used cypress from Battle Creek Cypress Swamp to make their canoes.

“Cypress being impervious to water made it excellent material for building canoes,” Clark explained.

Members of the Piscataway-Conoy Tribe were present with mats woven from marsh grass and cattail along with other items they have made by hand, bring ancient traditional crafts to life in the 21st century. It is a fitting tribute to the ancient ones who lived on the land some 900 years ago.

Contact Joseph Norris at joe.norris@thebaynet.com