

Early Native Americans in Herndon

By Barbara Glakas

While exploring the upper Potomac River over 400 years ago, Captain John Smith noted that the members of the Taux (also referred to as the Doeg or Dogue) tribe were located in the area of what is now southern Fairfax County. However, found evidence of tool artifacts indicates the presence of Native Americans in Herndon as well, thousands of years ago.

Native Americans hunted on the land of what is now the town of Herndon. These Paleo-Indians were the earliest inhabitants of North America, from the years 8,000 BCE and earlier. [Note: The acronym “BC” means “Before Christ” and was still in common use in the 1970s. Currently, the acronym “BCE” is commonly used, meaning “Before the Common Era”]. They made and used stone tools, such as arrowheads (projectile points) that were used on arrows and spears for hunting game. Many stone points were found in the 1970s on the Herndon Centennial Golf Course property, the Clearview Elementary School property, and in Runnymede Park, the town’s 58-natural park on the east side of the Herndon Parkway. Some of these areas were being developed in the 1970s.

In May of 1978, Herndon resident Jane Etter – who wrote for the *Herndon Observer* newspaper – had written an article about the 192-acre tract of wooded land that was adjacent to her home, which was about to be converted into Herndon’s new golf course. She noted that several projectile points had been picked up in the area and ended up in local collections. One of those collections is in the Herndon Historical Society’s Depot Museum, donated by hobbyist Sgt. Duane Atkisson, formerly of the Herndon Police Department.

Etter thought a cultural resource survey should be conducted prior to construction of the golf course. She contacted the Fairfax County History Commission and the Office Comprehensive Planning and was able to contact Fairfax County Archeologist, Mike Johnson. Johnson, Jon Brazier (a local amateur archeologist), and Charles McKinney (from the U.S. Department the Interior), conducted a preliminary reconnaissance of the future golf course land, as well as the adjacent tract of land of the soon to be built Clearview Elementary School.

Clearview Elementary School was built in 1979 in what is now the Kingston Chase neighborhood which abuts the north side of the town of Herndon. That land had previously been owned by the Orrison family, and later the Young family who operated Follylick Farm. It was reported in a 1978 *Herndon Observer* newspaper article that Freeland Young Jr. had a collection of arrowhead points that he had collected since boyhood on the farm land that is now Kingston Chase. A photo of his collection showed 72 artifacts.

On their initial reconnaissance, Johnson and his cohorts found several indications of both prehistoric and historic activity, including a jasper flake (an indication of making stone projectiles), one blue-grey flint tool, a worn quartz tool, and several other 19th and early 20th century artifacts.

In August of that year, Johnson, McKinney and some local amateur archeologists, came back to Herndon to conduct a second reconnaissance of the Clearview School tract. While there, they discovered that the golf course tract that they had initially explored back in May had already been cleared. They inspected the area again and found concentrations of prehistoric stone tools and projectile points. Despite the heavy disturbance of the golf course, they decided that a formal survey should be done to document all the important cultural information on the sites for the county's new Archeology Lab. The site they surveyed was the area that is now the general boundaries of the Herndon Centennial Golf Course.

The onsite survey began in September of 1978. Johnson explained that the site had already been damaged by construction. Moreover, seeding of the golf course was pending, which limited the time they had to survey the area. Nevertheless, they decided to do sub-surface testing. They also had Sgt. Atkisson along, who took them to identified areas of the golf course where he had recently been collecting.

In July of 1978, Atkisson had also found an old powder horn on the golf course. He said, "I was bored one day, I didn't have anything to do, so I just started nosing around the bulldozers building the golf course. All of the sudden, there was the horn." At first, he thought the powder horn may be 50 or 60 years old. But after sending it to be examined by archeological experts at the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of American History, and to the Daughters of American Revolution Museum in Washington, D.C., he discovered that it dated to the French and Indian War time period, which was from 1756 to 1763. Powder horns were made from cow horns and were used to store powder for use in muskets and other guns. This particular horn had scrimshaw on it which showed an elaborate engraving that included houses and church steeples, parts of the seal of Great Britain, war ships, the City of Philadelphia and Fort Island on the Delaware River. The partial word "PHIL" could be seen, which experts say indicated it was made in Philadelphia. How it ended up in Herndon is unknown, but one museum specialist speculated that "it was probably picked up on the battlefield by an Indian and later buried with him." Atkisson loaned the horn to the Herndon Historical Society Depot Museum. It was returned to him in 1996.

Johnson's survey crew examined all the sites identified by Atkisson. During their survey, six sites were identified, which were all were flagged, numbered and plotted. Test pits were dug and the artifacts were bagged. Auger samples were also taken and water screened through a fine mesh window screen, looking for any stone flakes resulting from flint making and charcoal. Field notes were taken. Later, Johnson also photographed Atkisson's collection, which he had sorted by site, based on his memory. Johnson later determined that Atkisson's collection contained points possibly dating between 5,000 and 6,000 B.P. (i.e., Before Present).

Later, detailed site reports were written which included maps and sketches of the artifacts. Other experts were consulted for analysis of the artifacts. In October of 1978, Johnson wrote his findings in a report entitled, "Prehistoric Site Survey of the Herndon Municipal Golf Course for the Fairfax County History Commission."

Johnson reported that the artifacts found indicated “a mixture of multi- and single-site exploitation by various prehistoric cultures over as much as 8,000 years.” The oldest artifact was a bifurcated (forked) base notched projectile, dating to 8,000 years ago, but he also said that does not prove habitation on that site. He explained that the “oldest significant cultural presence found appears to be that associated with the contracting stemmed ‘Piscataway’ [style point] variant, which has been dated to 5,000 to 6,000 B.P.,” a common style of point found in Northern Virginia that was also found on most sites on the golf course.

Johnson explained that they also found numerous points that were estimated to be from the Late Archaic, Transitional and Early Woodland periods, which he defined as being between 5,000 to 2,500 B.P. He continued,

“The presence of these points and the large amount of quartzite debitage [sharp-edged waste material] on the site indicates either an intensive occupation over a short period of time or a light, but recurring, occupation over many years. The large number and variety of points from [a specific golf course site] indicates that it possessed cross-cultural significance that spanned many years.”

The supposition is that these early hunter-gatherers were foragers who would intermittently camp and hunt for short – or sometimes extended - periods of time and then move on, a cycle that would be repeated across the years.

A large number of oyster shells were also found on many of the golf course sites. Johnson was not aware of their origin but speculated they could have represented prehistoric activity. Another site on the golf course produced some tools that indicated that the processing of meat or hides was being performed on the site.

Johnson surmised the earliest Native Americans came to the Herndon area at least 8,000 years ago and may have been drawn to our area for the seasonal hunting opportunities and the plentiful water supply. In the conclusions of his report, he theorized that the golf course sites were likely a continuum of sites all along the streams of Northern Virginia, and the sites in Herndon were probably associated with the Sugarland Run watershed and Lowes Island. The Sugarland Run Stream currently runs through Herndon’s Runnymede Park. A branch of that stream (the Folly Lick Branch) runs near Clearview Elementary School in the Kingston Chase neighborhood and continues through the town of Herndon, part of which runs through the golf course. He added,

“The job of sorting out the settlement patterns and the ways they changed over the past 12,000 years will be immense.... The important fact about the cultural activity on the golf course tract is that it is not contained. These sites probably are a result of movement that was governed by ecological factors such as seasonal and/or long-term climate shifts.” Based on the data that was collected on the survey, “an evaluation of these sites for significance to local prehistory cannot be made.”

The types of projectiles that are on the display in the Herndon Depot Museum include both complete and incomplete arrowheads and spear points. The largest implement on display is a

crude scraper that would have been used to separate the hide from meat of the animal, as well as to crush the bone to remove its marrow.

The dates of the stone points could be estimated by their size, shape, and manufacturing technique, which demonstrated the hunting technology known to be used in specific time periods. Most of the stones were created by flaking the stone into desired shapes, while some stones that were too hard to flake would be ground on other rock.

Johnson said that most of the points were made with local stone, but noted that a few were made elsewhere and brought to our area for seasonal hunting. At least one point was identified from the southern Piedmont area while another was identified as being from the Roanoke area. This helped support Johnson's theory that different groups were here in Herndon for seasonal hunting and then would return to their own territories when the season changed.

In another report that Johnson wrote in 1986 entitled, "The Prehistory of Fairfax County: An Overview," he mentioned the Herndon golf course as a known site of concentrations of cultural materials. In a chapter entitled "The Paleo-Indians or First Virginians," he explained that the period of 8,000 BCE and before represents the earliest known human activity in the region. Based on the evidence of stone tools, he believes the inhabitation may have begun around 9,500 BCE. He said, "Some archeologist different on whether or the first stone tool makers in the region were big game hunters or general foragers... [but] considering the diversity and richness of the environment, it is likely that they were both, depending on the time of year and the social organization of the groups." Johnson explained that the highly diversified environment within our county could support moose, elk, deer, bison, and mastodon, as well as a wide range of smaller game and plants.

Members of the Fairfax County Park Authority Archeology and Collections Branch indicate that another survey was conducted in 1984, on the east side of the town of Herndon, in an area north of Runnymede Park that is now largely developed. The Virginia Department of Transportation conducted the survey as part of the Herndon Parkway Development Project. In that survey, archaeologists found the remains of the toolmaking flakes, a stone drill or gouge tool, as well as a projectile point dating to the Late Archaic Period of Virginia Indian habitation, about 2,500-1,200 BCE.

Native American artifacts were also later found in in Runnymede Park. Much of the land that now comprises this 58-acre natural park on the east side of the town of Herndon was once privately held by the Carroll and Atkins families in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. The town bought the land in 1988. Herndon resident and former Herndon High School teacher, Gary Gepford, said that a couple of projectiles had been found in the Runnymede Park area by people who lived in the apartments that were adjacent to the park. Those findings were reported in a local newspaper, information that got back to Mike Johnson. Johnson contacted Gepford, who was then teaching at Herndon High School and was the sponsor of the school's Archeology Club. In the spring of 1990 Mike Johnson once again conducted a preliminary Phase I archeological survey of the park, along with Gepford and a group of his students from the Archeology Club.

Gepford said there were about ten people at the survey. They walked the park and every 100 feet they would dig a hole to check for any artifacts. The students were very enthused to participate in this survey.

In June of 1990, Johnson wrote a letter to Arthur Anselene, then Herndon's Director of Parks and Recreation, in which Johnson reported his findings. Johnson and his group conducted several shovel tests around the park. He identified one Native American site. The site included five quartzite flakes, one quartzite projectile point fragment, one hornfels [a type of metamorphic rock] flake, and one argillaceous [a type of sedimentary rock] flake. The artifacts were found in shallow subsurface, but Johnson said it was "potentially very significant because of potential for vertical integrity." He said this site should be "avoided at all costs or fully tested and mitigated if appropriate." He recommended that if any construction was to be done in the area, that a Phase II test should first be conducted to determine any National Register significance. He also said that any Phase II and III work should be done under the supervision of reputable professional archeologist.

Initially, it was thought that the park would be redeveloped into athletic fields. But, in the end, the park was never redeveloped and remained a natural park. Future minor improvements planned for the park took place on the west side of the park, near its entrance a parking lot and shelter were added by brick Atkins House, and in the vicinity of the stone Carroll House a shelter was added as well. Both were far away from the site where the Native American artifacts were found. Neither Anselene nor Gepford recall a Phase II archeological survey ever being conducted.

Another Herndon resident who had collection of hundreds of Native American artifacts was the late Mrs. Mamie Printz, who formerly lived in a house on Elden Street where Main Street Bank is located now. She had once explained that her late husband, Raymond C. Printz, had collected the points over a period of 40 years in Herndon and at Jenkins Island, an island located on the Potomac River in Loudoun County.

Moving ahead to the Proto-Historic period (1,500-1,676 AD), this is the time period in which Europeans affected the Native American populations, marking a rapid decline of their culture. The Spanish established presence in the Chesapeake in the 1570s, establishing a Jesuit mission on one of the lower Chesapeake peninsulas. Later, after the lost Roanoke Colony (1584 -1589), Captain Vincent Gonzales (commander of a Spanish flotilla), sailed a boat into the Potomac, presumably in search for the colony. The Jamestown colony was established in 1607 and the following year Captain John Smith explored the Potomac River. Stephen Potter wrote ("The Indians of Seventeenth Century Fairfax," 1984) that the Native Americans, "remained relatively undisturbed by the English colonists until the 1650s when land speculators began to patent land in their territory... by 1714, the last of these original residents of Fairfax County had moved again and were living in the upper reaches of the Mattaponi River," which is a tributary to the York River.

By the end of the seventeenth century, it has been estimated that the Native American population had been significantly reduced from wars with each other, battles with the colonists and, most

significantly, from death caused by contact with Europeans who carried germs to the Indigenous People for which they had no immunity, resulting in disease epidemics in the 1650s and 1670s.

About this column: “Remembering Herndon’s History” is a regular Herndon Patch feature offering stories and anecdotes about Herndon’s past. The articles are written by members of the Herndon Historical Society. Barbara Glakas is a member. A complete list of “Remembering Herndon’s History” columns is available on the Historical Society website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org.

The Herndon Historical Society operates a small museum that focuses on local history. It is housed in the Herndon Depot in downtown Herndon on Lynn Street and is open every Sunday from noon until 3:00. Visit the Society’s website at www.herndonhistoricalsociety.org, and the Historical Society’s Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/HerndonHistory> for more information.

Note: The Historical Society is seeking volunteers to help keep the museum open each Sunday. If you have an interest in local history and would like to help, contact HerndonHistoricalSociety@gmail.com.