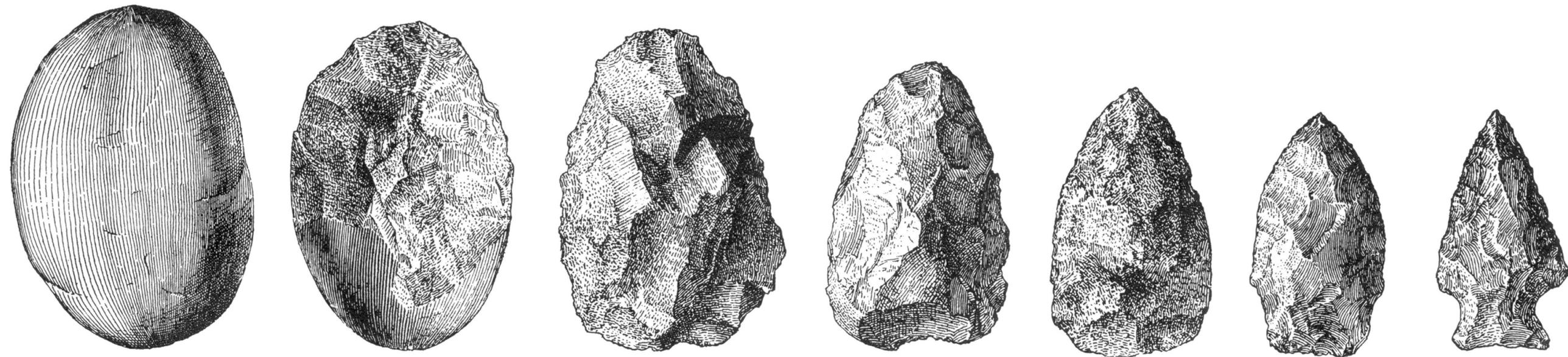


Ancient Native Americans in Rock Creek Park

Rock Creek Park
District of Columbia

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



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Native Americans have roamed the hills around Rock Creek and the falls of the Potomac for at least the past 10,000 years. However, for much of that time they do not seem to have stayed long. The only traces they left of their presence are a few lost spearpoints. Americans of that distant era were hunter-gatherers who roamed widely through the landscape in search of food, stone for tools, and other resources. People first made longer stays in the park about 4,500 years ago, in what archeologists call the Late Archaic period. About that time people began to quarry stone from cobble beds along Rock Creek. They also began to spend more time around the Little Falls of the Potomac, where large archeological sites were noticed as long ago as the 1870s. Finds of spearpoints, arrowheads, grinding stones, potsherds, and other artifacts show that after 2500 BC Native Americans often passed through and camped in the park. By studying the objects they left behind, archeologists have learned much about their lives.

The Quarries

On some of the bluffs overlooking Rock Creek and the small streams that feed it, thousands of cobbles peek through the dead leaves on the ground. These stones may not look like much, but they are the remnants of a prehistoric industry where ancient Indians once made hundreds of thousands of stone tools.

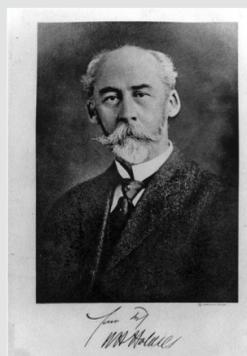


Rough Stone "Bifaces" Quarried from the Banks of Rock Creek around 2200 BC.

Most of the cobbles are a very tough kind of stone known as quartzite. Quartzite was seldom used in earlier times, but around 4,500 years ago the Native American residents of coastal Virginia and Maryland preferred it for making a kind of wide, heavy spearpoint we call the Savannah River broadspear. Huge numbers of quartzite cobbles were taken from these hillsides and chipped into roughly oval "blanks" or "performs." The roughly shaped stones were carried to campsites nearby, where they were shaped into finished tools. The quarry sites are covered with millions of fragments of waste stone and many thousands of cobbles that were tested and then discarded.

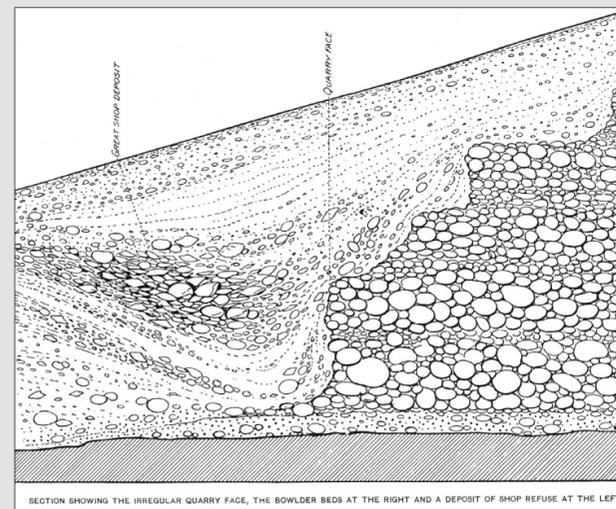
The quartzite quarries within the Rock Creek valley have an important place in the history of American

archeology. They were studied intensively by William Henry Holmes of the Bureau of American Ethnology between 1889 and 1894. The rough, oval preforms from the quarries look something like the ancient Acheulian handaxes of Europe, made between 500,000 and 100,000 years ago. Before Holmes's research, some American archeologists saw similarities between the local preforms and European sites and thought that people must have lived in North America in Acheulian times. Holmes worked out how a cobble was chipped into a finished spearpoint, and showed that what were said to be ancient hand axes were actually only the middle stages of this tool-making process.



William Henry Holmes.

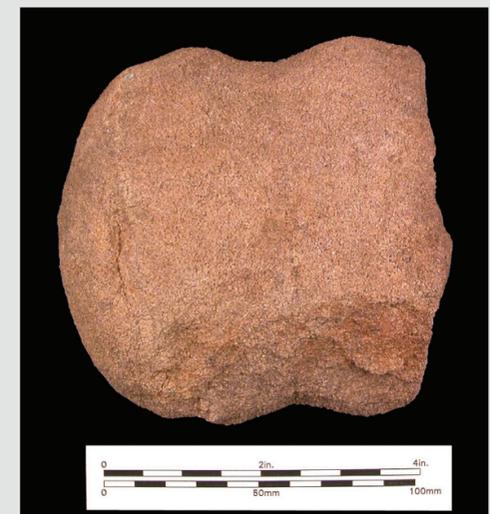
men dug trenches along the hillsides where the cobble beds are exposed, showing that in some places the debris left by ancient quarrying is five feet thick. Some of the quarries Holmes studied have been destroyed by the expanding city of Washington, but others remain intact in Rock Creek Park. They were explored by archeologists in 2004. Among the recent finds are whole and broken turtleback cores at various stages of completion, as well as half of a large, crude axe, possibly used as a quarrying tool. Some evidence of tool making was also found, including the tip of a nearly finished spearpoint.



Drawing of the Profile of one of Holmes Excavation Trenches.

Archeologists are not certain when or for how long the quartzite quarries were used. Holmes did not find any finished spearpoints in his excavations (which could be dated by their distinctive style), nor have any been found at the sites since. The best clue is the material of the stones. Quartzite was used for stone tools at many times in the past, but only the Savannah River people used so much of it that they would have needed these enormous quarries. Most likely, then, the quarries were used from about 2200 to 1700 BC. Those dates come from radiocarbon dating of fireplaces found near Savannah River spearpoints on other sites. Radiocarbon dating only

became available to archeologists after 1948, and it requires organic samples, preferably charcoal. As archeologists have tried to figure



Broken Stone Axe found in one of the Rock Creek Quarries.

out the date of the quarries, they are teased by this item in Holmes's account of his work:

In one of the side trenches a good deal of charcoal was found, and at the depth of about 6 feet a charred log more than 10 feet long and in places a foot in diameter was encountered.

Not knowing that radiocarbon dating would one day be invented, Holmes saved none of this charcoal, and we are left to wonder if our guess about the date of the quarries is correct.

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The Whitehurst Freeway Sites

At the mouth of Rock Creek, the Whitehurst Freeway ends in a tangle of ramps and embankments. This does not seem like a likely place to find a Native American camp site; if you imagine the highway under construction, with cranes, backhoes, and other heavy equipment tearing up the ground, it is easy to assume that any traces of people who once lived here must have been destroyed. Maps from the early 1900s only make this seem more likely, since they show that the area was an industrial district. But an archeological study of this area found important Native American sites, including one remarkable burial. It seems that a large amount of earth was dumped on the site before the factories were built, protecting the Indian site from the later construction of the Whitehurst Freeway.

Potsherds and stone tools found throughout the area show people camped here between 5,000 and 500 years ago. The burial that makes the site so exciting was found only a few feet from the freeway and Rock Creek and Potomac Parkway. This pit contained the cremated

remains of an adult, probably a 30- to 40-year-old woman. Her scattered bone fragments had been placed in a shallow pit measuring about two feet across. Along with the bones were a comb carved from antler; two stone pendants; a carved sandstone phallus; a triangular knife; 14 great white shark teeth, 12 fossilized and two apparently recent; a bone from a large bird; six antler disks; a wooden bead; and cloth woven of fibers from pawpaw and grass. Radiocarbon dates put this burial at AD 640-790.

The Whitehurst Freeway burial closely resembles burials made in upstate New York around the same time. The resemblance is so strong that either the woman who was buried here or her parents may have come from the north. This connection is fascinating to archeologists and historians because it fits with other evidence pointing to migration from the Great Lakes region to the Chesapeake around that time. The Indians who lived in coastal Maryland and Virginia in the 1600s spoke Algonquian languages closely related to languages spoken around the Great Lakes. Iroquoian languages were also spoken in both regions. The Whitehurst

burial reminds us that Indians were great travelers and that whole Indian peoples sometimes moved hundreds of miles in search of new homes.

The Palisades

When professional archeologists first worked around Washington, in the 1870s and 1880s, the city was rich with ancient Native American remains. Large sites lined both banks of the Anacostia River, and they stretched for miles along the Potomac from Rock Creek to above Little Falls. The early archeologists called these sites "villages," but most of them were not villages at all. They were simply places where hunter-gatherers camped again and again for thousands of years, each time leaving behind a few traces of themselves, until the accumulated material looked like the remains of a town. A few bits of the sites that once lined the Potomac bluffs survive in Palisades Park and other green spaces, and homeowners in nearby neighborhoods sometimes find spearpoints in their gardens, but most of those sites were long ago destroyed by development.

In 2004 archeologists exploring a small stream valley just below Little Falls made a startling discovery. Native Americans generally camped on bluffs or by the river's banks, not in narrow valleys, and these archeologists had no plans to do formal testing in this valley. Until, that is, they happened to inspect the root ball of a tree that had recently fallen across the stream. Such root balls provide a glance at the soil hidden under leaves and undergrowth, and sometimes archeologists might see an artifact or two on the exposed soil, hinting at the presence of a site. But on this particular root ball there was much more than just one or two artifacts: three spearpoints and a piece of decorated Indian pottery. This was the first clue to what have turned out to be amazing archeological sites.

The stream is so small that in places you can hop across, and the valley floor around it is no more than 50 feet wide. When archeologists dug test units on the flat areas by the stream they found

thousands of artifacts. In one 3x3-foot test unit they found 24 spearpoints or knives, 182 potsherds, and 1,673 other artifacts (mostly waste flakes from making stone tools). The sites along this stream were used over a period of about 4,000 years, from about 2500 BC to AD 1500.

What accounts for the repeated visits to these spots over such a long time? The stream enters the Potomac not far below Little Falls. People traveling by canoe upstream might have landed here rather than fight the current. Canoes could have been portaged around the falls along the stream, which provides a convenient route through the steep bluffs. But these sites were probably not merely short-term camps. Many ceramic vessels were used,

suggesting that women prepared food here. A large pitted stone was used for grinding nuts. Stone tools were made and repaired here. A large grooved ax shows us that people chipped wood, maybe for dugout canoes.



Decorated Potsherd, about 700 Years Old, from a Site Near Little Falls.

The people who visited the site between 400 BC and AD 1000 left dozens of crude points on the site. These tools have a "throwaway" appearance, as if they were made, used, and discarded in a matter of minutes. The people who made these points also used pottery. These sites must have been visited often in this period, possibly by family groups; the stone spearpoints imply the presence of men, pottery the presence of women, and the valley is too narrow to have held a large camp or village. Historic Indians lived in large villages for only part of the year, during the seasons of planting and harvesting corn. In the summer and winter smaller parties left the villages and went on hunting, fishing, and gathering expeditions. The sites on our little stream may have been used mainly by wandering bands in the autumn. The large nut-grinding stone certainly points to the fall, and cold weather would also help explain the choice of these sheltered spots, flanked by steep hills.



Crudely Made "Selby Bay" Spear Points or Knives from a Site Near Little Falls.



Artifacts from the Whitehurst Freeway Site, about 1300 Years Old, including an Antler Comb, Sharks' Teeth, and a Stone Phallus.



Archeologists Digging a Test Pit Beside the Fallen Tree that Revealed the Location of the Little Falls Sites.



Archeologists Recording a Test Unit in Rock Creek Park.

PROTECT OUR SITES

The Archeological Resource Protection Act makes it a federal crime to damage archeological sites on federal lands or to remove artifacts from federal property. Unauthorized metal detecting and artifact collecting are strictly forbidden in the park and on all other federal property.

Report Crimes and Park Emergencies to 1-866-677-6677 Toll Free