

GLOBEANDMAIL.COM

The villages beneath the city

Bones and artifacts unearthed in the GTA reveal clues about native settlements

BY HEATHER FINLEY

SATURDAY, AUGUST 20, 2005

UPDATED AT 1:13 PM EDT

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

When construction workers expanding Teston Road in Vaughan turned up the jumbled remains of at least 15 people this month, they may have been surprised. But the bones -- which were 500 to 700 years old -- weren't a shock to archeologists or aboriginal people. They were just the latest in a number of significant finds that have turned up all over the Greater Toronto Area, from a massive Iroquois village discovered under a Stouffville subdivision to the remains of a Seneca settlement by the Humber River that still reveals traces of its past when construction crews dig in the area.

In the 1920s, local archeologist A.J. Clarke documented a site in what is now Vaughan that is known as the Teston Road Iroquoian Village. "When there's a village from that period, there are usually burials," says Kris Nahrgang, chief of the Kawartha Nishnawbe First Nations, cultural liaison for the Scugog Island First Nations, and a professional archeologist.

Traditional Iroquoian spirituality holds that a person has two souls. When you die, one goes to the sky world, the other stays with your bones. Many modern Iroquois still believe this -- but even those who don't, want to respect their ancestors' wishes to keep communities together, undisturbed. As a result, current government policy is to leave group burials in place, designated as cemeteries in perpetuity under the Cemeteries Act.

With first nations consultation, there are some exceptions to this. In 1997, an ossuary of 85 people was found in Moatfield Park on the northeast corner of Leslie Street and Highway 401. The ossuary and the village beside it date from the early 1300s, which means this is one of the earliest-known burial pits in Ontario.

The pit was discovered during the building of a fence. The bones were so badly disturbed by construction, though, that the aboriginal representatives asked for them to be disinterred and moved to a new location designated as a cemetery.

In an unusual arrangement, the natives also allowed archeologists to extract and study one tooth from each skull. From those teeth, archeologists were able to learn about major transitions in diet during the life of the village.

So when you're looking at a parcel of land, how can you guess how much history lies beneath it? The first thing to look for, says Ron Williamson, chief archeologist with Archeological Services Inc., is proximity to drinking water. Researchers might also consider factors such as nearness to soil good for crops.

Mr. Nahrgang includes swamps in the list as well. "You can gather food pretty well all winter from swamps; there are usually springs near them too."

He also observes that there may be spiritual reasons a community chose a site. "The petroglyphs [at Peterborough] are soft rock that you could carve," Mr. Nahrgang says.

He adds that spectacular scenery, such as at Niagara Falls, is often a tip-off for locating such areas: "What a modern person may see as beautiful may have been seen [prehistorically] as spiritually significant."

Current provincial legislation says developers must complete environmental and archeological reviews before land can be put to new uses. Today, new subdivisions are built first by stripping off the vegetation and the topsoil. Archeologists may test the area ahead of time to look for evidence such as broken pottery, burn marks from fire pits or post moulds from rotting wood used to support structures.

In the 1920s and 30s, though, when the Toronto enclave of Baby Point was established near the Humber River, houses were usually built without archeological reviews or land stripping. So every now and then, residents find evidence of Teiaiagon, the Seneca village documented by Jesuits in the 1670s.

In 1999, crews replacing a gas line found the bones of a 600-year-old woman under the lawn of a house, three metres from the front door.

And in Toronto's east end, where houses were constructed around the same time as Baby Point, "we're still watching for the Withrow site," says Mr. Williamson of the 500-to-600-year-old Iroquoian village that existed near Broadview Avenue and Gerrard Street. "Any redevelopment of the nearby Don Jail will have to involve careful assessment for evidence of the village -- and, by the way, prisoners who were likely buried by the jail."

Burials offer a tremendous opportunity to understand life and death, but archeologists and first nations representatives are both bothered by undue emphasis. "People are more than their bones," Mr. Williamson says.

In 2003, an archeological crew began testing the site of a future subdivision near Stouffville. It was quickly evident the field held a massive village -- 14 months of careful excavations are just now being completed. The details are spectacular: In the early 1500s, more than 1,000 Iroquoian people lived in a nine-acre village. Their homes were tightly packed 100-to-150-foot longhouses, with palisades around the village.

That kind of population is a challenge to house, feed and protect, and the statistics are astonishing. "There were over 40,000 posts needed to build this village," Mr. Williamson says. Artifacts from the site include clay pots and pipes with human faces, a type of pottery usually found only on Iroquoian sites in central New York State. Some of the pottery may have been made in Ontario, or it may have arrived by trade.

But those New York villages were several days' travel away, a journey often fraught with danger. Mr. Williamson contends the travel and cultural cross-pollination mirrors Toronto today, with many diverse cultures influencing each other.

As for the Teston Ossuary in Vaughan, it will be several years before any conclusions can be drawn. In the meantime, archeologists and first nations representatives will plan a course of action

that respects the dead. If possible, the people will be left in place, and that may mean archeologists will have to learn what they can by viewing the remains as they are.

"I do believe we should learn as much as we can about our past," Mr. Nahrgang says. "But we don't want to interrupt the journey of the ancestors for too long."

© Copyright 2005 Bell Globemedia Publishing Inc. All Rights Reserved.