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Archaeology at Point State Park: The Confluence of Prehistory and History

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Investigations of the past human experience are important elements of environmental reviews. Such reviews are undertaken as a result of federal legislation (primarily Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act) or regional mandates such as the State History Code in Pennsylvania. Archaeological surveys and excavations may be conducted to examine the physical remains of past occupations that are preserved in soil layers, refilled pits, artifacts, and traces of former structures. These remains may reflect occupations that extend back thousands of years in certain places in eastern North America.

The confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers, or the Forks of the Ohio, is one such place. The location is currently occupied by Point State Park in the City of Pittsburgh and is owned by the Pennsylvania Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (DCNR). The park was created during the 1950s and 1960s to provide open green space in the city and to celebrate the origins of Pittsburgh at the “Three Rivers” (Photograph 1). Installation of new utilities and landscape modifications during the past two years caused ground



Photograph 1: The Point in May 2007.

disturbance throughout the park. As a result of State History Code requirements, archaeological monitoring and limited excavations were undertaken by A.D. Marble and Company from late 2006 through the summer of 2007.

The construction work was directed by the DCNR, the Riverlife Task Force, and the Allegheny Conference for Community Development in Pittsburgh. Archaeological guidance was provided by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Bureau

for Historic Preservation (PHMC-BHP). When buried structural remains or soil layers of potential interest were encountered, the excavation of construction trenches was temporarily halted to permit recordation or further study. In some instances, preliminary investigations were undertaken in advance of the utility or landscape installations.

The occupational history of the Forks of the Ohio at the Point is a long one. Pittsburgh's origins lie in the military competition between



Photograph 2: The brick drain probably associated with Fort Duquesne.

France and Great Britain for control of the Ohio country. The French Fort Duquesne was constructed on the Point in 1754. A brick drain that was probably built in the same year was partially examined (Photograph 2). This drain most likely represents the first discovery related to Fort Duquesne. The fort provided logistical support during four years of Native American raids on the Pennsylvania and Virginia frontiers. British General John Forbes formally renamed the location “Pittsburgh” on December 1, 1758, after his forces occupied the Point.

The British constructed a small fortification that was soon replaced by the much larger Fort Pitt between 1759 and 1761. Remnants of

Fort Pitt have been previously excavated by the Carnegie Museum. Several wooden pieces and soil features were encountered during this project, including an 18-foot long spruce tree trunk that was discarded in the fill of a fort bastion during the winter of 1759-60. The base of an oak post and associated refilled holes indicated the presence of an apparent palisade line that crossed the Point west of Fort Pitt. The town of Pittsburgh began to emerge in the shadows of the fort during the late eighteenth century. Evidence of the foundations of houses and industrial structures, as well as artifacts deposited by those who lived and labored in those structures, were encountered in various areas of the park.

Native Americans lived around Fort Duquesne during the French occupancy and had subsequently visited, traded with, and even besieged the British at Fort Pitt. They realized that the substantial British presence threatened their occupations in the area around the Point, occupations that extended back several thousand years. Radiocarbon determinations obtained during the project dated back to about 8,200 calendar years. These dates established that river flood-deposited sediments had raised the westernmost portion of the Point by approximately 20 feet, or roughly to within 4 feet of its presumed elevation during the eighteenth century. Artifacts associated with Native American occupations during the Middle and Late Archaic (Photograph 3), Woodland, Late Prehistoric, and possibly seventeenth-century groups were recovered during the project. It is quite likely that even earlier evidence of occupation is contained within the lower 20 feet of sediments.

The archaeological investigations at Point State Park revealed the complex occupation record of this important location and emphasized the extent to which prehistory and history may be explored and understood at the headwaters of the Ohio River.



Photograph 3: Middle to Late Archaic projectile points recovered during the project. Protein residue analysis on the point at right indicates it was used to hunt turkey, goose, or duck.

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Dr. Blades has directed or co-directed archaeological surveys in the Middle Atlantic states and western Europe for three decades. He has considerable experience in the organization, direction, and management of archaeological projects and a thorough familiarity with federal preservation legislation and state guidelines for conducting archaeological investigations.

