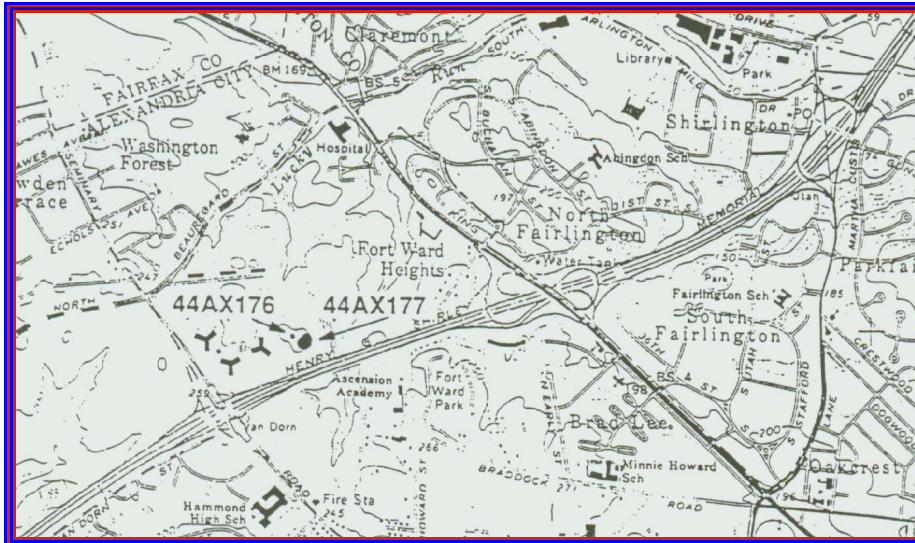


# STONEGATE DEVELOPMENT - PARCEL C (44AX176 AND 44AX177)

*Report Summary by Shirley Scalley*



## INTRODUCTION

The Stonegate Development Parcel C sites are prehistoric sites that occupy a wooded hilltop overlooking Braddock Road to the north and Interstate 395 to the east. Archaeological investigations were indicated because the sites are part of the larger Stonegate housing development and would be disturbed during construction. Prior studies had shown that the larger site (44AX177) was significant enough in terms of the prehistory of both Alexandria and Northern Virginia to be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places and for further archaeological investigation.

Through an agreement between Alexandria Archaeology and Pulte Homes, Thunderbird Archaeological Associates, Inc. was retained to conduct a systematic excavation of the site in the fall of 1995. A Scope of Work to

govern the methodology was developed in consultation with Alexandria Archaeology.

## HISTORY

### *Prehistoric Climate*

The prehistoric climate of the area had a major impact on the types of activities ancient Native Americans carried out on the sites.

At the end of the last Ice Age, about 12,000 years ago, a warming trend began that culminated in an extremely hot and dry period that reached its peak during the Halifax phase (3600 to 2500 B.C.) of the terminal Middle Archaic. This was the warmest climatic episode in the paleoclimatologic record since the last interglacial period 36,000 years ago.

About 2000 B.C., when the Holmes phase (1800 to 1200 B.C.) of the terminal

Late Archaic was beginning, the climate was ameliorating somewhat. By this time, the sea level had risen considerably, the Chesapeake Bay had been established, and the Potomac River valley had been drowned, with tidal limits reaching where they do now, just above Georgetown.

As the warmth, dryness, and sea level rise stabilized the marine and estuarine environments of the upper Potomac coastal plain, anadromous fish (those seeking fresh water in which to spawn) were increasingly drawn to the river. With Great Falls acting as a barrier to upriver migration, the upper Potomac teemed with sturgeon, herring, perch, shad, and bass during the spring.

From mid-March to early June, the riverbanks were occupied by prehistoric Native Americans harvesting this abundance of fish. The evidence for this activity is the literally thousands of Holmes-style points housed in the Smithsonian collection. While most of the fishing sites of this era have been destroyed, a number have been studied. Most of these are base camps located directly along the shoreline or just upstream from the tidal reaches of tributary streams where the fish could be easily procured. One complex of these sites, located on the Maryland shore, has been studied.

What archaeologists do not know much about is what the Holmes phase populations were doing when they were not taking advantage of the fish runs. This is where the importance of the work at Stonegate comes in.

### ***Prehistoric Uses of the Site***

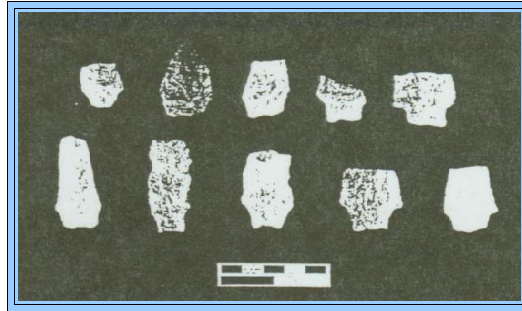
Most of the artifacts were recovered from the larger site and dated to the Holmes phase.

Named after the late nineteenth, early twentieth century Smithsonian archaeologist, William Henry Holmes, this phase is defined by a spear point with an elongated, rather narrow blade and a straight to slightly contracting stem to which the spear shaft was attached. Other artifacts characteristic

of this period include bowls made of a soft stone called steatite, also known as soapstone, and tools such as drills, scrapers, awls, knives, and axes.

The full range of tools and equipment is found only at base camps, which were used as living sites for relatively long periods of time, such as four to six months. These were settlements at which a variety of everyday tasks were carried out as part of the routine of daily life. Significantly, the tool range recovered at Stonegate is limited, indicating that this was not a base camp, but rather a special activity site.

Decades ago, Holmes worked along Rock Creek in the District of Columbia studying cobble quarries. Prehistoric Native Americans extensively used these cobbles that were deposited millions of years ago by an ancient river. The most intensive period of use was during the Holmes phase. These early fishermen collected the cobbles, shaped them into preforms, and then transported them back to the fishing stations where they were fashioned into spear points used for procuring fish.



Unfinished Holmes Points

The Stonegate project provided the first opportunity for contemporary archaeologists to investigate in detail one of these sites used for fashioning preliminary stone tools. As a result of this work, we now have a more complete picture of events that occurred nearly 4,000 years ago.

The picture that emerges is one of Native Americans, presumably mostly male, visiting streambeds that course through these cobble deposits and collecting the stones. The Holmes groups, which made the most intensive use of the site, had a strong preference for quartzite, a kind of metamorphized sandstone that was transported by river action from the Blue Ridge to an area west of the site. They selected elongated cobbles that were close to the shape of the weapons they were going to make. At Stonegate, these cobbles went through the first shaping at a place alongside a nearby stream that today flows along South Van Dorn Street. They were then carried up a hill to a large, flat area where the preforms, finished spear points, and other tools were manufactured. While there, the natives built campfires, possibly for warmth, cooking, or safety. As far as archaeologists can tell from the artifacts left behind, they did not do much at this site other than make these points.

On the other hand, the groups using the site during the Halifax phase were not particularly river or estuary oriented. Indeed, they seemed to have been seasonal nomads moving across the land and exploiting the natural food resources as they ripened. The relatively low number of their sites around the fishing areas, compared to Holmes phase sites, suggests that the

anadromous fish had not reached their maximum numbers. These people also used the Stonegate site in a different way. In addition to preferring quartz over quartzite, they brought their cobbles and chunks up to the site and made their tools and points on the spot rather than waiting until they returned to a base camp to finish the points, as the Holmes populations often did. They also discarded heavily used lithics at the site.

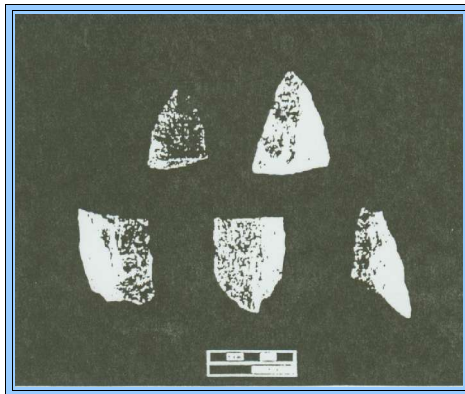
Although the Late Woodland (A.D. 900 to 1700) groups in the area had adopted agriculture by A.D. 900, they continued to hunt using bows and arrows instead of spears. Historic accounts describe a practice in which many villages were almost completely abandoned after the corn was planted, with the residents returning before the harvest. Hunting treks out from their river-based villages were also probably common.

## ARCHAEOLOGY

Over 17,000 artifacts were recovered from the site, including 1,108 fire-cracked rocks that may suggest a cold weather occupation. These were all of sandstone rather than quartzite, because heated quartzite tends to explode, sending spalls, or fragments, of stone flying through the air.

Of the 11,933 quartzite artifacts recovered, 11,783 were waste flakes (debitage). The amount of debitage per finished stone tool is enormous. In addition to the debitage, 44

chunks and 100 bifaces in various stages of completion were recovered. In making points, peoples of the Holmes phase shaped both sides of the stone -- hence the term biface. Some of the artifacts were partially completed



Late Stage Bifaces

bifaces that were discarded because of flaws in the rock or mistakes in knapping.

Other quartzite artifacts recovered were three scrapers, two drill fragments, and one knife. This is a low number of tools, which speaks of the limited activities taking place at the site.



Drills

Holmes phase populations possessed an almost singular preference for quartzite. Not so for the early Halifax phase groups who, in contrast, strongly preferred quartz. Although either group would use some other raw material if necessary, each selected its preferred lithic given a choice.

Of the 3,924 quartz artifacts recovered, 3,883 were debitage, 27 were bifaces, 3 were Halifax points, which are side notched in the stem area, and one was a drill. The Halifax groups probably left behind most, if not all, of the quartz artifacts. The recovered points had been extensively resharpened and were no doubt discarded and replaced by new ones.

Other lithic materials recovered include hornfels, chert, jasper, and rhyolite. Rhyolite is the only material that could not occur in the immediate local area in cobble form. It would have to have been carried in from the area around Harpers Ferry, West Virginia, and Frederick, Maryland. The small size of the rhyolite artifacts suggests that tools were resharpened rather than manufactured at the

site. Wandering hunters and gatherers most likely brought the material in as finished spear points and other tools.

The same may be said of the single Late Woodland triangular point that was recovered. It may tell the tale of the "poor shot" or a wounded animal that escaped only to die alone in the forest. It is also unlikely that the post-Holmes or Early Woodland hornfels point and flakes represented lithic reduction as the primary activity on the site at the time.

The smaller site, 44AX176, was also studied. Only 26 artifacts were recovered, and excavations were halted because the artifact count was low and no significant information was being recovered. This site seems to have been a peripheral activity area associated with the lithic reduction activities occurring at 44AX177.

## CONCLUSION

While prehistoric base camps along the Potomac River and its tributaries have been studied, little has previously been known about the activities of their inhabitants. The archaeological investigations at Stonegate provided a unique opportunity to fill this gap in our knowledge.

The Stonegate site, which is near both good cobble sources and the river, became an intermediate place for the manufacture of spear points and other tools during the Halifax and Holmes phases. Both peoples did the preliminary fashioning of their lithics by the streams where the cobbles were gathered and then took them to the site for further reduction. The Halifax groups usually completed the points at Stonegate, while the Holmes groups often took the spear points back to their base camps by the river and completed them there.

The period of most intensive use of the site was during the Holmes phase of the Late Archaic. An occasional hunter from the Early and Late Woodland may have passed over the site during his travels. No evidence was found that any of these prehistoric people used the site as a permanent encampment. The spatially separate lithic concentrations suggest different activity areas that most likely represent periodic visits to the site by individuals or groups, mostly during the 600 years or so of the Holmes phase.

On the basis of our present knowledge, we cannot know how many people used the site or how many visits they made. We can, however, infer that it was a locus of point manufacture and that after making the points, the prehistoric individuals went back to the tidal estuaries where they used the points to spear fish.

*This summary is based upon a 1995 report by William M. Gardner, Kimberly A. Snyder, and Tammy Bryant.*