

Limited Activity and Low Visibility Remains in the Middle Trent Valley: Wishin' and Hopin' at the West Burleigh Bay Site

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Located on the edge of the Canadian Shield in the middle Trent Valley, the West Burleigh Bay site (BdGn-12) is a cluster of limited activity loci having low archaeological visibility. Recent excavations at the site have revealed an 12,500-year cultural sequence that is an important contribution to our understanding of poorly known local and regional developments. At the same time, archaeological remains from the site provide a cautionary tale regarding how we identify, classify and interpret Middle and Late Woodland ceramics from eastern Shield sites having stratigraphically and culturally mixed components and/or highly fragmented sherd samples.

Introduction

In January 2002, Chief Kris Nahrgang of the Kawartha Nishnawbe First Nation advised me that North York Archaeological Services had recently discovered numerous sites located in the middle Trent Valley directly across Burleigh Bay (Stony Lake) from the hamlet of Burleigh Falls (Figure 1). He remarked that these sites required mitigation prior to proposed development and asked that I run my summer's Trent University

archaeological field school at the sites as a partner with him and the landowners in what ultimately will be a long-term mitigation process.

Because the sites are located on the edge of the Canadian Shield, I objected that they were likely to lack good stratigraphy and that this would compromise the field school's pedagogical requirements. Chief Nahrgang countered with a series of valid arguments as to why several aspects met other practical pedagogical needs and suggested two locations which he thought were particularly

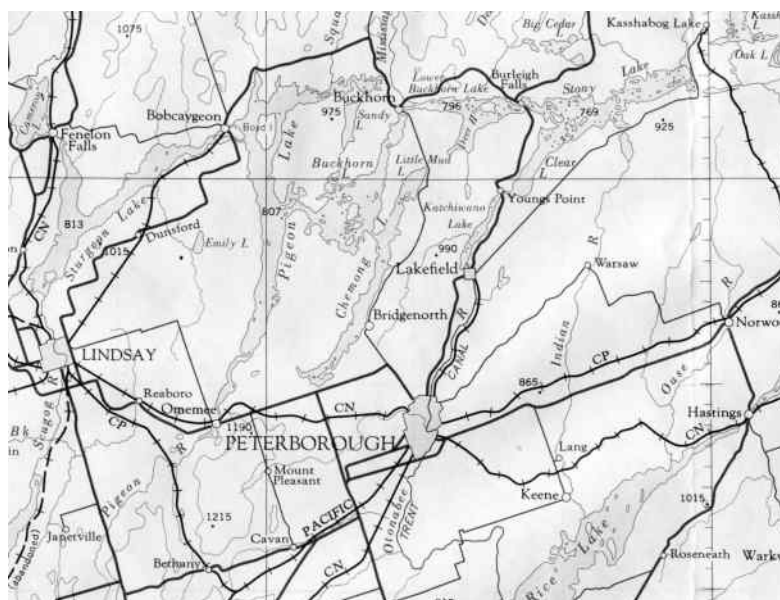


Figure 1. Stony Lake is the most northeasterly of the middle Trent Valley lakes. Burleigh Falls is located at the western end of Stony Lake.

suitable for a field school, as both sites were rich in artifacts from the Late Archaic through the nineteenth century. Basically, he argued that they would be interesting for the students to dig and would hold their attention over the six weeks of the course. I succumbed to his logic.

After reading a preliminary archaeological assessment report prepared by North York Archaeological Services (Dibb 2001), I selected BdGn-12, located at the west end and on the north shore of Stony Lake on a low-lying point of land (Figure 2). A preliminary visit to the site the following April confirmed that it is in forest cover dominated by ash, oak, hop hornbeam, pine and hemlock. Large cut tree stumps indicated that the locale had been heavily logged. Soils were observed to be thin and very stony, but well drained.

Aspirations and Expectations Confront Realities

As we began test pitting the site at three-metre intervals, my fears were confirmed: there was no stratigraphy at any of the tested loci.¹ But, within a few days we had documented a series of small clusters of artifacts believed to represent campsite locations used by single families or special groups. Along the eastern side of the point these artifact clusters overlap, indicating that the camps were re-established on a regular (seasonal?) basis in approximately the same location. In the central and western sectors of the point, the artifact clusters are discreet, indicating that these camps—predominately of Late Woodland origins—were not re-established. For the most part, the artifact clusters are not visible on the surface. In fact, the only place that the site's artifacts were consistently visible was at the water's edge where erosion of the point on which the site is located was depositing sherds and lithics in the water. These artifact clusters appear to represent repeated aggregations of temporary camps, although no features could be discerned, perhaps in part owing to thin soil cover badly disturbed by natural processes (including repeated burns) and in part owing to the ephemeral nature of the occupations.

BdGn-12 is a good stopover spot along the middle Trent system, positioned as it is near one end of a portage route where a number of key



Figure 2. *The BdGn-12 site. Note fossil beach ridge to left of photo just behind trees.*

resources are located. Owing to differences in elevation, a portage has been required for the past 12,500-plus years between Lovesick and Stony Lakes. BdGn-12 is located directly across from Perry's Creek and only a short distance northwest of Burleigh Falls. The creek and falls link Lovesick and Stony Lakes through a series of rapids and falls (e.g., Strickland 1970:2:236-237). The site is on a point of land that abruptly rises through a sequence of fossil beach ridges to the rocky outcrops of the Shield, where people could remain unobserved while keeping an eye on the Perry's Creek portage. Alternately, people could (and did) camp on the point in a location where the prevailing winds for much of the site's history blew across their campsite. Such winds would help keep mosquitoes and blackflies at bay. The site also has two substantial quartzite outcrops that were quarried for their toolstone, and is located near excellent fishing grounds (including not only the rapids at Burleigh Falls and along Perry's Creek, but also a series of ancient fishweirs located in Lovesick Lake just above Burleigh Falls [Kris Nahrgang, personal communication 2002]). It is located adjacent to low-lying areas attractive to both herbivores and waterfowl as well. For example, Samuel Strickland (1970:2:234,238), writing in the early 1850s, commented upon the "vast quantities of fine salmon-trout... muskononge, black-bass and white-fish... besides many other varieties" to be caught at the foot of the falls, as well as upon the fine duck-shooting the vicinity afforded. Edwin Guillet (1957:Figure 50) illustrates surveyor Edward Caddy's mid-1850s painting of

deer on an island near Burleigh Falls, suggesting that this too may have been a plentiful resource in the area. In addition, the immediate and broader BdGn-12 vicinity is ecologically diverse, hence may have provided a variety of usable plant species for much of its history. Nearby, at least during the mid-nineteenth century were “fine fields of wild rice, over which clouds of wild fowl” could be observed (Strickland 1970:2:231). Wilkin’s 1914 map (Dibb 2001:Figure 3) shows rice beds along the north shore of Burleigh Bay approximately one kilometre from BdGn-12.

Although I assume climatic change through time with concomitant environmental change, in general these data suggest that BdGn-12 was most intensively used during the warmer seasons of the year by small, transient groups. Key resources, of course, would have varied through time. Although we know little about temporal changes in water levels in the middle Trent Valley, the sequence of occupation at BdGn-12 implies that the system was likely navigable by watercraft throughout the site’s long history. Test pitting of these limited activity and low visibility remains confirm that they dated from circa A.D. 1850 through to the Early Paleoindian period, estimated at circa 12,500 years ago in the middle Trent Valley (Fiedel 1999:105-107). The site was indeed proving to be interesting for the students to dig.

At the same time, though, the students were unsettled by the fact that BdGn-12 did not have a name, just a Borden designation. This presented a prime opportunity for me to discuss how sites were named. Option One, I explained, is to name the site after the landowner—not suitable in this instance given that there are almost 20 sites on the subject property (Dibb 2001). To give them all the same name, even though there would be a difference in their sequential numbers, would be confusing. Option Two, I explained, is to name the site after a prominent geographical or cultural feature. However, there is nothing particularly noteworthy about the point of land on which BdGn-12 is located apart perhaps from its fossil beach ridges—but even these are not distinguishing features as they occur elsewhere in this region (Kris Nahrgang, personal communication 2002). The site could be one of several

others, dominated as it is by a landscape of trees and water.

Now, in some respects archaeologists in the field might be said to be socially bereft. So, following what they had been told about site naming protocol, the students proposed to name BdGn-12 after what they deemed to be its most conspicuous feature—three lovesick turtles who surfaced each day on a rock adjacent to the site in order to mate.

However, my field assistant had other ideas about what was conspicuous about BdGn-12. She privately referred to it as the Wishin’ and Hopin’ site after the Burt Bacharach/Hal David song which has the lyric “‘cause you won’t get him thinkin’ and a prayin’, wishin’ and a hopin’”. Evidently, it wasn’t just the turtles who were love struck. Fortunately this, too, proved to be a limited activity which had relatively low visibility and we were able to keep the field school running on an even keel.

Somehow the wishin’ and hopin’ concept stuck, though, and I began to apply it broadly to the site. There was wishin’ that it wasn’t so root disturbed and that the cobbles which dominate the soil matrix were fewer, smaller and lighter. There was hopin’ for stratigraphy—most of the site’s artifacts were found intermixed between the cobbles. And, for example, Middle Woodland sherds underlay, were intermingled with, and overlay diagnostic Gainey-like artifacts. In June, following a particularly heavy rainfall, there was more wishin’ and hopin’ that units located in a low-lying area of the site (an intermittent lake feeder/seep from uphill swamps) would drain and we could get on with mitigation. There was wishin’ that the glaciolacustrine features in this area had been studied and documented by Pleistocene geologists² because that would contribute substantially to any discussion of the site’s earlier components.

Gainey-like points (e.g., Figure 3) and channel flakes were recovered from the water side slope of an ancient sand and gravel beach ridge positioned only some 60 cm above the current artificially-raised water level, a Hi-Lo point base from its inland slope and other Paleoindian artifacts (e.g., backed biface fragments, a side scraper, cores)



Figure 3. Gainey-like point from BdGn-12. The nipple has broken away, precluding fluting.



Figure 4. Backed biface (left), and Hi-Lo point base (right) from BdGn-12.



Figure 5. Low-lying seep area. Note fossil beach ridge in background. Excavation units in this area produced an array of Paleoindian through Euro-Canadian materials.

were found in the low-lying seep area behind it (Figures 4 and 5). The diagnostic Gainey-like materials are indicative of projectile point retooling: the flaking of new fluted points and the discard of a specimen that had reached the end of its effective use-life. Hi-Lo artifacts are rare this far north in Ontario (Ellis and Deller 1990:61). The

southern exposure this location would have afforded during periods of Paleoindian occupation would have been important even during summer months in what would have been a gradually ameliorating subarctic environment (Karrow and Warner 1990:28-29, 33-34).

There was wishin' that the Early Archaic points recovered from this same low-lying area of the site were intact. Figure 6 illustrates a fragment of an Early Archaic corner-notched and serrated point and a LeCroy-like point, the bifurcate base of which has broken away. If memory serves me correctly, there also is the base of an Early Archaic side-notched point from the site, but formal confirmation of this must await analysis of the collection, scheduled to begin early in 2003. There was wishin' that we had time to examine the ridge behind and above the seep and the high Shield outcrop above this, because there is a possibility that some of the artifacts may have been redeposited from the ridge and because test pitting on the high ground revealed concentrations of quartzite flakes associated with one of the quartzite veins that transverse the site. The large size of these flakes suggests that they are Archaic and, if so, then in situ remains of this period (i.e., in good context) from the middle Trent Valley are a rare and significant find.

There was fervent hopin' that the bugs and poison ivy would let up, that the Middle and Late Archaic (Figure 7) artifacts would not be quite so jumbled together, because—frankly—for this region in particular and Eastern Ontario in general we do not know very much about these manifestations. As Ellis et al. (1990:93,120) acknowledge, the Archaic is not generally well known for this part of Ontario and diagnostic artifact types seem to intergrade. There are typeable Brewerton points and a section of a ground slate (so-called "Laurentian") biface as well as Lamoka, Normanskill, Genesee and Ace of Spades points from BdGn-12. But, there are many non-typeable flaked specimens too, most probably Middle or Late Archaic, and some perhaps Early or even Middle Woodland. Compounding this problem, we do not have a good grasp of how Late Archaic ground stone lithics differ from Early Woodland lithics in Eastern Ontario and the middle Trent Valley (Lackowicz 1996).

It may well be that we have an Early Woodland component at the site but have not recognized it in the absence of definitive ceramics. It is perhaps noteworthy that this lack of Vinette I ceramics has been documented elsewhere in eastern Ontario (e.g., Emerson 1955:38-39; Watson 1992:17). We certainly have strong evidence in the way of sherds for Middle Woodland use of the site (Figure 8). Following Watson's (1992:18-19, 28) Rideau Lakes research, those sherds with pseudo-scallop shell decoration most likely date to the early part of the Middle Woodland sequence, with dentate/trailed stylus decoration dating to a slightly later time, and with cord-wrapped-stick or paddle to the very late Middle Woodland/Late Woodland transition. Just wishin' and hopin', though, that these sherds were not so fragmentary. I'll return to this point later because I think the fragmentary nature of these particular artifacts *could* promote erroneous conclusions about archaeological cultures in the middle Trent Valley. Wishin' and hopin' that the Late Woodland sherds came with instructions (Figure 9) as to the languages their owners spoke and despite this to which social groups they assigned themselves, so that I would no longer be tempted to refer to the sherds as miscegenating and thereby cease to confound and confuse my students, at least on these grounds!

We have sherds that exhibit either Algonquian or Iroquoian decorative band symmetry preferences (Denny 2001). We have sherds that appear to mix



Figure 6. The Early Archaic corner-notched and serrated point (left) exhibits alternate bevelling of blade edges. The LeCroy-like point (right) has had its base broken, but the bifurcate form is evident.

both preference types, and sherds that may be Algonquian copies of Iroquoian motifs (these are less constrained and carefully executed and tend to violate Iroquoian ideals of zonation). This variety is typical of late northern ceramic assemblages (Fox 1990:462-463; Wright 1965:199-201) and reflects locally produced and imported vessels.

Wishin' and hopin' that the mid-nineteenth century European ceramics spoke more clearly as to whom had used them. Hand wrought chains and nails likely relate to logging activities in the



Figure 7. Middle and Late Archaic points from BdGn-12.



Figure 8. Middle Woodland rim sherds from BdGn-12.



Figure 9. Late Woodland rim sherds from BdGn-12. Note the asymmetry of the castellation.

area circa 1850 and the ceramics may be related to these activities. First Nations peoples worked on the logging gangs around Burleigh Falls (Kris Nahrgang, personal communication 2003), as did peoples of European ancestry, so both could have used artifacts of European manufacture. These are not just idle questions—they have serious import to aboriginal heritage, as well as rights and land claims issues in the Middle Trent Valley and beyond. This is a geographical region where there has been longstanding social interaction. As archaeologists we need to know more about how peoples expressed themselves in their material culture.

Yet Another Reality

Here, I return to the point I raised earlier about the small size of many of the so-called Middle Woodland sherds recovered from BdGn-12. Some 60 km east of Burleigh Falls, in the northern part of Hastings County, there is a body of water called Limerick Lake. Limerick Lake is drained by Beaver Creek, which flows into the Crowe River, thence into the Trent River east of Rice Lake. A few years ago aboriginal artifacts from a site on this lake were sent to me for analysis. These items are from pit features which also contained datable European materials. Sherds from the site at Limerick Lake are the eastern variant of what once were termed Blackduck (Figure 10). According to Zibauer (1994: 162, 167, 192, 262-263), Blackduck vessels are manufactured by modelling, are globular in form, have straight or concave necks, and have collarless rims with outflaring, thickened lips. They are decorated by encircling cord or cord-like techniques and combing—the most common motif is a band of right oblique impressions above encircling impressions and exterior punctates producing interior bosses. Lips are brushed, combed or decorated with cord or cord-like obliques. An impressed cord-wrapped object leaves imprints “in which the twists of the cording and the shallow, rounded, regular impressions of the wrapped object in the clay are observable” (Zibauer 1994:262). Many Blackduck ceramics, however, have clear impressions in which cording

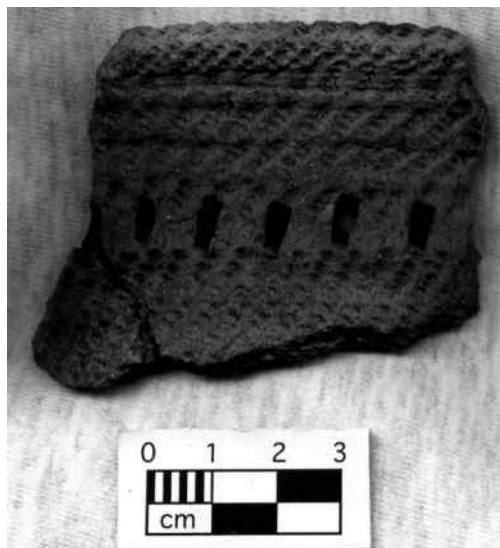


Figure 10. Blackduck-like sherd from Limerick Lake.

is not evident (Lugenbeal 1977:214-218, 1978:47, 1979:26; Zibauer 1994:261). These are referred to as cord-like impressions created by “a form of stamping in which a thin flexible cylinder is wrapped with a flexible linear element and pressed into the clay. Distinct cords or strands of cords are not apparent in the negative impression produced by this technique” (Zibauer 1994:259). The Limerick Lake sherds are decorated with cord-like impressions. They are not corded.

Lenius and Olinyk (1990) have redefined the western ceramic taxonomy, eliminating Late Blackduck as a category in Northwest Ontario (including the north shore of Lake Superior), northern Minnesota, northwest Michigan, and Manitoba. However, Zibauer’s (1994) reanalysis of the Hungry Hall site sherds from Rainy River in northwest Ontario finds limitations to this new model and she concludes that it is premature to dispense with Late Blackduck as a ceramic category. Certainly, the association of the Limerick Lake sherds with European materials indicates that the eastern variant of Blackduck post-dates circa 1780 at the site in question. European records combined with archaeological investigations have established that the western variant of what used to be termed Blackduck is associated with the Ojibway, very broadly defined (Wright 1965:201; cf. Lenius and

Olinyk 1990:101). Wright (1965:199-201) infers this to also be the case with the eastern variant, although he does note that typically “Ojibway” ceramics are representative of several different ceramic traditions.

Given this data, one might well ask whether each of the small sherds from BdGn-12 is Middle Woodland or a Late Woodland eastern Blackduck variant. The difficulty in identification of such small sherds is that both Middle Woodland and the Late Woodland eastern Blackduck vessels have straight or concave necks and collarless rims with outflaring lips. Both can be decorated by a band of right oblique impressions above encircling horizontal impressions and exterior punctates producing interior bosses, reflecting what Denny (2001) argues are Algonquian decorative band symmetry preferences. Bodies of both can be brushed (Spence et al. 1990:158), that is, marked with striae caused by dragging a brush-like instrument across their surfaces prior to drying and firing. With small sherds, it is not always possible to distinguish manufacturing technique (Middle Woodland coiling versus Late Woodland modelling) and vessel form (Middle Woodland elongated bodies with sub-conoidal or conoidal bases versus Late Woodland globular bodies). Fortunately, specifics of lip decoration differ between Middle Woodland and Late Woodland “Ojibway” sherds. Alas, what does one do when lips are damaged? The Limerick Lake sherds are not cord decorated—they are cord-like impressed. And following reanalyses of collections previously identified as corded, both cord and cord-like decorative techniques were found to be common in Middle and Late Woodland ceramic assemblages from western Ontario and adjacent regions (e.g., Lugenbeal 1977:214-218, 1978:47, 1979:26; Zibauer 1994). A cord-like technique was found on several small sherds from BdGn-12 that exhibited right obliques below their rims. This prompted me to re-examine Middle Woodland sherds from the Serpent Mounds site held in the Trent University collections to determine if there were any examples of cord-like impressions. I looked no further than the first box opened: out of approximately 60 specimens, three examples of cord-like decorative

technique were found.³ I suspect, therefore, that if existing ceramic assemblages from eastern Ontario were reanalyzed many sherds currently described as corded would be found to be otherwise. Here, then, the question is: to which Woodland taxonomic category/ categories do I assign these small sherds from BdGn-12 or any similar mixed multicomponent sites, of which there must be thousands, along the Trent-Severn System and throughout the southeastern Shield? Our current state of knowledge is problematic, indeed.

Conclusions

At this juncture, I’m wishin’ and hopin’ that I could give definitive answers to the issues and questions raised in this paper because it is inevitable that they will surface again. They are important to aboriginal rights, land claims, and heritage matters. They are important to archaeological theory and practice and whether Ontario’s past is interpreted merely as a list of things found or as something closer to past social reality. Another season of fieldwork at BdGn-12 will do much to clarify issues and some of the questions. That is just one reason why I’m wishin’ and hopin’ that I’ll get back to BdGn-12 next summer. Yet, one of the major questions, how we can convincingly distinguish between small Middle Woodland and Late eastern variant Blackduck sherds, is not likely to be answered within a short research period. By the way, despite all the wishin’ and hopin’ outlined here, I have followed convention and gave BdGn-12 the name “West Burleigh Bay site”.

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Notes

¹ Nevertheless, the site was initially excavated by trowel in arbitrary 10-cm levels. This, too, failed to reveal any stratigraphy either in terms of soil matrix characteristics or types of artifacts associated with each of the arbitrary strata.

² Fortunately, my PhD, although in Anthropology, is in the Quaternary Studies option offered by Washington State University. This gives me basic background from which to interpret these features. Trent University anthropology graduate student Thomas Krahn will be applying GIS analysis to these features during the summer of 2003 as part of his Master's degree requirements.

³ I acknowledge that the small size of the BdGn-12 sherds might promote erroneous conclusions as to decorative method and technique (often one and the same), however, impressions are clear on the specimens described as being cord-like and they lack any diagnostics of cording. The Serpent Mounds sherds identified as being cord-like in terms of their decoration are relatively large.

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