

Historical Discovery on Block Island Uncovered Earliest Settlement in Southern New England

From “Discovery on Block Island: 2,500-Year-Old Village Predates Agriculture” by Carole Jaworski, which first appeared in *Nor’easter: Magazine of the Northeast Sea Grant Programs* 2(2):32–37, 1990.

Excerpted by Malia Schwartz

More than 2,500 years ago, ancestors of the Manissean Indians—a branch of Algonquian-speaking Indians of the Eastern Seaboard closely related to the Narragansetts—settled into permanent, year-round village life on Block Island, some 10 miles off the coast of Rhode Island.

The discovery of this settlement startled anthropologists and set the archaeological timetable for southern New England back by at least 1,000 years. Although year-round villages are usually correlated with the rise of agriculture—thought to have begun in the Northeast around 1100—the economy of this site was based on marine resources.

“As far as we know, this is the oldest evidence we have for year-round villages in southern New England—and maybe for the whole Northeast,” says Kevin McBride, a Rhode Island Sea Grant–sponsored archaeologist who led the Block Island excavation.

As sea levels rose with the melting of the glaciers, Block Island, then a series of hilltops located equidistant from the coasts of both Rhode Island and Long Island, became two islands. Dunes formed between the islands and created an estuary. It was a very productive environment. About 3,000 years ago Block Island became a single island through the formation of a tombolo—a dune connector between two islands. In this case, it was a double one and established the Great Salt Pond.

It was not an accident that early people chose this site, says Nicholas Bellantoni, Connecticut state archaeologist.

“It was like a Garden of Eden, rich with resources,” he says.

Before the Block Island discovery, there had been archaeological evidence of even more ancient people in the Northeast. Remains of these people, known as “the Red Paint People” because of the red ochre material that accompanied their burials, have been found from Maine to Labrador. But the Block Island site represents the earliest known year-round site in southern New England.

Chance Discovery

Evidence for the extraordinarily early, year-round occupation of Block Island might have remained buried but for the interest of one group.



Some of the artifacts excavated from the Block Island site included a net sinker (left), a broken quartz knife (upper right), a spear point (middle) and a fragment of a decorated pot. All are believed to be 2,500 years old.

Photo by Richard Kingsley, URI Graduate School of Oceanography.



Archaeologist Kevin McBride examines the post holes that mark the outside of an excavated house. *Photo by Richard Kingsley, URI Graduate School of Oceanography.*

In 1985, Gerald Abbott, a Providence physician and member of the Block Island Historical Society, approached Paul Robinson, Rhode Island state archaeologist, for advice on how to learn more about the archaeology of Block Island.

Robinson told him of grants available from the Rhode Island Historical Commission. Working through the town of New Shoreham on Block Island, the historical society applied for and received a grant to conduct a survey of the archaeological resources of the island.

The survey team found things almost right away, Abbott says. And they kept finding the most important artifacts adjacent to the Great Salt Pond. “They knew that the Native Americans always located their villages on land that faced south, below the crest of the hill and out of the wind—unlike today, where we locate on the top of the crest for the view. That’s one reason the site is still intact.”

Pay Dirt

The crew hit pay dirt. It soon became clear that they had found not an isolated dwelling, but a village. In fact, the site is one big occupation covering some three acres.

“This is huge for a prehistoric site,” McBride says. “At this time, no one ever thought you would see permanently occupied villages of this size. Villages on the mainland at this time were very small, with only seasonal use of maritime resources. Here, there was an actual village occupied year round, with all internal structures, storage pits, houses, activities—and most are still here.”

Because later development did not occur on top of the Native American remains, the integrity of the village left behind on Block Island remains. In fact, the integrity of the site is so good, scientists can reconstruct what the village looked like, McBride says.

Evidence shows that houses at the site were 30 feet long by 18 feet wide and probably constructed of saplings bent over like present-day Quonset huts. Because the houses were so large, they may have been multi-family. Some 15 to 20 houses would fit in the area, with a distance between households of approximately 10 to 20 meters. That would put a possible population count at 200.

Broken pots and food remains indicate areas where fish was processed. There is a sturgeon processing area, replete with flake tools. There are patterns

of very large posts and lots of charcoal remains. “This probably represents a fish-smoking area,” McBride says. The village is in a remarkable state of preservation, Abbott adds. “You can actually see the plates of sturgeon from 500 B.C. You realize as you stand here that you are in the midst of a shelter from 500 B.C. It’s beautiful.”

Most of the artifacts retrieved from the site come from a midden, or garbage dump, covering three-quarters of an acre located downwind of the site.

“Archaeologists deal with garbage,” McBride laughs. “To an archaeologist, this is hot stuff.”

Fortunately, there was excellent preservation of the remains because the lime in the shellfish shells neutralized New England’s normally acidic soil, slowing deterioration and preserving bone and other perishable material.

Year-round Site

“Our original conclusion was that this might have been an outpost for smoking fish—and that it was seasonal,” McBride says. “But the food discovered at the site—the combination of fish, land mammals, sea mammals, and seeds—indicates year-round.”

Food remains recovered from the midden include shellfish, seal, migratory birds, and fish of all kinds. But sturgeon and seal are the most common. Seal was a major resource, comparable to deer on the mainland, McBride says.

There was also a wide range of plant remains, such as raspberries and hickory nuts. “The plant remains gave additional proof that the site was year-round,” he says. “We see a full range of food materials covering all the seasons.”

Marine Economy vs. Agriculture

The traditional wisdom is that year-round villages only became possible with the rise of agriculture. But the earliest known use of maize (corn) in the Northeast did not occur until 1160 on Martha’s Vineyard—nearly 1,500 years after people had settled into permanent villages on Block Island, where the economy was based on marine resources.

Food remains at the Block Island site are 90 percent marine and 10 percent plant, McBride says. In contrast, plant utilization on the mainland represented 50 percent of the diet.

The majority of artifacts excavated from the site are net sinkers—stones, with hemp or rope tied to them, that could take a net to the bottom and weight it there. “If you associate processing sturgeon, net sinkers, and smoking, you come up with the fact that fishing was very important,” McBride says. Spear points were not as common as on the mainland, which shows that hunting was not as important here.

“Block Island is really unique,” he says. “It’s the closest thing to a true maritime economy. Even in coastal areas of the mainland, deer was the primary resource. While deer was utilized for clothing on the mainland, seals were probably used for clothing here. The excavation also turned up porpoise remains. These people were pretty good at seagoing if they were picking up porpoise.”

Interestingly, the site provides the earliest evidence for the use of lobster by Native Americans.

“It’s probably not the first use of lobster, but rather the oldest lobster remains to have survived,” McBride points out.

Lobster shells, because they are softer, do not survive as long as clam or oyster shells. The fact that we don’t see lobster shells in middens, he says, doesn’t necessarily mean lobsters weren’t being utilized; it’s just that their remains don’t always last long enough to tell us so.

2,500-Year-Old Village

At first, McBride thought he had discovered a 16th-century site. After all, archaeologists didn’t expect to find a permanent year-round site predating the rise of agriculture.

But hints at earliness kept surfacing. The pottery discovered at the site, for instance, was all early-looking. Early pottery was pointed in order to fit into a fire. Later pottery was rounded, with constricted necks that could be tied and hung over a fire.

The pottery discovered at the Block Island site was all pointed. But that was not conclusive. “If you find rounded pottery, you know for sure you have a late site,” McBride says. “But the case is not so clear with pointed pottery. All you can say for sure is that it may be early.”

To find out the site’s date for sure, Sea Grant funded the radiocarbon dating of three samples.

When the results came in, the dates of the three samples were startling—all ranged from 2400 to 2450 B.P. (before present). McBride now has a total of five separate radiocarbon dates for the site, including two additional charcoal samples from a hearth in one of the houses. All fall between 2350 and 2550 B.P., with an average date of 2400 B.P.

Why Block Island?

Today, with our modern highways and automobiles, Block Island seems remote. There are no bridges linking it to the mainland and a ferry ride, using modern engines, takes one hour. But to the Native Americans and early explorers, the arteries of communication were the waterways. Travel by water was easy and swift compared to travel over land without roads. To Native Americans, Block Island may have seemed less remote and easier to get to than the interior of the mainland. It was, after all, on their major highway to anywhere: the water.

“It was not a problem to get back and forth, contrary to what some people might think,” McBride says. The first Europeans to arrive in the area reported a regular communication back and forth from Block Island to both Rhode Island and Long Island already in existence.

“Roger Williams, one of the first European settlers in Rhode Island, tells us that by the 17th century, the Narragansett Indians had canoes that could hold some 40 to 50 men,” Bellantoni says. “The Native Americans were very well adapted to oceans and movement between islands—even in winter.”

Epilogue

Some 2,000 years after the Manisseans established the first year-round village in southern New England, the Italian navigator Giovanni da Verrazano, sailing north from Long Island Sound in 1524, “discovered” Block Island.

Prevented from landing by bad weather, Verrazano wrote that the island seemed “much populated, judging by the continuous fires along all the surrounding shores.” Nearly a century later, the Dutch explorer Adrian Block became the first European to set foot on the island. But if he saw any Manisseans in 1614, he left no record of it. It wasn’t until some 20 years later that militia, sent to avenge the killing of a Boston trader, left the first written record of the Manissean settlements. From that account, archaeologists have pieced together a possible Manissean population count of between 300 and 500 in 1636. But by 1774, some 140 years later, only 51 Manisseans remained, the rest having either died out or left the island. The last known Manissean, Isaac Church, died unheralded at age 100 in 1886—without anyone realizing the unique historical contribution the Manissean people had made.

—*Malia Schwartz is Communications Director for Rhode Island Sea Grant.*