

The Robert Minshall Collection: Nantucket Archaeology.

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IN DIRT ROADS, in gardens, in pits dug for construction, even on beaches, Nantucketers sometimes find stone tools and projectile points made by the prehistoric inhabitants of the island. For the past three years, the Nantucket Historical Association has been photographing and cataloguing Nantucket Indian artifacts from private collections as well as from its own collection. Where possible, we record artifact styles, lithic material, and find sites.

A "golden age" of archaeology occurred in the 1930's, when Edward Brooks initiated controlled archaeological excavations which were followed by published reports. Alfred O. Shurrocks, Alice A. Shurrocks, Nelson Olney Dunham, and Layla Dunham also at that time began looking for surface indications of Indian sites on the island. Although they made substantial collections of surface finds, since given to the Nantucket Historical Association, the major significance of their work for archaeology lies in the fact that they recorded the find sites of each artifact at the time of discovery.

Robert Minshall, as a teen-ager, tagged along with Mr. and Mrs. Shurrocks as they walked the dirt roads on the island, and, as a young man, used to visit Edward Brooks at his office at the Museum of the American Indian in New York City, with archaeological questions. Minshall spent 45 summers surface hunting for Indian artifacts on Nantucket, and recording the site of each find. Last year he presented his collection, with proveniences attached, to the Nantucket Historical Association.

We have spent the past year photographing and cataloguing the Minshall collection, and in July presented the original copy of the catalogue to the Foulger Museum of the Nantucket Historical Association.

We are now beginning to give the artifacts in the Minshall collection a detailed examination, and expect some interesting results to emerge from this study.

Already, we can observe that, as in other Nantucket collections, the percentage of white quartz points is somewhere around 10 percent, which

is low compared to inland sites in Massachusetts. In particular, we find a relatively modest occurrence of Late Archaic triangular and small stemmed points, which are usually made of quartz. On the other hand, even a preliminary sorting by style shows more Late Woodland artifacts, infrequently made of quartz, than Late Archaic artifacts. Current explanations for this style frequency distribution are that the rising sea has eroded or covered many coastal Late Archaic sites, and that the Late Woodland period saw a general increase in coastal population.

On Martha's Vineyard, William A. Ritchie's excavations produced primarily Woodland and Late Archaic point styles, with barely a trace of occupations earlier than 5000 years ago. In contrast, on Nantucket, almost every collection which we have seen, including Minshall's, contains a significant number of projectile points older than Late Archaic.

The strengths of the Minshall collection lie in the number and variety of tools of the Susquehanna styles, dating from about 3700 to 3200 years ago, and in the large number and variety of ground stone tools such as gouges, grooved axes, adzes, celts, pestles, hammerstones, sinker, gorgets, etc.

We attribute whatever knowledge we have of artifact styles and their corresponding carbon-14 dates to Professor Dena F. Dincauze, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, archaeological consultant to the Nantucket Historical Association.

The Historical Association accepts collections with gratitude, and will curate them with care. The Archaeology Department endorses studies of Nantucket's prehistoric inhabitants from existing collections. For this purpose, careful, accurate records are needed. We strongly urge collectors to record their own collections, but, if they so desire, we will do it for them during our annual summer cataloguing program. Our objectives are the conservation of archaeological sites on Nantucket, and the development of knowledge and understanding of Nantucket's first inhabitants.

We have enough catalogued material now at the NHA, including pottery and faunal remains, to extend an invitation to scholars to consult our collection. Professor Barbara Luedtke, University of Massachusetts, Boston, used our resources this spring for research, and commented very favorably on the catalogue and the availability of the materials.

The public is cordially invited to see the new exhibit at the Foulger Museum showing highlights of the Minshall collection.



The Minshall collection catalogue was completed and deposited at the Foulger Museum on July 30, 1980. On the front steps of the Museum, Center - Robert Minshall presenting his catalogue to Edouard A. Stackpole, director of the Museum, Cynthia Young, director of the Archaeology Department, and Marie Sussek, research assistant. [photograph by E. A. Little].

(Dr. Robert Minshall died at the Cape Cod Hospital in Hyannis, Mass., on December 22, 1980, only a few months after he had given his valuable collection to the Nantucket Historical Association. He was 56. He was a life-long summer resident of the island and had played an important part in many of Nantucket organizations and activities. He had been a professor at Brown University and ten years ago had joined the faculty at Cape Cod Community College. His contribution to the Nantucket Historical Association is thus doubly appreciated and his continuous cooperation with the aims and work of the Association will be greatly missed. -- Ed.)