

Summary 2014

Exploits River Research 2014

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This summer Laurie, under contract to Newfoundland and Labrador's Provincial Archaeology Office, directed two research projects at known Beothuk sites on islands in the Exploits River in 2014. Grand Falls resident Don Pelley provided guide/boat operating and archaeological assistance in both endeavours.

The author and Pelley were assisted by Memorial University graduate student Dave Crane on one of the islands. In addition, the author individually visited the Beaches archaeological site, near Burnside, Bonavista Bay, on a number of days in August. The two Exploits River islands cannot be named in order to protect them from illegal digging. Fourteen Beothuk housepits and other features had been reported on island #1 approximately 40 years ago by avocational archaeologist Don Locke. The term housepit refers to structures whose floors had been excavated by Beothuk to a depth of 20-40 cm below the surface and the excess earth and/or rocks were piled around the perimeter of the depression, forming a low wall. The wooden poles forming the structure's frame were stuck into the earthen wall and covered with caribou skins, birch bark, the bark from other trees, or sail cloth obtained from Europeans. Most of these pit structures were homes for one or more families, depending on the size of the building. Some of the pit structures may have been storehouses used to stockpile mostly caribou meat and hides along with other resources and tools. The buildings ranged in shape from round to oval, square, rectangular, pentangular, hexagonal or octagonal. Fifty-two Exploits River housepits that have been re-visited since 2010 vary in size from 12.9 m to 60.2 m, averaging 33.7 m

The archaeological team re-identified nine of ten housepits that had been previously documented within the portion of island #1 they were assigned to work in 2014. This is an exceptionally high proportion of re-identified housepits, given that three similar Exploits River research projects identified between 34 % and 71.9% of housepits in three different clusters. A dense forest cover had grown over most of island #1's housepits, requiring the crew to dig over 500 test pits in order to find them. Once a housepit was identified, it was photographed and measured. Wall height, interior depth, the presence or absence of a mounded hearth, doorway and sleeping hollows were recorded. The distance to the river was measured and GPS coordinates were taken for each housepit in order to facilitate future identification.



Dave Crane and Don Pelley conducting test excavations inside Housepit 3 on Island #1, 2014.

The main goal of this archaeological survey was re-identifying previously reported cultural features on this island, so once housepits, bone deposits, manufactured rock concentrations or other product of human activity were found, the crew moved on. These features can be excavated at another time. This minimal excavation technique resulted in the survey finding very few artifacts. Caribou bone fragments were recovered from four housepit interiors and from two underground locations outside housepits. Two storage pits connected to housepits were identified and two possible exterior storage pits were found. Although this project did not include large scale excavations, significant new information was generated. Detailed plotting of the nine housepits' distribution suggests this site represents a late Beothuk occupation. Structures appear to have been designed and placed to leave them inconspicuous to Europeans travelling on the river. The island's housepits were built further apart than they were at most sites and were placed further from the river. Also, many of the former structures were missing their south, river-facing earthen wall, suggesting this side accommodated the doorway and possibly a less substantial wall, once again to make the houses less visible to Europeans travelling upriver during the early nineteenth century. Larger-scale excavation of some of these former structures holds great potential for producing important new information concerning late Beothuk life along the Exploits River.

Island #2, Exploits River

Island #2, on the Exploits River, was the focus of a slightly different research project. Ten housepits, one large hearth, smaller hearths and storage pits had been identified here during the 1960s, once again by avocational archaeologist Don Locke. Numerous archaeological re-visits since then could only detect a few, if any, of these features per trip. The author and Don Pelley re-identified eight housepits, the remains of a long hearth, fire-cracked rock deposits,

four storage pits and a concentration of caribou bone on two research projects implemented in 2012 and 2013. Their 2014 project provided for salvage excavations of a 2.13 m long remnant of an originally 15 m long hearth and for surface analysis of Housepit 3 which was recently re-discovered by Ken Reynolds, an archaeologist employed by Newfoundland and Labrador's Provincial Archaeology Office.

Excavation of the hearth showed that 83% of the feature has washed away through erosion which has destroyed up to four m of the island's southwest shoreline. Charcoal from the 2014 excavation was radiocarbon dated to A.D. 1295-1410 (BETA 396195), indicating that the Beothuk's late prehistoric ancestors, archaeologically referred to as the Little Passage complex, made this hearth. Iron artifacts recovered from the hearth during the 1960s show that Beothuk people used the same facility, probably at least 100 years after its initial use. This radiocarbon date, in conjunction with the widespread evidence for Beothuk activities on the island, showed that this island experienced long term Recent Indian-Beothuk use.

Archaeologists use the term *Recent Indians* to refer to the pre-Beothuk inhabitants of Newfoundland. Two chronological periods of Recent Indians include Little Passage, Beaches complexes, with the latter being the oldest. The co-occurrence of Recent Indian and Beothuk on a number of other sites located within a km of this island indicate this part of the Exploits River significantly differs from most of interior Newfoundland's Beothuk sites which do not contain evidence for usage prior to the intensified post-1750 Beothuk period. Dorset Paleoeskimo and possible Maritime Archaic material were also previously found on this island which extends its usage up to 4500 years before the historic Beothuk period.



Exposed fire-cracked rocks representing most of the remaining 17% of an originally 15 metre-long hearth. The fire-cracked rocks continue into the grass-covered bank to the left. The charcoal sample was obtained from the bank section.

A cluster of six Beothuk housepits and six storage pits occur 60 metres northwest from the former hearth. The crew was assigned the task of measuring, photographing and otherwise performing surface analysis of Housepit 3 during 2014. Pelley and McLean removed the large trees that were growing inside the housepit depression, revealing a uniquely narrow housepit that appears to have been a storage house or unfinished residential unit. The team visited another small, similarly built housepit on a site 10 km west from here and briefly stopped at another site containing at least three housepits that are badly eroding

55 Beothuk Housepits and Other Features

55 Beothuk housepits and many other features have now been re-identified along the Exploits River since 2010. Many of these are well-preserved while others are eroding or threatened by erosion and/or development. Many of the housepits have been damaged by illegal digging over the years. Nonetheless, a rich record of Beothuk life is intact throughout the Exploits Valley. These non-replaceable cultural resources require constant monitoring to ensure their survival and archaeological research to provide additional information about latter period Beothuk. Archaeological research to date has provided much evidence for Beothuk ingenuity and successful adaptation to Newfoundland. It is anticipated that continued research will enhance our understanding of these people and remind us that they should be remembered for more than their extinction.



MONITORING BEOTHUK ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESOURCES AT THE BEACHES SITE (DeAk-01), BONAVIDA BAY

Newfoundland's Surveyor-General, T.G.B. Lloyd, counted nineteen Beothuk housepits at the Beaches site, Bonavista Bay, in 1874, identifying one of Newfoundland's largest Beothuk villages. Erosion, due to rising sea level, has destroyed 90% of the site since then, taking with it 12 Beothuk housepits and related cultural material, representing Recent Indian, Paleoeskimo and Maritime Archaic people who first lived there 5000 years ago. The author first visited the Beaches in 1989 and has annually stopped there since 1993. Working for the Burnside Heritage Foundation Inc., the author directed excavations in six housepits, a Recent Indian midden, a Paleoeskimo area in Area B and most recently, along the site's 150 metre-long eroding bank. The author and the BHF have attempted to stop erosion at the Beaches by building 140 metres of retaining walls, but these have been only partially effective.

Beothuk Housepit 2 is now actively eroding at the site. Buckets of slumped earth from the former structure's foundation were collected and brought to the Burnside laboratory for analysis during 2014. One stone tool fragment and 80 chips of stone, archaeologically known as flakes, were present in this disturbed earth. Over 23,000 artifacts have been collected from the Beaches eroding bank and surface areas below the bank since 2001. This site is a prime example of potential threats to archaeological sites from natural forces. A large-scale salvage excavation and/or conservation is immediately needed at the Beaches site. The BHF will conduct salvage excavations at Housepit 2 during 2015, pending receipt of sufficient funds.





2014 – housepit 2 at Beaches site