

PRESS RELEASE

CTDOT ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS ENCOUNTER EARLY NATIVE AMERICAN SITE IN TOWN OF AVON

At some point around the end of the last Ice Age—just about 12,470 years ago in fact—a group of nomadic individuals set up camp and built a fire on the sandy banks of an upland watershed in what would eventually become the modern town of Avon, Connecticut. A few of them broke out a kit of stone implements and began working, or rather reworking, the cutting tools they had carried along from very far afoot. Quality stone was scarce in these parts, so the toolmakers were careful to make the most efficient use of the material they had on hand. There was little room for waste. They made repeated use of small stone scrapers, pointed gravers, and a very distinctive form of lanceolate-shaped projectile point with a long groove, or ‘fluted’ channel that rose up from the base of the blade. For reasons that are not entirely clear, these people made relatively little use of locally available stone—such as quartzite—instead preferring rhyolite from present day northern New Hampshire, jasper from eastern Pennsylvania, and chert/flint from along the Hudson River in upstate New York.

This group appears to have been among the first to populate the region we recognize today as southern New England, and the watercourse they camped adjacent to is now called the Farmington River. At the time, the Connecticut environment may have been similar to what we today would call boreal forest—cold, dry and lightly covered with pine forest. The site where they chose to make their camp was revisited several times by people of the region over the next couple thousand years, which is an epoch of time archaeologists refer to as the ‘PaleoIndian’ Period. The encampment eventually became buried more and more deeply as alluvial sands were washed up over the banks by occasional floods of the adjacent river. For whatever reason, the spot became less attractive over the following several millennia until a nearby area was again occupied briefly during the Middle Woodland Period about 2,000 to 1,200 years ago.

How do we know about this ancient campsite on the banks of the Farmington River? Recent archaeological investigations conducted in preparation for a Connecticut Department of Transportation (CTDOT) project, funded in part by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), encountered the deeply buried site just ahead of construction of a new footing during reconstruction of the Old Farms Road Bridge near Route 10. The cultural resource consultant firm that investigated the site, Archaeological and Historical Services (AHS) operating out of Storrs, Connecticut, discovered the remnants of suspected hearth features and associated artifacts at some six feet below the present ground surface. Over 15,000 artifacts were recovered from the site, many of which are characteristic of the Early and Middle Paleoindian periods. Artifacts recovered from the site are almost exclusively lithic (stone), as organic material tends not to preserve from this great age and pottery had not yet been invented in this part of the world. The lithic collection, however, includes projectile point and biface fragments, small thumbnail sized scrapers, pointed gravers, and ‘channel flakes’—diagnostic by-products removed from ‘Clovis-style’ fluted points characteristic of the early Paleoindian Period—as well as numerous other small waste chips produced from stone tool manufacture or resharpening. In addition to the artifacts, at least 27 cultural features, including hearths and postmoulds thought to represent imprints from temporary or

short-term shelters were also found. The estimated date of the site comes from a carbon sample obtained from burned wood charcoal found within one of the suspected fire-pits. Radiocarbon analysis results suggest that the site represents the earliest documented human occupation to date of the area now comprising the State of Connecticut.

AHS worked diligently throughout the winter of 2019 in order to accomplish a complete excavation of the affected area of this newly discovered site without major disruption to the project schedule. As part of the effort to resolve adverse effects to this significant historic property mandated by Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, FHWA and CTDOT intend to provide for in-depth scientific analysis and reporting of the site and its contents to further our knowledge about this remote period of North American history. Consultation with stakeholding parties, including the Town of Avon, the State Historic Preservation Office, and modern Native American Tribal authorities, has also led to an agreement to develop future educational displays for the general public about the site. After full analysis, the collection itself will for the most part remain with the Office of the State Archaeologist at the University of Connecticut for students to use in future archaeological research. The CTDOT Office of Environmental Planning is pleased to have had this opportunity to contribute to general knowledge surrounding the deep history of the native peoples of the State of Connecticut, while advancing the goals of the agency's transportation mission.

Subject matter experts available for additional comment about excavations at the site:

David Leslie (Principle Investigator) AHS, Inc. dleslie@ahs-inc.biz 860-617-7345 (cell)

Sarah Sportman (Senior Archaeologist) AHS, Inc. ssportman@ahs-inc.biz 860-617-7345

Catherine Labadia (Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer) Dept. of Economic and Community Development

Catherine.Labadia@ct.gov

860-500-2329 (office)



Aerial view of completed excavations at the Site



View of cobble, post, and hearth features



Hearth feature, radiocarbon dated to 12,500 years ago.



Winter Excavations



Base of a rhyolite fluted spear point.



Jasper 'channel flake'



Hudson River Valley Chert graver tool



Hudson River Valley Chert scraper tool