

We Live Atop Lost Cities and Civilizations

Pig Point is our newest Lost Town — and our oldest link to history ~ by Steve Carr



Anne Arundel County's newest Lost Town is Pig Point, a prehistoric Indian village near Jug Bay on the Patuxent River.

Archaeologist Jane Cox and her Lost Towns Project colleagues realized they were on to something pretty wild as soon as they started excavating the long-forgotten site. Digging down through the layers of several fire pits, they encountered trash going back almost 10,000 years. That makes this one of the region's oldest uncovered sites.

The accepted wisdom has always been that Paleo Indians first occupied North America somewhere between 13,000 and 10,000bc, coming down the land bridge from Russia after the last Ice Age and working their way east over the course of millennia. Some evidence suggests that they moved with surprising speed across the continent. There's also evidence that occupation in North America could be as early as 16,000bc.

Archaeology is tedious work. You carefully sift through dirt an inch at a time. As you dig deeper, you travel back in time. At the top of the pit, you may find metal objects, like buttons or fishhooks from the colonial era. At every level, animal bones tell you what people were eating.

As you dig down, the color of the dirt walls changes, and you can accurately carbon date each layer within a decade or so by analyzing the charcoal.

After about a foot, you start finding pieces of pottery, which in turn provide a pretty good idea of what time period you are digging through. At this site, Townsend, Rappahannock, Mockley, Popes Creek and Accokeek pottery styles have been unearthed. Pottery dates this site to the Woodland period, between 1000bc and around 1650ad.

When the pottery stops, you are left with charcoal, bones and stone tools from a time we know little about.

The latest Carbon 14 date from this year's excavation at Pig Point now confirms occupation back to circa 7300bc, making this one of the oldest stratified sites ever studied. So the stone points recovered from the fire pit at Pig Point are a major discovery.

Two good old boys showed up in the second year Jane and the Lost Towns team were working at Pig Point, supported by a Maryland Historic Trust grant. Each carried a shoebox filled with arrowheads, including two projectile points that Al Luckenbach, the Lost Towns director and county archaeologist, recognized as re-worked Clovis points, the oldest stone points uncovered on the continent. The modern-day hunters had found the points in a nearby field 40 years ago.

Over 20 small sites are located around Jug Bay, with Pig Point the largest and most significant. What makes it unique is not just that it's old but that it was occupied continually throughout human times.

News from 10,000 Years Ago



An intern displays an arrowhead found at the Pig Point archaeological site.



Here's what we now know after digging through 10,000 years of Indian life.

Over time, many different people called Pig Point home, at least seasonally. They started as hunter-gatherers and eventually settled down, living in more permanent camps soon before Europeans arrived in the Chesapeake. They became farmers, living in small oval shelters made of bent saplings anchored to the ground and covered with bark. The river was their highway. They traveled in log canoes, trading with people throughout the region, maybe as far away as the Ohio Valley. That's what Cox and her crew suspect because they found stone tools from quarries in the Midwest.

The Pig Pointers had a rich protein diet, eating shad, bass, gar, sturgeon, drum, freshwater clams, rodents, turtles, birds, beaver, bobcat, bear, raccoon, deer, turkey and muskrat. Local plant life also provided an abundant source of food, including acorns, hickory nuts, wild grape, wild rice and Tuckahoe root, a potato-like tuber. And they created items of rare beauty: bead necklaces, tobacco pipes engraved with elaborate designs, bone tools like sewing needles, decorated clay bowls and tiny pots that may have been used to hold paints.

Pig Point is like a small window into life before white settlers.

"We are always looking for volunteers to help us with our field work," Cox said. "You, too, can actually come out and play in the dirt with us and touch artifacts from thousands of years ago." No experience necessary.

The Lost Towns Project: www.losttownproject.org. Sign up to volunteer in the field or at the County Archaeology Lab with Jessie Grow at 410-222-7440; volunteers@losttownsproject.org

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