

Rich treasure at 'Thorold Site'

By Alun Hughes

Most people know where Barbican Heights is - as you drive west along St. David's Road, it's the subdivision on the right just before Highway 406. But few realize this is also the location of an ancient Indian town. Though strictly speaking, it's across the line in St. Catharines, archaeologists call it the Thorold Site.

Native artifacts were found here as early as 1895, chiefly due to the efforts of two local collectors called McComb and Case, but it was not until 1979, prior to the building of the subdivision, that formal excavation took place under the direction of William Noble of McMaster University.

What Noble and his team unearthed was quite extraordinary - a major 10-acre settlement that was once home to 1,500 people. It occupied a commanding position on the escarpment edge, alongside a spring-fed tributary of Dick's Creek and not far from the Mohawk Trail, an important Indian route across the Peninsula.

The town would have looked much like the one in the picture below. It was heavily fortified with palisades, especially along its southern boundary, and it probably contained over 25 longhouses, each home to several families. The archaeological team located five of these longhouses, measuring between 20 and 50 metres in length and about 7 metres in width, and examined two in detail. In addition, several middens (refuse dumps) were excavated.

The evidence showed the town was not of prehistoric origin, as once suggested, but dated from much later. According to Noble, it served as the regional capital for the Onguiarahronon (Niagara) tribe of the Neutral Confederacy from about 1615 to 1630 AD. It may have been visited by French explorer Étienne Brûlé on his journeys through the Peninsula, though there is no solid proof of this.

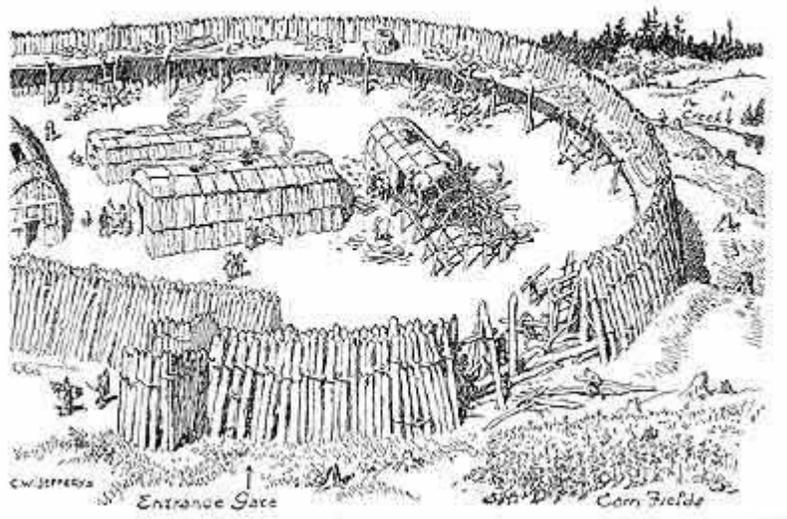
At one time, the Neutral inhabited a large area between the upper Thames and Niagara rivers, and may have numbered 40,000 people. They belonged to the Iroquoian cultural group, and as such, were closely related to the Huron and Petun (or Tobacco) tribes around Georgian Bay and to members of the Iroquois Confederacy in what is now northern New York State (the Seneca, Cayuga, Onandaga, Oneida and Mohawk).

The Neutral, known to their Huron neighbours as the Attiwandaronk, were called "la nation neutre" by the French because of their refusal to become involved in the hostilities between the Huron and Iroquois. Despite this, they were far from peace-loving and were for many years embroiled in fierce warfare with the "Fire Nation," the Mascouten Indians of present-day Michigan.

Noble's team found very few human remains at Thorold, which is consistent with Neutral burial practice. bodies were kept indoors until partly decomposed, then placed on an outdoor scaffold for further decay. The bones were removed, cleaned and put on display in the longhouses, and were taken for permanent burial only at the Feast of the , which was held every 10 years or so, or when a site was abandoned.

Once supplies of firewood were depleted and cornfields exhausted, a tribe would move on, and the Thorold Indians abandoned their site in about 1630, possibly moving to St. David's. This was the location of a large Neutral ossuary or communal burying ground, and it is likely that a Feast of the accompanied the move.

The final move, in about 1645, may have been to Grand Island. Final is the operative word here, for only a few years later, the Neutral nation effectively ceased to exist. Growing hostility between the Huron and Iroquois, possibly fuelled by fur trade competition, erupted into major conflict.



The Iroquois had the advantage of firearms provided by the Dutch and easily defeated the Huron, who were greatly weakened by smallpox. The Iroquois then turned on the Petun and the Neutral, and had destroyed both by 1651.

At first, the Iroquois used the former Neutral territory as a hunting ground, but then began to establish settlements north of Lake Ontario. Toward the end of the 17th century, however, they were progressively ousted by Indians

belonging to the Algonquian cultural group from the north, specifically the Mississauga Ojibwa. It was these that the first Loyalist settlers encountered when they arrived in the 1780s.

The Thorold Neutral site lies at the eastern end of Barbican Heights. To find it, enter by Barbican Gate from St. David's Road, turn right on Barbican Drive and follow the curve to the left - you are now right in the middle of the ancient town.

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