

Maryland

SECTION

B

TUESDAY,
MAY 31, 1994

Indian village yields 600-year-old clues

By Frank D. Roylance
Sun Staff Writer

SYCAMORE LANDING — More than 100 amateur and professional archaeologists digging in a corn field near the Potomac River in Montgomery County have uncovered the remains of a walled Indian village nearly 600 years old.

Scientists say traces of the wall, or palisade, uncovered here Sunday are the first found in Maryland since the 1930s.

"These palisades are funny things," said Joe Dent, an assistant professor of anthropology at American University who, with doctoral candidate Chris Jirikovic, has been studying the site since 1990.

"You would think it would be saying something about their relationship with their neighbors not being too good," Dr. Dent said. "But I don't know that was the case. It may be

Traces of wall found at site

just a symbolic way of separating the people and the village from the outside world."

During 10 days of digging, participants in the Archaeological Society of Maryland's 28th annual field session uncovered thousands of artifacts. Their field laboratory processed dozens of stone tools and "arrowheads," and thousands of bone and pottery fragments left over from Indian meals consumed about 100 years before Europeans arrived on the continent.

But for the American University archaeologists who led the dig, the most exciting discovery was the line of dark, round soil stains found along the bottom of a 20-foot trench.

The stains are all that remains of

a segment of the wooden stockade that encircled the village, Dr. Dent said.

Most villages of the Late Woodland period, just before the Europeans arrived, are believed to have had circular palisades. The first Europeans described such villages and said the Indians they encountered were in a more or less constantly at war with their neighbors.

But the only Late Woodland palisade found in Maryland until Sunday was at a village excavated in Accocek, Prince George's County, in the 1930s and reported in 1959, Dr. Dent said.

A hint of the wall at the Montgomery County site first turned up on Saturday at one section of a long east-west trench. Artifacts were abundant just east of the stains but became scarce just west of them.

See VILLAGE, 3B

VILLAGE: Traces of wall found at Indian site

From Page 1B

That suggested that the stains marked the western edge of the village.

It wasn't until Sunday, when a new trench was extended to the north and south, that the pattern of stains could be seen to continue in both directions, forming the village's western perimeter.

"I was so afraid they weren't going to show up," Dr. Dent said.

After the discovery, he realized that his excavations during the summers of 1990 and 1991 had come within two feet of the palisade's remains without finding it.

"But in archaeology, if you let that start bothering you, you're going to have an ulcer really quickly," he said.

Dr. Dent had only praise for the volunteer help he received from participants in the Archaeological Society's annual field session.

"It has allowed us to open three times as much area within a single year as we could normally do," he said. "The other thing is, it's really fun to see people do archaeology just for the fun of it."

State archaeologist Tyler Bastien, who took part in the dig, called it "very successful. . . . It was an interesting site with lots of artifacts and a few features to keep people interested."

About 100 visitors — many of the bird watchers and bicyclists from the nearby Chesapeake and Ohio Canal bike trail — stopped to tour the site.

The Indians who lived at this spot, about 250 yards north of the Potomac River in the state-owned McKee-Beshers Wildlife Management Area, are believed, based on their pottery, to have migrated to the area from the west.

Dr. Dent said they mixed the crushed shells of river mussels into their clay to "temper," or strengthen it. So did Indians to the west and from the Pittsburgh area. Others living just to their east used sand.

The remains of corn, beans and squash found at the site — called the Hughes Site after a farmer who once owned it — reveal that the peo-



JENAFER GILLINGHAM/SUN STAFF PHOTO

Volunteers Brad Apling (right front) and Dennis Curry (left front) scrape around remains of a timber pole.

ple who lived here grew about half of their food.

They also hunted. Thousands of deer bones were found at the site, along with those of elk, bear, mountain lion, raccoon, birds and turtles.

"Turtle shell was so abundant that I doubt if there was a box turtle within three miles of the village, at least not a live one," Dr. Dent said.

He estimates that the village supported 150 to 250 people who lived there for 50 to 75 years, then moved on.

By then, he said, "I think you would see the village reach a point of diminishing returns." Firewood would grow scarce, the soil in nearby fields would become exhausted, and new fields farther away would be too

difficult to protect.

"And there wasn't any sense of conservation in terms of animals," Dr. Dent said.

"We're fairly certain they were setting fires to keep the [tree] growth down to encourage deer," he said.

Deer prefer open land at the edge of forests.

Indian populations were low enough to protect resources elsewhere, however. So the people just moved on. "That's our problem today," he said. "There's just too many of us."

No human remains were found on the site during this month's dig.

Dr. Dent's students did encounter six Indian burials during previous years' work at the site. They notified

the Maryland Indian Commission and covered the remains again.

Fourteen American University archaeology students and faculty members will continue the Hughes Site dig through June.

Their "field school" will attempt to determine the shape and structure of the village's houses, and perhaps how they were arranged within the village walls.

Recent discoveries in Virginia revealed houses that were oval, probably a circle of saplings stuck into the ground, bent inward to form a dome, then covered with woven reed mats, skins or bark.

"But there hasn't been a house pattern for this period uncovered in Maryland," Dr. Dent said.