

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Dresden archaeological site protected for research

By Seth Koenig, Times Record
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DRESDEN, Maine — After nearly 25 years waiting at the gate — the last three of which involved heavy negotiations and deal-making among multiple parties — a Dresden property considered to be one of the most archaeologically significant sites in Maine is protected for research.

Bruce Bourque, chief archaeologist at the Maine State Museum, wrote in a letter supporting a grant application to help protect the property that he “can think of no site that remotely approaches its importance for the study of this early period of Maine’s prehistory.”

The riverfront parcel has intrigued state historians for more than two decades, since amateur archaeologists hiking through the site emerged with stone tools dating back thousands of years. But private landowners refused to allow an official archaeological dig until Rick and Wanda Lang purchased the lot in 2007.

The Langs allowed researchers to do some test digging there and began talking with representatives from the Maine Historic Preservation Commission about a possible sale of the property to protect the archaeological site from development.

Ed Friedman, president of the Friends of Merrymeeting Bay, said that after talks between the Langs and the preservationists broke down, Peter Axelson stepped forward to purchase the property and hold it until the group could raise the necessary funds.

“From what I understand, this is one of the most important archaeological sites in the state, and it was about to be developed,” Axelson, a Massachusetts-based business consultant, told The Times Record last week. “This was an opportunity to protect it from development, and that was a worthy cause to me.”

Friedman said Axelson spent \$400,000 to buy the 28-acre parcel. He said a Land For Maine’s Future grant and additional financial help from The Archaeological Conservancy brought the coalition of conservationists to within about \$100,000 of purchasing the property from Axelson. Friedman said Friends of Merrymeeting Bay raised the rest of the money, and the multiparty collaborative closed on the property last month.

Axelson then rolled about \$170,000 of the money he got back from the sale of the 28-acre parcel into the purchase of an additional adjoining 4.3 acres uphill from the riverfront lot, Friedman said.

“We’d never dug up there before, and last summer, we did a Phase I survey up there [on the additional 4.3 acres],” Friedman said. “We determined that, yes, the site does continue up there. There are both prehistoric and historic artifacts up there.”

Now, Friends of Merrymeeting Bay is launching another fundraising campaign to repay Axelson for the uphill property.

Long-term significance

Friedman said the Dresden property offers researchers a unique look at the lives of native people living here between 5,000 and 8,500 years ago.

“This area was all covered by glaciers, and when the ice receded, the earth rebounded,” Friedman said.

In a past interview about the site with The Times Record, Arthur Spiess, senior archaeologist with the Maine Historic Preservation Commission, said the Dresden location could provide clues about a time in which natives made the transition from more nomadic lives to ones in which they gathered in small villagelike communities.

To make that societal change, he said, natives needed to be coerced by an abundant and predictable food source in one location.

“Why would there be such an intense occupation from this time period in a field in Dresden?” Spiess posed in a letter supporting the Land For Maine’s Future grant application. “The answer lies in the recent geological history of the Maine coast. The Maine coast has been slowly sinking since the end of the Ice Age, about 10,000 years ago. Put another way, sea level has been creeping slowly inland on the Kennebec Estuary. Merrymeeting Bay became completely tidal sometime around 3,000 to 5,000 years ago.

“Looking at the local topography and river depths, we see that the Kennebec River forced its way between Swan Island and the Dresden shore before the ‘back side’ of Swan Island flooded out by the rising sea level,” he continued. “Thus, this location was an intense falls. For a while it must have been the first major falls on the Kennebec, and thus a focus for catching anadromous fish in season. We surmise that people camped at the site during fishing season, and probably also camped here when they were forced to break a journey by carrying baggage around the — now drowned — falls.”

The stone tools and fish bones recovered by amateurs and during preliminary tests support Spiess’ theory, so far, but researchers are eager to engage in a full-scale dig to learn more.

The appeal of the site extended into the European colonization of the country, Friedman said, as British navigation maps of the area from 1772 indicate that a home stood on the uphill portion of the property at that time.

Friedman also said protection of the property is important from an ecological standpoint. The hayfield there provides an increasingly harder-to-find habitat for certain pasturing bird species, and among the rare plant species found near the water is an unusually large stand of spongy arrowhead flowers, he said.

“Even without the [archaeological] specifics, it’s adjacent to really unique tidal forested wetlands and home to rare plants and valuable habitat,” Friedman said. “[Protecting this site] is really huge. This is a sort of nexus of biology, archaeology and aesthetics — a blend of archaeology, habitat and a rare plant hotspot.”

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