

# Vermont Prehistoric Collections and Their Possible Utility

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## Abstract

It has been stated that Vermont suffers from a lack of problem-oriented archaeology. This is partly due to the lack of funds necessary to conduct such research. Existing artifact collections may, at a reduced cost, reveal answers to some of the questions about Vermont's prehistory. Vermont prehistoric artifact collections can provide valuable information to archaeologists depending upon each collection's documentation, history, and integrity. This paper is an attempt to demonstrate some of the types of questions that can be answered by using prehistoric collections of varying sizes and provenance information.

## Artifact Collections vs. Archaeological Collections

What is an artifact collection and how does it differ from an archaeological collection? An artifact collection is an assortment of objects that were used, modified, or made by humans that lack the detailed information about their stratigraphic context and associations with other artifacts and features found at the same site. The degree to which an artifact collection is documented can vary from a simple state designation to general locations within a site. Artifact collections often do not contain lithic debitage, broken artifacts, archeobotanical remains, or faunal remains. Collectors keep only the archaeological materials that they are most interested in; and these tend to be artifacts that are easily recognizable and whole.

Archaeological collections contain archaeological resources collected in a more systematic fashion with detailed information regarding the context from which they were recovered. Most of the archaeological collections in Vermont contain artifacts from sites that were excavated by professional archaeologists; however, the archaeological collections amassed by the Champlain Valley Archaeological Society and Vermont Archaeological Society were mostly created by interested avocational archaeologists.

## Professional Archaeologists and Archaeological Research

Archaeologists often excavate sites before determining whether the research questions they are interested in could be adequately answered through the study of archaeological material that has already been recovered. It is a waste of money, time, and of the archaeological resources to excavate sites in the search of answers to research questions that could be adequately solved with collections. These archaeologists should have first reviewed all of the available archaeological data including relevant artifact and archaeological collections. If the research questions could not be answered with the available data, then the archaeologists should locate a site that could best answer their questions.

Numerous archaeological sites are excavated without written research proposals. A site excavated without the adequate planning is a project that is surely doomed to be, at the least, a burden. A research proposal may not seem necessary, but it requires thought about how the entire process of the project will unfold. This is an excellent exercise that will prove to be helpful throughout the project by at least serving as a guide to follow and a gauge against which progress may be compared. However, this does not necessarily ensure that nothing unforeseen will happen. Archaeologists should always review all the available data and write a research proposal. Again, if the research questions could not be answered with the available archaeological resources, then the archaeologist should locate a site that could best answer the questions presented in his/her research proposal.

Archaeology is a destructive means of gaining knowledge about our past, so whatever is excavated and not documented is lost forever. Prehistoric sites are not a renewable resource, so care should be taken in the planning and execution of an archaeological project. If something was forgotten or not done adequately, it cannot be done over. Preserving a site may be in its best interest if it is

not endangered in any way. This will permit future archaeologists to excavate it, hopefully with better research techniques.

Funding is always necessary, and sources of funding should be known before a project begins to ensure that the amount of work necessary to complete the project is possible with the resources available. A project that is started without the necessary funding is one where the data recovered is likely to end up on storage shelves, never to be completed. This is a tragedy that occurs all too often in this field. Excavations are expensive; however, this cost can be avoided by working with existing collections whenever possible.

Artifact collections are often seen as useless in solving research questions. Most archaeologists believe that problems encountered in working with artifact collections are too immense and troublesome, making it prohibitive to use them in archaeological research. Each artifact collection has its own research limitations; however, after

recognizing these limitations, a researcher can often work around them and find a potential use for the collection. To do this adequately, an archaeologist must be first willing to create a track record or history of the collection, in order to develop an accurate understanding of the collection's status and limitations. The history will often present information about the collection that is not obvious and possibly expand the researcher's view of the collection's research potential.

#### Artifact Collectors vs. Professional Archaeologists

Artifact collections can provide information that is not available to most archaeologists. This is due to certain advantages that collectors have over both academic and contract archaeologists. Academic archaeological projects are always limited in funds and time; and because of this, sites are seldom completely excavated. Contract archaeologists are not only limited by these factors, but also are limited to preestablished boundaries that reflect impact zones, areas to be disturbed by construction. If a

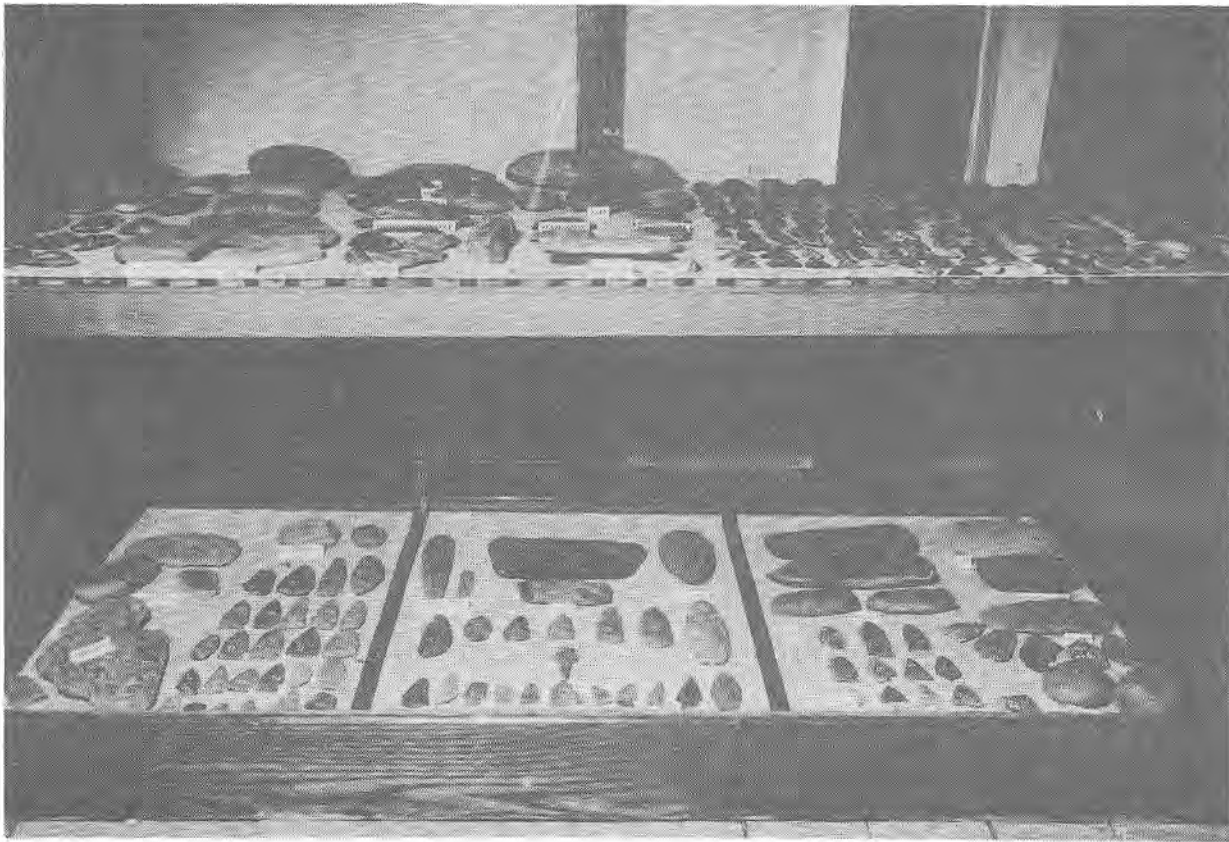


Plate 1. Part of the Tom Daniels Collection in 1981 while in storage at Chimney Point. Courtesy of Vermont Development Department, Montpelier, VT.

site is encountered during testing, it almost never correlates with the pre-established boundaries, but always seems to straddle the limits of the impact zone. Sites such as these are usually never completely excavated. Even significant archaeological sites encountered during a cultural resource management (CRM) study are rarely, if ever, completely excavated. Most of the time, the project will be moved to avoid impacting part or all of the site, but more important to the engineers is that it will reduce the cost of the archaeology. Collectors have the luxury of excavating almost any site they want with no restrictions of time or funding. They often locate artifact-rich sites and completely excavate them. Many of the most significant, known sites in Vermont have been excavated by collectors, including the Reagan Site — a Paleoindian site — and the Swanton and Bennett sites, both of which are Early Woodland cemeteries.

CRM studies in Vermont have been largely limited to areas where there was to be a bridge replacement, road upgrade or road realignment. Currently most of the professionally excavated sites have been in Addison, Chittenden, and Franklin counties. Nearly all of these excavations have been conducted under contract as part of cultural resource management studies. These studies are conducted primarily in areas of expanding population growth. There has been very little professional archaeology conducted in other parts of the state. This has created a bias in the sampling of prehistoric sites and in the understanding of Vermont prehistory. Where the current understanding of Vermont prehistory is lacking, collections can contribute in some way. As a whole, Vermont collections represent sites from every time period and environmental setting in Vermont.

#### Reevaluation of Archaeological Assumptions and Models

As in other fields that involve theories and conjecture, archaeologists also need to periodically critique their assumptions and concepts. Most of what we know today about Vermont prehistory is not from archaeological excavations in Vermont, but knowledge taken from the surrounding states and provinces in the Northeast. The problem with the reconstructions currently used is that archaeologists are uncertain as to how accurate they may represent what really did happen in Vermont in the past. An even larger problem is encountered in developing a reconstruction of prehistoric life in Vermont based solely upon Vermont sites with such a limited data base. Collections can provide the data base needed to verify,



Plate 2. *The Daniels Museum in Orwell, Vermont. Courtesy of Vermont Development Department, Montpelier, VT.*

modify, or refute some of the aspects of the current models and reconstructions of prehistoric lifeways in Vermont.

Many of the museums, schools, libraries, and historical societies have collections of prehistoric artifacts in varying conditions. "Relic hunting" has been a hobby for many people since the early nineteenth century. Again, these artifacts have been collected from possibly every environmental setting in Vermont and cover the entire span of Vermont prehistory. Collections can be found containing artifacts from nearly every town in the state. They can provide the data that is lacking in certain areas, something that may take decades if we were to wait for CRM studies to provide the information.

The current model of movement of Paleoindians into Vermont is based mostly on about twenty Paleoindian sites found almost entirely by collectors, combined with the postglacial history of the Northeast, and dated Paleoindian sites in neighboring states and provinces. This model and others like it have been developed by integrating collections data with other archaeological resources. Questions such as the relationship among the Vosburg, Brewerton, and Vergennes Archaic phases could be better understood with the comparison of a large number of Late Archaic sites. Was there, in fact, a significant decline in human populations in Vermont during the Early Archaic period? Has Lake Champlain always been a boundary between the Iroquois and the Western

Abenaki? Can we define the boundary between the Western Abenaki and the Mahicans? How many character traits of the Adena culture, Glacial Kame culture, and Red Paint culture can be seen in Vermont? All of these are questions archaeologists are interested in answering. Artifact collections can possibly shed some light on the answers to these questions and others like them.

### Refinement of Vermont Typologies

An artifact represents a technological and cultural tradition that has an area of influence, much like any idea; however, due to numerous variables, an artifact type or idea may not be recognizable as such at the edges of its influence area. Depending upon the time period, the influence of an idea ranges greatly in distribution and dynamics. Some of these ideas become muted or blended when farther away from their origin. It has been noticed that Native Americans in Vermont have adopted many cultural traditions developed in the Northeast and some as far away as the Midwest. Some of the projectile point types that appear throughout a large region are the Clovis, Adena, and Jack's Reef Pentagonal points; while the Meadowood, Snook Kill, and Susquehanna Broad are only found in the Northeast.

Currently, the accepted typology for projectile points in Vermont is that developed by William A. Ritchie, the former state archaeologist of New York. It has been assumed that his New York typology (Ritchie 1971) could be used in Vermont without any modifications; however, there have been significant problems encountered in using his typology. It has been noticed by Vermont archaeologists that there are difficulties in distinguishing some projectile point styles such as the Madison and Levanna points from the large range of triangular points found at Middle and Late Woodland period sites in Vermont. Small stemmed points also create a problem when using Ritchie's typology. Each point type is based on artifacts found at a single site. There appears to be a great overlap between each point type, making it extremely difficult to identify any individual small stemmed point type.

Ritchie's typology was developed for New York State prior to the vast amount of published archaeological data now available. There has been little restructuring of his typology, even though there are definite problems with it. A few regional typologies for the Northeast that attempt to include Vermont in their distribution maps of various projectile points are unfortunately inaccurate (Justice 1987; Fogelman 1988). This is mostly due to the lack of

published data on Vermont archaeology. It would be helpful for archaeologists working on regional studies to have a published descriptive list of all the artifact types known to have been found in Vermont. This list accompanied by a distribution map and drawings or photographs of the artifacts will provide enough data to help those attempting to do regional surveys to make accurate conclusions about the distribution of technological traditions in Vermont. This list could also provide the basis for typologies of artifact types other than projectile points — such as groundstone tools, scrapers, drills, and artifacts of personal ornamentation. A statewide survey of artifact collections combined with other archaeological data would not only refine the existing typology but may even identify new regionally distinct tool types.

Two previous attempts to refine the typologies used to classify projectile points in Vermont were conducted by Mariella Squires (1977) and Peter R. Mills (1984). Both studies were based on a small number of artifact collections and professionally excavated sites on the Vermont side of the Champlain Valley. Squires attempted to classify a sample of projectile points based primarily on morphological characteristics. She was reluctant to use Ritchie's nomenclature, and this has made it difficult to use her work. Mills was less reluctant to use current typologies and nomenclature. He spent more time determining the range of each point type found in Vermont than did Squires. He also discussed the classification of other "general chipped stone tools." These two studies just scratch the surface of this topic. A detailed study using all the available archaeological resources, including collections, is something that needs to be done in the future.

### Computers and Archaeological Data

Computers can help enormously in our understanding of past cultures when all the available information on both natural and cultural data has been inputted. Spatial analysis, statistical analysis, and models can be built using the known information about Vermont prehistory with the appropriate computer hardware and software.

The study of basic spatial patterning of archaeological data was established early in the development of archaeology; however, it has been only in the last few decades that systematic evaluations of maps have been developed and used in the establishment of complex models. With the assistance of large data bases such as geographic information systems, archaeologists are able to quickly compare and contrast data sets made up of both natural and cul-



Plate 3. *One of the permanent Native American exhibits at Chimney Point State Historic Site. Courtesy of the Vermont Division for Historic Preservation, Montpelier, VT.*

tural traits.

To create an accurate sample of Vermont's Native American past, it would be necessary to include data from a large number of collections to provide a large enough sample and to have sites represented from every time period and environmental setting. The information learned and questions generated from this type of study seem to be endless. Questions such as the extent and impact of ideas and technologies throughout Vermont could be answered. Correlation between the environmental setting and artifact assemblages or site location and environmental setting could be identified with spatial analysis studies; and even basic questions could be answered, such as determining whether there is a difference among artifact assemblages of the Champlain Valley, the Connecticut River Valley, and the interior uplands of Vermont.

The most important key to studies such as these is having an adequate data base that is representative of Vermont prehistory and a sample that can create statistically valid conclusions. By conducting a statewide survey, this would provide a solid core of archaeological data.

#### **Experimental Archaeology**

Unfortunately, numerous Vermont collections contain artifacts that have very limited provenance information. For many artifacts, all we know about their provenance is that they are from somewhere in Vermont. If none of the artifacts in these collections are unique, many of the collections can provide archaeologists with a sample of authentic artifacts to be used in experimental archaeological research. Collections can provide a sample of similar artifact types of varying materials that can be used in a number of exercises in microwear analysis and even in aerodynamic and balance tests. This provides an opportu-

nity that may not be possible with well-documented archaeological material.

### **Collections and Public Awareness**

The most common use of artifact and archaeological collections is in museums to help construct our concepts of prehistoric life. The methods of displaying the artifacts vary greatly, from crudely mounted artifacts on boards with descriptive labels to life-size models showing the details of prehistoric lifestyles.

This is an important function of collections. Hopefully these displays will make the public aware of the importance that they have in reconstructing prehistoric life-ways. It is intended that visitors will leave the museum with a notion of how important context is in reading and interpreting the archaeological record. This may reduce the amount of looting of prehistoric sites and create a desire on the visitors' part to preserve our cultural heritage. Of course, the better prepared and presented the exhibit, the greater the chance of conveying this information and gaining the viewers' support.

We cannot forget the amusement and educational qualities that the artifacts provide. Artifacts are an excellent way to educate the public because they are visual. Unprovenanced artifacts from collections can be used to create educational kits to expose people to the role of archaeology in understanding human cultures.

Copies of artifacts are often used in museums today to eliminate the risk of damaging the authentic artifacts or having the authentic artifacts stolen. Unfortunately, when visitors to the museum see the words "museum replica" on a label, they often do not take the time to look at the objects. The replica may look identical to the real artifact, but the thought of it being a copy makes the viewer uninterested. Artifact collections can provide museums with objects that have less research value, but still are authentic. By using artifact collections, this will enable the archaeological collections to remain intact and make them more accessible to researchers by not having to place them on display.

### **Vermont Archaeology and the Western Abenakis**

We know from historical documents and ethnographies that the Western Abenaki and Mahicans lived in Vermont at the time of European contact. These tribes did not have a writing system, so to determine anything about their

history prior to contact with Europeans we must use the archaeological record.

Artifacts are an indicator of culture, and by comparing artifacts found in Vermont with the surrounding areas, it may be possible to determine the boundaries between native groups in Vermont. This would be done by starting with artifact assemblages of the contact period and identifying any differences among the different Native American groups around the Western Abenaki and Mahican territories. Then by working back in time through the archaeological record, it may be possible to come up with identifying traits for each tribe.

Collections provide a large variety of artifacts of varying types and functions. The data amassed from academic and cultural resource management studies has been from a limited range of geographical and environmental settings. This makes it difficult to discuss the entire state; however, with the combination of data collected from all three sources, much can be learned. Only with the combination of all archaeological resources can studies such as this be possible. This type of study would not just provide valuable information to the archaeological community, but also would help the Western Abenaki achieve recognition by the Federal Government and help them establish their rights to ancestral lands.

### **Vermont Prehistoric Artifact Collections**

Two artifact collections that have seen a lot of use in the past six years have been the Robert Hull Fleming Museum Archaeological Collection and the Thomas Edward Daniels Collection. Each collection has its own unique story to tell, not only about Vermont Native American prehistory, but also about the development of Vermont archaeology and the lives of those who had an interest in Vermont "relics" over the past two hundred years.

One of the earliest researchers in scientific prehistoric archaeology in Vermont, sometimes referred to as the father of Vermont archaeology, was George Henry Perkins (1844-1933), a University of Vermont (UVM) professor and curator of the university's museum. Through the interest and efforts of Perkins, the State Cabinet Collection and several large private prehistoric collections that he studied were donated to the University of Vermont, which became the basis of an extensive artifact collection. Artifacts from the collection were used as visual aids in his anthropology courses and were part of a permanent exhibit on Vermont Indians until it was dismantled in 1950.

Today this collection contains nearly 12,000 prehistoric artifacts, primarily from western Vermont. This collection has and still can provide archaeologists with additional information about Vermont's Native American past.

This collection is probably the largest collection of Vermont prehistoric tools. The information known about the provenance of each artifact is limited. Some artifacts are known to have been found somewhere in Vermont, and others are known to be from specific sites. So the range of utility of this collection varies greatly, depending upon the amount of provenance information known about each artifact. The first step in working with this collection is to establish the history of the collection and verify its current condition. There are as many as five catalogues for this collection: Perkins' catalogue, Fleming Museum index cards, Fleming Museum catalogue, Louise A. Basa's catalogue, and Marjory W. Power's catalogue. There are also assorted notes and photographs of the collection, along with published and unpublished papers about the collection or about Vermont prehistory that use data from the collection.

This collection has a lot of potential uses. It has a large variety of artifacts, which could easily be assembled into a permanent museum exhibit. Over the past twenty years parts of the collection have traveled around the state and been used as visual aids in lectures about Vermont prehistory. On account of the size and distribution of the collection, it would provide an excellent starting point for collections research and establish a statewide investigation into artifact and archaeological collections. Typologies and type collections could be based on this collection with data and samples from other archaeological collections.

The Thomas Edward Daniels collection is a much smaller artifact collection containing about 1,200 prehistoric artifacts, of which most are tools (see Plate 1). Thomas "Tom" Edward Daniels (1898-1962) was an avid collector from the age of thirteen. While performing his job as a Vermont game warden traveling the waterways of Addison and Rutland County in his canoe, he came upon several prehistoric sites either by searching for them or receiving information from local residents. His collection represents a lifetime of studying Vermont Native Americans and their technologies.

Daniels kept good notes on the artifacts and their context. He used the archaeological techniques taught to him by a host of archaeologists working in the Northeast

during the 1950s and early 1960s. In 1960 Daniels opened a museum in Orwell, Vermont, which was devoted to his collection of Indian and colonial artifacts (see Plate 2). The museum was named the "Daniels Museum." The artifacts were housed in glass cabinets, arranged by site, and identified as to artifact type and time period. Unfortunately, Daniels died before he could successfully catalogue all of his collection and complete his book on Vermont prehistory.

Daniels' collection was purchased by the State of Vermont from his widow in 1971, and the collection is now being curated at Chimney Point State Historic Site. It was catalogued and analyzed by the author from 1988 until 1991, and portions of the collection are now included in the permanent exhibit at Chimney Point (see Plate 3). In recent years researchers have been studying the collection, and the State of Vermont definitely welcomes such use of its collections.

Not only can the history of the Daniels collection inform us about how the collection was acquired, documented, and curated, but also about Vermonter's feelings toward Vermont prehistory between 1940 and 1970. The provenance for most of the artifacts is a site location accompanied by information concerning whether or not the artifact was found below the surface.

Vermont needs to take advantage of collections such as the Fleming Museum Archaeological Collection and the Daniels Collection before all of the information about these collections is lost. There are numerous people with information about these collections, but if it is not collected soon, it will be lost forever. These collections are certainly not unique, and other valuable collections are slowly deteriorating throughout the state. The investment of time to collect, document, and catalogue these collections could prove very worthwhile. These existing artifact collections can reveal answers to some of the questions about Vermont's prehistory. Each Vermont prehistoric artifact collection can provide valuable information to archaeologists, depending upon the collection's documentation, history, and integrity, which means the sooner a statewide survey of collections is conducted, the better the hopes are of collecting the important data about the collection's history and, most importantly, the provenance information for each artifact.

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