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A Late Woodland Double Indian Burial at College Point, New York

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A double prehistoric Indian burial dating from the Late Woodland period was found at Graham Court in College Point in 1934. It was one of several prehistoric Indian burials reportedly uncovered by workmen and chance collectors. No record of these reported findings has been found. The burial pit appears to have had prior uses as a fire pit and a storage pit, as well as a final trash pit. The burials were found in the upper layer. It is possible that the pit saw intermittent, possibly seasonal, use.

This is a report on a double Indian burial which I excavated in 1934. The site was at Graham Court, College Point, New York (Figure 1). The burial, in what had been a storage pit (Figure 2), in addition to the skeletons, yielded some interesting finds, including two ceramic vessels. One of them is illustrated by Carlyle S. Smith (1950) in his publication. The circumstances and the context of the finds, however, were never described. I had written a report for my own record which I had shelved among other papers up to this time.

Finds of Indian burials in New York City are very few, and usually poorly documented (Cantwell and Wall 2001:96-97). The excavations of burials at Throgs Neck and Clasons Point, across the East River in the Bronx from College Point (Skinner 1919), and later by E. Kaeser (1970) in Pelham Bay Park yield much in the way of comparative data with the apparently contemporary Graham Court burials.

Site Description

The site is located in a part of the town of College Point, Queens, identified as Graham Court, an east-west street dead-ending on the eastern shore of Flushing Bay. North Beach Airport, now LaGuardia Airport, is a mile away across Flushing Bay to the west. From College Point to Clason's Point across the East River, really a strait or an arm of the Long Island Sound, is over two-thirds of a mile away. The area was lightly wooded with either a second or tertiary growth of trees, and an unobstructed view of the bay. The site was on a bluff rising steeply about 20 ft above the sandy shore (Figure 3). The bluff showed heavy erosion. There was a thin scatter of marine shells sprinkled in the top few inches

of the bluff. The property was once part of the old E. Platt Stratton estate situated on old 8th Avenue, now 25th Avenue (New Series Atlas of the Borough of Queens, City of New York, V. 3, 1926). Nearby, to the west of the Stratton estate, was the residence of Captain J. Graham, just south of 9th Avenue (now 25th Road).

Archaeological Investigations

My investigations were limited to occasional week-end day inspections, and could be called salvage archaeology. I was then 16 years old, but had four years of experience researching local archaeology. My resources were very limited. I had to use public transport for distances longer than a bike ride. The investigations at College Point spanned five years between 1932 and 1937, when the Graham Court site was closed for building operations. A nursing home was built on the site. I had originally learned of the College Point Site through the works of Bolton (1922), and Parker (1922), who mention it as one of the archaeological sites in Queens County. Parker (1922:672) mentions that there was an Indian village and a burial site on the E. Platt Stratton estate. Skeletons were found in 1861 during foundation excavations for Knickerbocker Hall. On his map he shows archaeological remains along the shore at College Point, extending down to the mouth of the Flushing Creek. This was very promising, except that with the rapid construction activity in the area, the information was probably well out of date.

My first visit to the College Point Site was in 1932. This visit and subsequent ones in 1933 were mainly surface surveys. The scope of my surveys and test excavations also took in the area in the vicinity of Graham Court and all along the beach line. I had first concentrated on investigations in 1932 in the southern part of College Point in an area called Grantville, the home of Mathew Schreiner, who was likewise interested in local prehistory. He became our friend in the field for many years up to the time of his death.

I was prompted to make further investigations at College Point in 1934 by a newspaper report. There was a sensational piece in the New York Daily News (March 29, 1934) of the find of a human skeleton at Graham Court. It was made by some Civilian Works Administration workers.

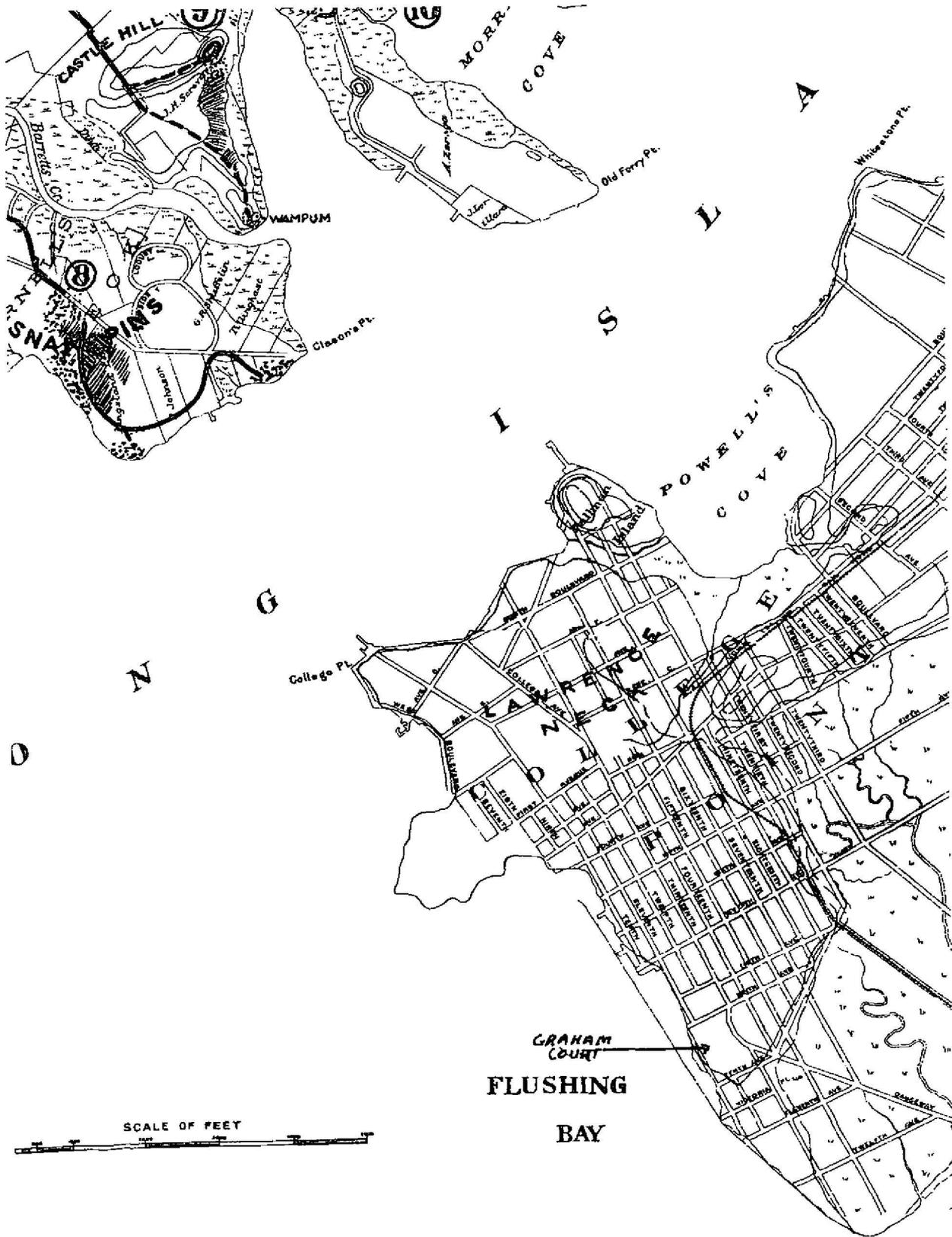


Figure 1. Map showing the location of the College Point burial site at Graham Court (After Bolton 1922).

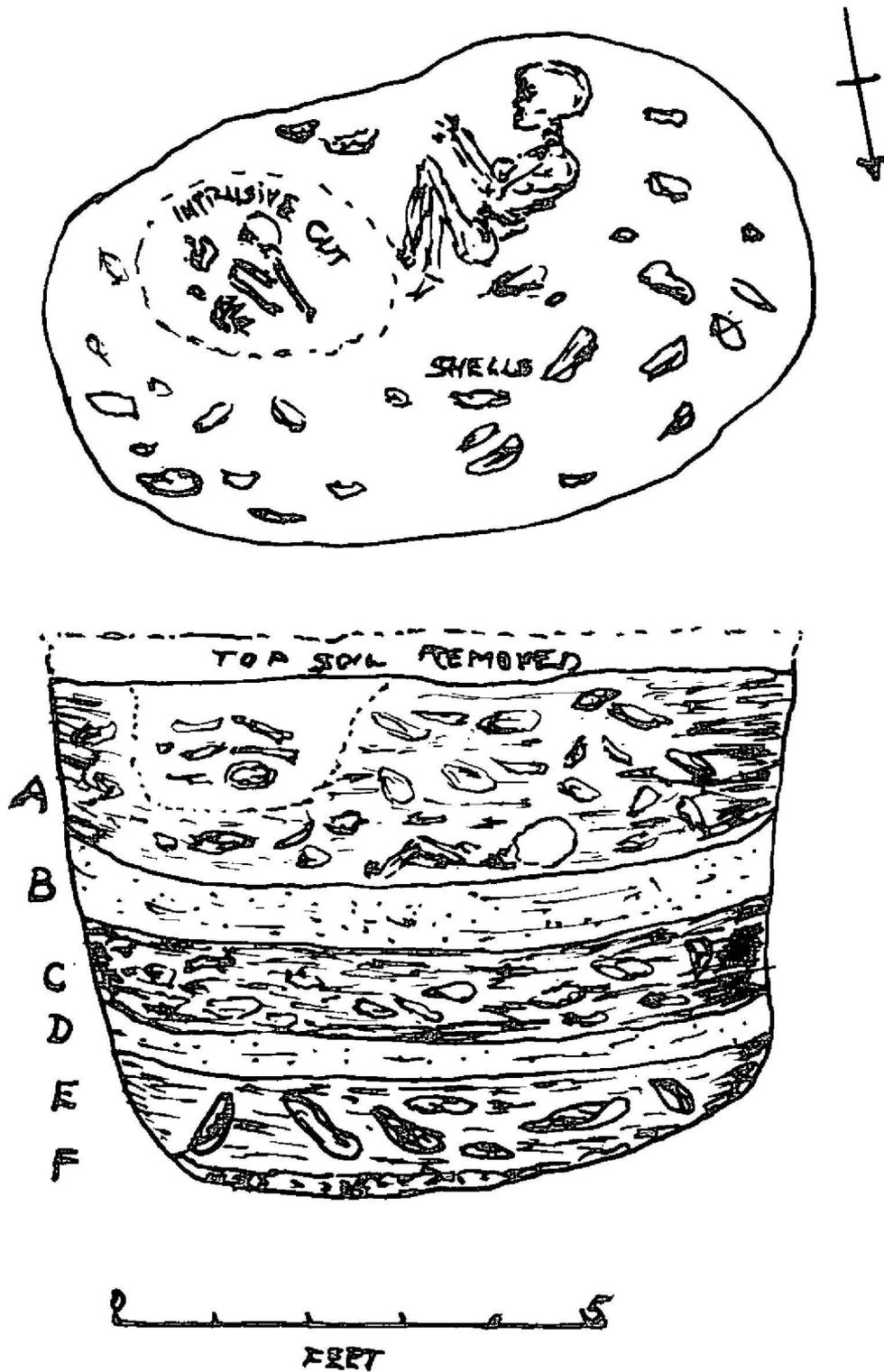


Figure 2. The burial pit at Graham Court (drawn by the author).

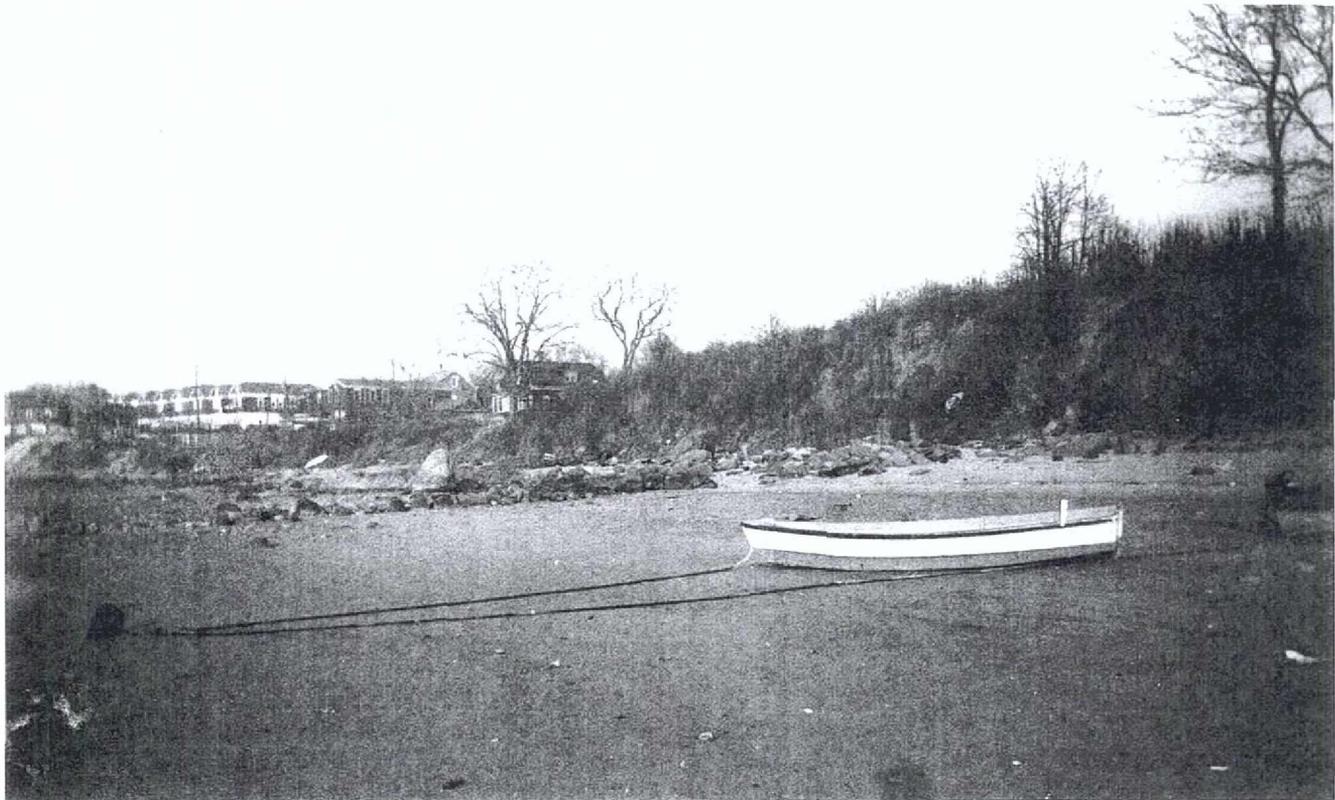


Figure 3. The steep bank facing Flushing Bay at College Point. The burial site is a few yards in from the rim of the bank (photo by the author).

It appeared that in grading Graham Court (26th Street) between 121st and 122nd Streets, the workers encountered a crumbling human skeleton. The police were called in, and detectives from Flushing came to the scene to take charge of the skeletal remains. These were taken to the Queensboro morgue. We can only imagine what became of them after that. The author of the newspaper article speculated that the skeletal remains might have been that of a slave, because the owner of the property, Captain J. Graham, was thought to be a slave runner. There was nothing left to be seen at the site except for some scattered marine shells, some disturbed earth, and the remains of a brick construction which may have been a wine cellar.

A subsequent visit the same year to the Graham Court site was more productive. The topsoil had been skimmed away from the surface, down to the sterile loam, revealing traces of shell pits. I later learned that the topsoil from this site was trucked out to the Flushing Meadows for the surfacing of the 1939 World's Fair Grounds. With a hometown colleague, Stanley Wisniewski (Figure 4), from Maspeth, Queens, I explored a number of shell pits and several dark oval areas, possibly "wigwam" sites at Graham Court in 1934. He also helped with the excavation of the burial on the last day of the work.

Later the same year, on one of my inspections on August 5, 1934 of the Graham Court site, I noted what appeared to be the top of a disturbed shell pit (Figure 5). It was about 365 ft west of 112th Avenue (the old College Point Causeway), in line with Graham Court (Figure 1). The surface of the shell pit showed signs that it had already been shovel tested by someone. Marine shells from the pit had been thrown out of the shallow excavation. I initially assumed that the person had partially excavated the contents of the pit, and then filled it in again. This appeared to be discouraging. But I thought a record of the pit's existence should be made. In order to check its measurements, I began to clean out the disturbed fill. Some loose bones, the toe bones of a human skeleton turned up in my clearing work. Continuing with the excavation, more loose bones, those of an adult human skeleton were found. The shell pit was roughly oval in shape, measuring about 8 ft long and 5 ft wide in maximum dimensions. When finally excavated, the pit bottom was reached at a depth of 5 ft 3 in (Figure 2).

It soon became apparent that only the first two feet of the pit contents had been disturbed. In my cleaning operations, I was surprised to come upon several human bones scattered throughout the disturbed soil. These were apparently uncovered by the unknown excavator, who for some



Figure 4. Stanley Wisniewski excavating in the base of the burial pit in 1934 (photo by the author).

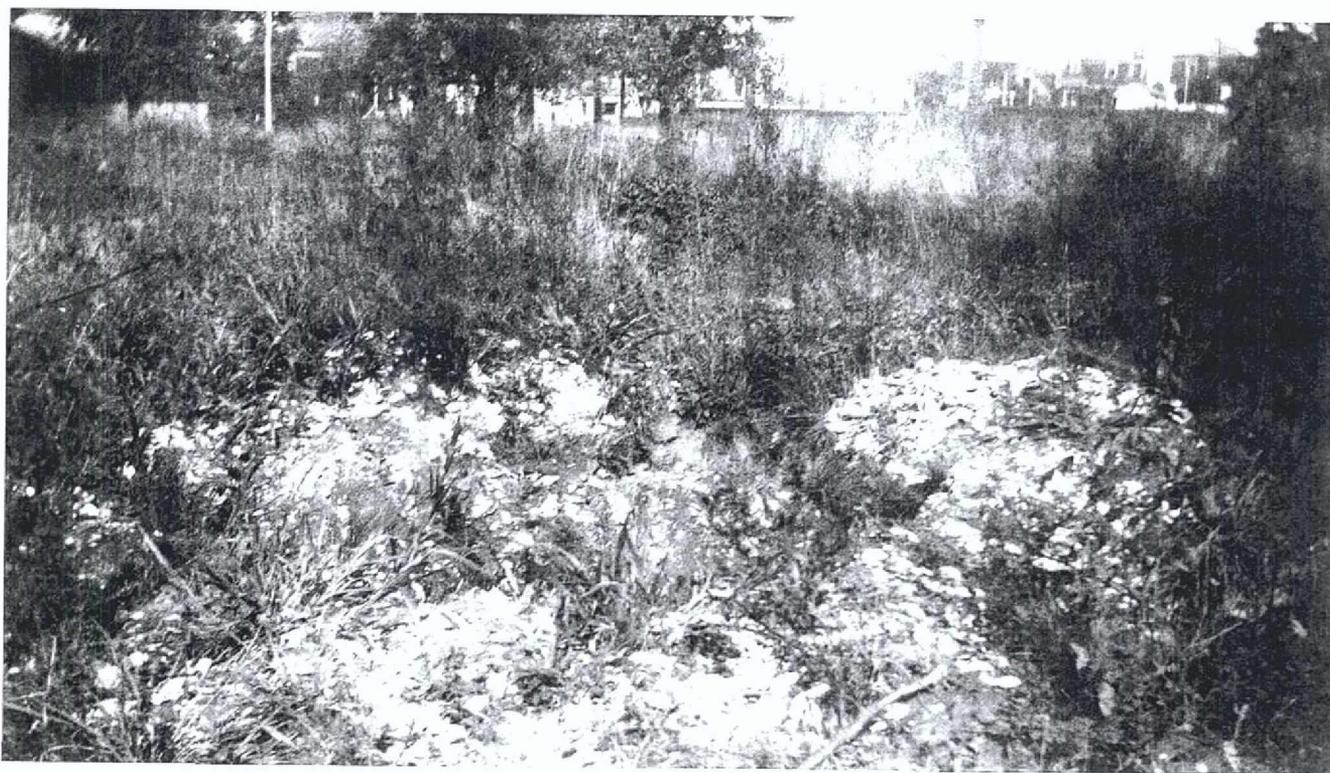


Figure 5. Marks of an exploratory cut into the top of the burial pit by unknown persons (photo by the author).

reason appeared to have quit his explorations, possibly because he realized that he had stumbled upon human skeletal remains. Putting these bones carefully aside, I enlarged the pit by excavating into the undisturbed side at the northern end of the pit. There I recovered two large potsherds, which later proved to be the major portion of the vessel (Figure 6) illustrated in Smith's (1950 Plate 8, Figure 9) publication.

In another part of the pit which seemed to be untouched, I exposed the leg bones of a second adult human skeleton. It lay about 23 in from the pit surface (Figure 2). The skeleton was complete. It lay in a flexed or fetal position on its right side. The feet and legs were drawn up close to the chest, and the hands were in its lap. The face of the skull was to the southeast. It was crushed, probably due to the weight of the bulldozer in doing its work of stripping away the valuable topsoil. The teeth and jaws were in good condition, probably belonging to a young mature adult. The sex was not determined. No obvious caries were noted on the teeth. A rimsherd of the same vessel recovered earlier was found about 8 in below the leg bones. It probably had nothing to do with the burial.

In enlarging the pit deposits closer to the pit surface, I found the disturbed bones of what I assumed to be the rest of the first human skeleton. They were found mixed together in the earth with marine shells and stones in a confusion of material. Parts of the cranium, broken jaw bones, teeth, and other bones were found scattered in the fill of the badly disturbed portion of the pit. No more pieces were found of the large pottery vessel. It is possible that the original excavator of the pit had collected the missing parts and then quit his work. However, pieces of the smaller undecorated pottery vessel or cup were found on the same level with the larger vessel.

On further excavation in depth, it was discovered that the two burials had been laid together in the top layer of the six layers distinguished in the pit (Figure 2). The sediment in this layer (A) was a dark brown mixed earth. Its contents included marine shells, many of which were oyster and clam shells. The layer was about a foot thick. The artifacts recovered from it included: pieces of two broken clay vessels, a crude schist notched pebble (netsinker?), and four ordinary hammerstones. The next layer (B) consisted of a covering or seal of sterile yellow loam, similar in nature to the subsoil of the area, about 8 in thick. From its appearance, I had thought that I had reached the base of the pit. However, a test probe indicated that there was another culture layer or deposit under the loam. This layer (C) was black with charcoal fragments and ashes. Ceramics of different type than those found in Layer A were recovered. Seven cut bird bone beads measuring about 1.5 in long and about 0.25 in in diameter, two large bored or holed aboriginal clay pipe stems

measuring about 1.75 in long, two other fragments of an aboriginal pipe bowl with a stamped decoration, and four grey chert flakes were recovered from Layer C. In the same layer was found a stone of mica schist which had opposed notches. This was probably a netsinker. Non-cultural materials included two jawbones of a large carnivorous animal such as a wolf, a crab claw, and a fragment of what looked like charred corn were also found in the same layer. The third layer (D) in the pit, like Layer B, consisted of the same yellow sterile sediment about 3 inches thick. Again, I thought that this surely was the base of the pit, because the soil color and texture matched the color and texture of the pit walls. Just to be certain, I put a test probe into the yellow sediment, discovering that there was still another cultural horizon (Layer E) below the yellow loam. In Layer E, which was about a foot thick, were found thickly packed together numerous marine shells, consisting mainly of large oyster shells, hard clam shells, mussel shells and others not identified in the field. The columellae of some whelk shells were also recovered. I thought that the whelks, like the clams, had been broken open for the food and not for wampum manufacture. Among the artifactual remains were several potsherds, animal bones, stone flakes, as well as two limonite concretions which may have been "paint stones." The next layer (F) proved to be composed of burned red earth and stones. Evidently this was the true bottom of the pit, which was somewhat incurvate at the base. Layer F was several inches thick. A test through the base of this layer yielded only sterile yellow loam. Evidently this was the true bottom of the burial pit.

It is likely that the two lenses of sterile yellow loam (Layers B and D) evidence abandonment of the pit, and that the loam came from the sides of the pit as cave-ins. The other alternative was that the yellow loam was purposefully thrown in as a cover over garbage debris. In the first case, it may be suggested that a natural fill of yellow loam accumulated in the pit at the end of a seasonal round of occupation. In the second alternative, two purposeful fills of yellow loam, may be reflective of a desire for a more sanitary condition of the site. This is considered as a remote possibility. The evidence of fire at the base of the pit (Layer F) may have been the result of the cleaning of camp hearths, in which ashes and charcoal were dumped into the hole. Alternatively, the fire remains could have been the result of a deliberate burning at the base of the pit. This was done in order to dry out and solidify the sides and base of the pit in order to use it for food storage (Kraft 1986:139,141; Figure 34c) or cache pit (Ritchie 1944:64, Figs. I, 2). As to what may have been stored in the pit, we may suggest corn. We have evidence in the form of a charred corn kernel found in the pit.

Unfortunately, no study of the physical remains from the burial pit was made. We have lost track of what became

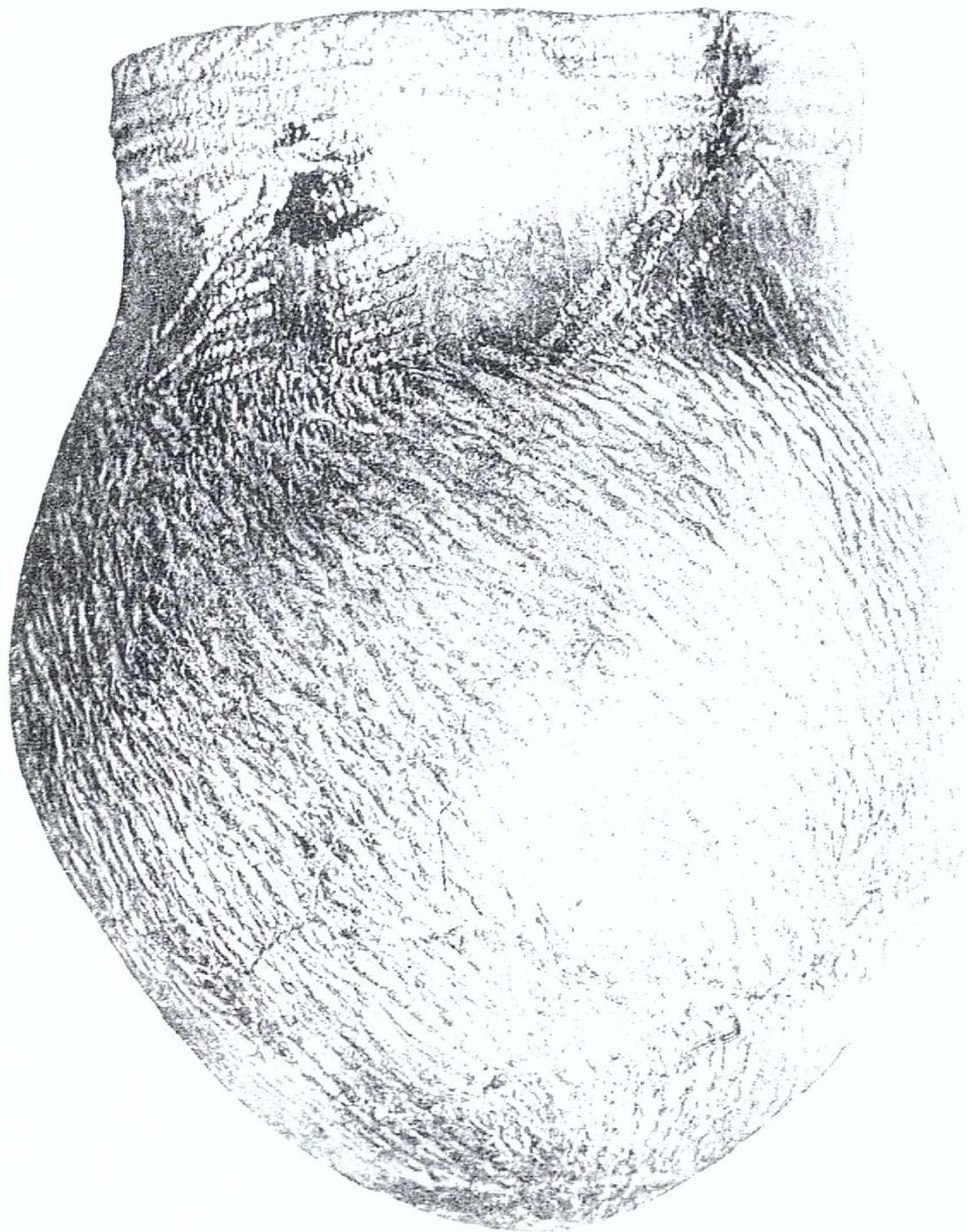


Figure 6. The Late Woodland vessel recovered from the pit (photo by Carlyle Smith).

of the human skeletal remains. Perhaps we could not keep them anyway, because of NAGPRA. I recently tried to deposit some Indian skeletal remains with a couple local museums, but was told that they could not accept them, evidently because of the prohibition. We can only guess how many Indian skeletons were found on the E. Stratton estate.

As with the Indians in the Bronx, the Graham Court deceased were apparently buried without any rituals or burial goods accompanying them. This is one of the hallmarks of the Late Woodland period. As Ritchie (1980:172) comments on the Clasons Point burials, the flexed corpses of the dead were simply placed for burial in a "convenient" storage or cooking pit. It may be significant that the College Point burials were placed in the upper part of the pit, as a secondary use of the feature.

From the character of the artifactual remains and the circumstances of the burials, we are fairly certain that the burials were made during Late Woodland times. Notable among the distinguishing traits for this period are the bone beads, the ceramics, the presence of the corn and the absence of burial goods, and the method of burials in the flexed position. The corn evidence shows that the occupants of the site practiced some form of agriculture as part of the food economy. This may have been the beginning of the subordination of their sole dependence upon hunting and fishing activities in favor of agriculture.

A number of the artifacts from College Point, along with other Long Island artifacts, were put on display at the Flushing Library in Queens. We have an unconfirmed report that when the library was modernized, at least some of the exhibit material was taken over by the Queens Historical Society. Carlyle Smith (1950:175) notes that the collection had been deposited with the Rochester Museum of Arts and Sciences for "future study." When I was associated with the Smithsonian Institution, I gifted the two pottery vessels, the bone beads and other artifacts from the Graham Court, College Point grave pit to the Smithsonian National Museum (Accession Numbers 411524, 411515).

In his publication Smith (1950) identified the larger of the two vessels from the burial pit as belonging to a type he named "Van Cortland Stamped" of his "East River Ceramic Tradition." The type site for this pottery Smith finds in the Bronx, where such ceramics were recovered in earlier archaeological investigations by Skinner (1919) in the Bronx on the East River at Throgs Neck and Clason's Point. It resembles quite closely Ritchie's (1980) Castle Creek stage of the Late Owasco in upper New York State. Kraft (1986 Figure 35c) illustrates a vessel he identifies as Oak Hill Corded, which looks remarkably like the Graham Court vessel. These vessels belong to the prehistoric culture called the Late Woodland, dating between about 1,000 A.D. and 1,650 A.D. (Kraft 1986:116). This is in agreement for the

placement of the Late Woodland by Ritchie (1980:Figure 1), and this is at variance with the dating given for the Late Woodland (1,000-400 B.P.) (Cantwell and Wall 2001:93). No radiocarbon dates were obtained through our excavation; at the time of my investigations, this dating technique was not yet discovered.

The larger of the two vessels stands about 8.5 in high, with a circular mouth about 5 in in diameter. The maximum diameter of the body is about 6.5 in, and at the neck measures about 4.75 in. The vessel had a capacity of about one-half gallon. It is dark grey in color, with dark "firing" clouds. The exterior of the vessel is cord-marked and the interior is smoothed. It is grit tempered. The body is globular in shape, with a neck ending in a thickened rim. The body is marked with a cord-wrapped paddle overall in a criss-cross manner. The paddling was carried up just to the neck, which was smooth surfaced. The neck was decorated with a series of diagonal cord impressions which were evidently applied singly. These impressions extended between the body proper and the collar. The collar had a decoration of four encircling bands of diagonal cord impressions evidently applied singly on wet clay. There was space between the top of the upper encircling band and the lip of the rim. On the latter a series of diagonal single cord marks were impressed, evidently one by one. The bottom of the vessel, which carried the marks of the cord-wrapped paddle, was round. The vessel could not stand upright without support, and must have been set among supporting stones on the hearth. The vessel was broken in several large fragments. Practically all of the pieces, save for a small section near the base, were recovered.

The smaller vessel from the same burial pit was more like a cup. It measured about 4 in high, with a mouth about 2.75 in in diameter. The walls of the vessel were straight sided. The maximum diameter of the body was a little over 3 in. It was grit tempered. There was a double constriction at the rim, as if it had been pressed out from the inside against a constricting circular band. The vessel body had been roughly smoothed. The interior was smoothed. The only decoration, if we can call it that, were the constricting bands at the rim.

Interpretations

What we have at Graham Court is an extraordinarily deep pit, which must have taken its diggers considerable effort to excavate with what tools they had, possibly wooden spades and large marine shells. Other pits found at the site were generally shallower, about a couple feet deep. The Graham Court pit was obviously not dug originally as a burial pit because only the top layer contained the burials. Layers C and D contained refuse debris from household use. The

bottom Layer F contained evidence of fire with burned soil, ashes, and charcoal flecks. The burned soil is positive evidence that it was an *in situ* burning. In all likelihood the pit was originally a storage or cache pit, which was later turned into a refuse pit, and finally a convenient place for the burials. Ritchie (1944:64, Figure 2) illustrates a cache pit with a secondary use for a flexed burial. There were remains of burning at the bottom of this pit, as with the Graham Court pit.

Layers B and D, the sterile loam deposits, were probably natural fills fallen from the sides. They may mark a seasonal hiatus in the site's occupation when the local Indians went on a seasonal round.

Of a number of other finds made on the Graham Court Site by other investigators, the triple Indian burial pit is most informative. A number of other pits and a dog burial, were discovered by (Lopez and Wisniewski 1958) several yards away at the Graham Court Site. Aside from this reference and Carlyle Smith's (1950) publication, we have no more pertinent information in print on the Graham Court Site.

It was learned later that William L. Calver, and Leonidas Westervelt, both members of the New York

Historical Society's Field Exploration Committee, had made excavations at the site without our knowledge. Both gentlemen were our acquaintances, and were told by us about the skeletal finds at College Point. They had used a steel probing rod to locate shell pits on archaeological sites. Probing through the grassy turf near our burial pit, they found two more shell pits close by our pit, each containing a single flexed human skeleton. It is not known what became of them. Inquiry at the New York Historical Society revealed that they had never received any material or data from either Calver's or Westervelt's investigations on College Point.

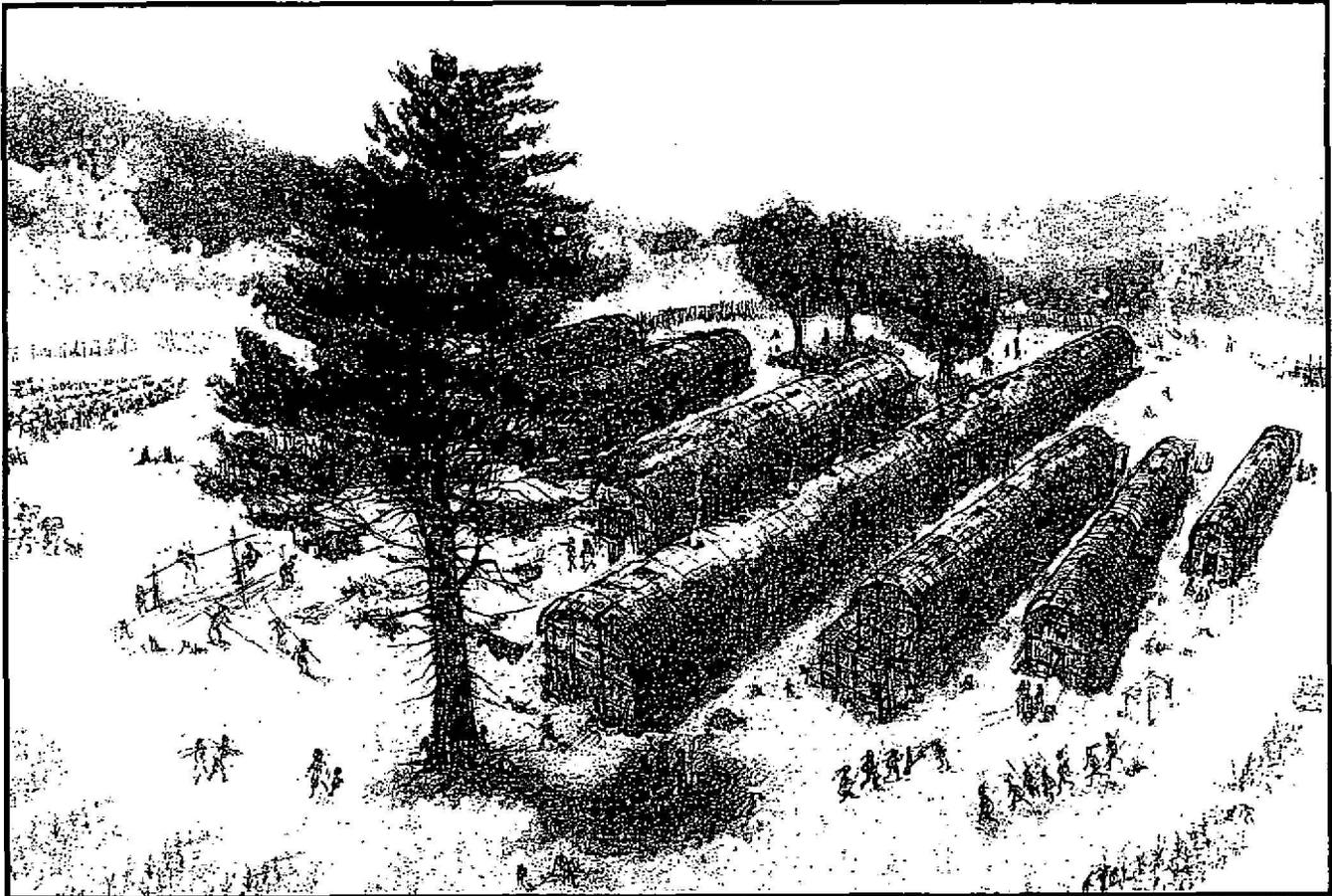
Matt Schreiner left his College Point field notes with me; these contain additional data on the Graham Court Site, which will be entered in a planned future publication. There were several other investigators who explored the site, but left no known record. As to how many Indian skeletons were found on the Stratton estate in College Point, we can only hazard a guess. We know that skeletons have been found there according to reports in 1861. In the 1930-50s, we know for certain that at least five had been uncovered by us and others (Civilian Works Administration, Westervelt, and Calver).

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Vaillancourt imagined. Artist's reconstruction of longhouses discovered by Chenango Chapter archaeologists (drawing by Daniyel Faulkner).