

# NYSAA NEWSLETTER



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## **Treasures Along The Way** By Michael Beardsley

**Those of us who muck through muddy fields, wade meandering streams, or scour stretches of desert are occasionally blessed by finding treasure. The treasures we seek are, of course, tangible traces of bygone cultures. We search for artifacts that bear testimony to those who lived, toiled, worshiped, and died where today we live, toil, worship, and also eventually pass from this Earth.**

**If we are lucky in our pursuit of treasured links to the past we may also discover a few new friends along the way. We can appreciate and even cherish these like minded individuals, our diversities diminished by a common archaeological bond. Age, race, occupation, earnings, the house you live in, or the side of the tracks on which you were born don't matter a bit when you share a deep appreciation for the ancient Americans, their craftsmanship, and their mysteries.**

### **New Bulletin Editor**

Dr. David Starbuck is Professor of Anthropology at Plymouth State University and Adjunct Professor of Anthropology at SUNY Adirondack.



Dr. Starbuck has completed the editing of *The Bulletin* for 2017-2018, which was mailed in December 2018. This large, double-issue includes some of the articles that were presented at our Centennial Meeting in 2016, as well as a number of general submissions. There should truly be "something for everyone" because we will have broad overviews of the history of NYSAA, as well as lots of articles covering both prehistoric and historic sites in our state. This will be a volume to remember!

### **INSIDE THIS ISSUE:**

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Let's not lose sight of the fact that the wonderful friends we make on our archaeological journeys are also treasures of no less and often far greater value than the history we seek. Archaeology enthusiasts can thus be twice blessed.

In this article I will share the previously untold "back stories" regarding the discovery of 3 important New York State Paleoindian treasures. I also want to introduce you to friends I've come to know...treasures who found treasures.

### Robert and Katherine Roberts

A quandary collector's face is "what is going to happen to my collection after I'm gone?" Since no one gets out of here alive, it's pretty safe to say that each of us will have to deal with the realization that we are only temporary caretakers of our artifacts, and that our claim to them is finite...more of a temporary guardianship if you will. That being said, I wonder how long the average collector retains and enjoys his or her most treasured artifacts...20 years? 40 years? 50 years?

Well, my friend Bob Roberts found his Gainey style Paleoindian point at the Nichols Pond site up among the hills of the Onondaga Escarpment in the Town of Fenner here in Central New York State in 1930 when he was 11 years old. Bob was the curator of this New York State treasure for 83 years until he decided to pass it on to me to enjoy, share, and tell you about at the wonderful age of 94 years young. Now, I'm not a betting person but I'd wager a few dollars that the number of artifacts that can boast an 83 year "1 owner" provenance are few and far between. Needless to say I feel quite humbled to have been chosen as the next individual to curate this rare Madison County, NY point. By the way, at 66 years old my chances of enjoying this Gainey for 83 years are on the slim side.

Jonathan Lothrop, Curator of Archaeology for the New York State Museum, got this pursuit rolling. Jon noted in William Ritchie's book *Traces of Early Man in the Northeast* that the fluted point shown on page 28, plate 2A a (10) was found by a Robert Roberts of Canastota, NY. Since Canastota is only one village removed from where I live in Chittenango Jon called and challenged me to see if I could track down the whereabouts of this previously published point after all these years.

Being that Ritchie's book was printed in 1957 my feeling was that the owner had likely passed away and that I'd be speaking to his heirs if I was lucky. If I was even luckier the heirs might actually know the point's whereabouts. I was initially excited about tracking the name Robert Roberts...how many men with that name could there be in our area? Well, a white pages search turned up no less than 10 area-wide Robert Roberts' candidates...who knew? I let my fingers do the dialing and incredibly hit pay dirt on my second Robert Roberts call. An older gentleman answered the phone. Yes, he was the fellow who found the fluted point at Nichols Pond. My heart sank though when Robert told me that he'd sold his large collection to the Oneida Indian Nation a number of years prior. But, I was resuscitated when Robert told me that the Oneida's were not interested in and did not purchase his fluted point because it was not from their cultural period. Yes, he still had the treasure! I was blown away. And, Robert lived less than 5 minutes from my home.

At first Robert and Katherine ([Photo 1](#)) were a bit guarded about meeting. After several phone conversations we discovered that we had a number of mutual friends, mostly older farm families in the area. Kathleen later explained that their home had been broken into and burglarized just a few weeks prior to my phone call so that was the reason they were leery when I contacted them "out of the blue". Understood and forgiven!



**Photo 1**

**Robert &  
Katherine  
Roberts**



**Photo 2      The Nichols Pond Site (looking West)**

Eventually, I went to their home where Katherine greeted me with homemade pumpkin cookies. We had a wonderful conversation. Bob is very handy and an accomplished woodworker. He shared some of the beautiful and creative items that he'd crafted. After a bit Bob brought out his treasured Gainey point (called a Clovis in the day). Bob's family owned the farm where the Nichols Pond site is located. As a boy Bob loved to walk the tilled fields looking for arrowheads. The Nichols Pond site location is now a Madison County Park but back then it was all plowed farm land surrounding a rather large but intermittent shallow pond. Bob recalls finding the fluted point near the site of the park's present picnic pavilion. Even at 11 Bob instinctively he knew that this arrowhead was different from the Nichols Pond triangular norm and valued it highly. And, therein rests another mystery.

The Nichols Pond site ([Photo 2](#)) is anything but Paleo. In fact, the site is a well documented prehistoric Oneida Iroquois village that was explored and excavated by Dr. Peter P. Pratt who dated it to circa 1480. Arthur Parker and later William Ritchie also dug at Nichols Pond, but Dr. Pratt did the lion's share of the work at the site. And, here's where the fun comes in. Over the years several had claimed that Nichols Pond was the spot where Samuel de Champlain and an army of Frenchmen attacked a palisaded Onondaga village with the aid of some Algonquin allies in 1615. This "story" was pretty much fabricated by Auburn, NY historian John Clark around 1867. In spite of basically no evidence to support his claim the Champlain legend became the "law of the land". Nichols Pond was anointed as the site of this historic and important early battle between Europeans and Native Americans. Later archaeologists and historians latched on to Clark's fiction. Richard MacNeish declared the site an Onondaga village and threw support to the Champlain battle site claim. He was incorrect on several counts.

It didn't matter that Dr. Pratt's excellent archaeological work blew the whole Champlain battle theory completely out of the water. Local politicians and "historians" lobbied Albany to commemorate the "battlefield" and several lovely but totally fallacious historical markers were erected to celebrate the Champlain legacy. The plaques grace the Nichols Pond Park to this day, glaring testimony to the fact that facts should never be allowed to get in the way of a good story.

Back to the conundrum! How is it that a young Robert Roberts found a fluted point on a prehistoric Oneida Indian village site when the two cultures are separated by 12,000 years or so? Was Bob's fluted point perhaps found by the Oneida's and kept as a curious keepsake? Did Paleoindian people passing through, possibly while scouring the Escarpment to find and exploit its abundant reserves of Onondaga flint tool stone, briefly stop to rest and enjoy the resources available at Nichols Pond? We'll likely never know. It's important to note that our Glass Factory and Owlville Creek Paleoindian sites are located not far from Nichols Pond so the "Paleoindian passing through" theory is certainly on the table.



### Beardsley continued:

As noted, Robert had amassed a rather large collection from his family farm. In his teen years Robert stopped collecting, never having looked for artifacts anywhere but on his family homestead. His family subsequently donated the land around Nichols Pond to Madison County for the park. Robert shared stories about finding cigar boxes full of triangular (Madison) arrowheads and one time found a whole small pot under the ledge of a large boulder in the field. He also told of a wonderful bird head effigy made from bone that he dug from the middens on the bank of the pond. Bob remembers the soil being nearly black from the years of Oneida occupation.

Bob did have one unresolved issue. Back in the 1950s the New York State Museum asked to borrow Bob's fluted point and some other Nichols Pond artifacts to photograph and study. They were to return them post haste. Eighteen months later, Bob still didn't have his artifacts. When they were finally returned Bob was promised a copy of Ritchie's newly minted book as a peace offering. Well, the book never materialized. I mentioned this situation to Jon Lothrop and Meredith Younge at the Albany Museum and they found one of the last remaining copies of *"Traces of Early Man in the Northeast"* in the museum inventory and presented it to Bob with the State's compliments...cool gesture...50+ years late, but still cool.

The Robert's Gainey point is made from heavily patinated mottled tan and brown jasper, likely from Pennsylvania. (Photos 3 & 4) It is small measuring 1 ½" by 15/16". The sides are parallel and the fluting extends up most of the blade on both sides. The base exhibits some grinding. No, it's not the flashiest fluted point around, but it was the first ever discovered in northern Madison County and it's special to us.



Photos 3 & 4  
Nichols Pond Site Gainey point  
& reverse



### **Beardsley continued:**

**In January Bob turned 98. In our last conversation Bob says that he can't wait for the snow to melt so that he and I can go out and walk some of his family's old fields along Nichols Pond and "maybe do some digging below the plow line". Bob's energy and zest for life are remarkable. The Robert's and the Gainey point are truly New York State treasures.**

### **Joe and Gwen Ostrowski**

**In all of my youthful years patrolling the fields along the artifact rich Seneca River between Montezuma's endless swamps and world famous Jack's Reef ( world famous for Watson's Little Store which made the uncontested best egg and olive sandwiches on earth...and, yes, Jack's Reef also had a few nice Indian sites as I recall) I never met Joe Ostrowski. This was pretty amazing since we both "worked" the same sites along the same River back in the heyday when it seemed like everyone surface collected. Dad and I often hid our car as best we could so as not to draw suspicion to a newly found site in case one of our myriad of competitors came along. That was then. Today Game of War, Clash of Clans, texting, Facebook, playing on your cell phone, etc. seem to have replaced fresh air and flint as the preferred activities for a generation or two. Frankly, with the likes of Kate Upton plugging video games I don't see archaeology rebounding anytime soon. Sexy girls versus a broken Lamoka... tough argument!**

**Joe Ostrowski, the arrowhead hunting Judge [\(Photo 5\)](#). We'd see his footprints in the Seneca's sandy soil, but never the man. And, as much as we'd hear about Joe we'd also hear about the "red fluted point" that he'd found. Not many had actually seen the point but everyone spoke about it in hushed tones. The passing of years clouds ones recollection. Was the red fluted point just a story from my adolescence? Hey, we'd never even met the guy. Maybe none of it was true. But, maybe it was. The story rattled around way in the back of my head but never left. It took me 40 years to make the call.**

### Beardsley continued:

Gwen Ostrowski answered the phone. Gwen is Joe's better half and has been for over 70 years. A meeting was arranged at the Ostrowski's neat as a pin log cabin. Fields roll from Joe's back porch down to the Seneca River and, yes, Joe can walk out his back door and find artifacts. What a wonderful couple. We enjoyed a captivating evening sharing stories of people we knew and places we'd hunted. I'm convinced that no one can tell stories better than archaeology people. We looked at box after box, frame after frame of wonderful Seneca River artifacts. I was in 7<sup>th</sup> heaven. Since Joe restricted his arrowhead looking activity to only about a 5-7 mile radius of his home this was a quintessential Seneca River assemblage with no foreign intervention. There were endless numbers of Susquehanna Broad points, Brewerton's of all varieties, little Lamoka's, Bifurcates, Fishtails, and hefty Genesee's. Onondaga flint ruled the day. I had never seen Joe's collection, but it was all very familiar...like looking at old friends. The collection is important and impressive.

Joe finally brought out a small box and gingerly opened it. There on a bed of cotton foam laid the legendary "red fluted point". Yes, it did exist. It was not a dream but, at the risk of sounding like a 1950s teen, it sure was "dreamy"...startlingly so. We don't see a lot of tool stone color here in Central New York State. We live in pretty much a gray/black Onondaga flint world. Hey, we get giddy when we come across the lovely gray/blue/brown Western Onondaga flint (Diver's Lake) more likely than not left behind by our Meadowood friends. Blood red and a flute...does it get any better?



**Photo 5**  
**Joe & Gwen Ostrowski**

### Beardsley continued:

As Gwen passed around fresh strawberry shortcake Joe told me the story of the “red fluted point”. I should say Joe started to tell me the story then passed the baton to Gwen for it was Gwen who found this wonderful point! That part of the story never made it to the “legend” stage years ago. Now Gwen, a youthful and spry nonagenarian, has failing eyesight but her memory is as crisp and clear as the day she found this magnificent piece of New York State history. Gwen often accompanied Joe on his arrowhead walks. On this particular day they visited the well known Bonta Bridge Site at the end of Ditmar Road on the north side of the Seneca River. This is one of those sites that is impossible to hide. It is fully exposed to the road...a wide open, “no brainer” field rolling gently down slope to the Seneca River. Everybody and their brother and dog knew about the Bonta Bridge Site and the spoils of the hunt went to the folks lucky enough to be the first in the field after a strong rain.

Our family visited Bonta Bridge often ([Photo 6](#)). As a multi cultural site you could find Lamoka, Brewerton, Otter Creek, Meadowood, Levanna, Bifurcate, etc. points as well as occasional old coins. We have a nice collection from Bonta Bridge, but, no flutes ([Photo 7](#)).

In the middle of the field standing more toward the river than not rose a massive old White Oak tree that generations of Blumer’s (the family that owned the farm) had plowed and planted around. The tree was nestled in a bit of a low spot in the sloping field. No doubt in times of pasture cows had sought shelter from the storm gathered under the mighty tree’s massive canopy. It was to this tree that Gwen was drawn that fateful day. Walking along the tree’s drip line Gwen spotted what appeared to be a red leaf on the ground, but it wasn’t fall. Gwen picked up what later we’d call a Barnes point and immediately erased 12,500 years as the first person to see and hold this wonderful treasure since its loss so many years before. Today the Bonta Bridge tree is gone living only in the memory of those of us who spent time walking under and around it. The tree will always hold special memories for Gwen.



**Photo 6**      The Bonta Bridge Site (looking SE)



**Photo 7**      The Bonta Bridge Artifact Assemblage



### Beardsley continued:

At 92 Joe doesn't get out as much these days to roam the Seneca fields but his passion for archaeology hasn't faltered. In 1961 and 1962 Joe assisted New York State archaeologist William Ritchie with his excavations at the O'Neil Farm Site which is located just a short walk from Joe's log cabin. Later, Joe worked with the late Robert Funk at the O'Neil Site and on several other exploratory missions along the Seneca. On several occasions Gwen cooked dinner for the New York State workers. Bob Funk had sat at the very table I was sitting at sharing stories and partaking of Gwen's wonderful home cooking.

Joe loves to tell about purchasing 44 acres of land to add to his farm. He took his tractor down to plow and level off the pasture land near the river. Joe got several furrows plowed and got the tractor stuck. He hopped down off the tractor and immediately spotted arrowheads in the sand. Eventually that ½ acre where Joe had plowed yielded 50 good arrowheads. Such is the Seneca River.

Joe was a farmer. Gwen helped out on the farm and worked as a nurse's aid. Joe served as a Judge in the Town of Cato, NY for 29 years starting in 1967. Joe also ran a nursery (Arrowhead Nursery, naturally) and drove school bus for a time. Joe is also a skilled woodworker. He hand carved the totem pole seen in the accompanying photo. Joe's occupations changed over the years, but never his love of archaeology.

The Ostrowski Barnes point is 2 ¼" long and 1" wide. The flaking is exquisite ([Photos 8 & 9](#)). The point is not without a degree of controversy. Some who have seen it feel that its blood red tool stone is Munsungun chert from the Munsungun Lake formation in northern Maine, the site of several Paleoindian quarries. Others feel that the material is heat treated jasper from Pennsylvania. Still another school of thought is that it could have been made from Colchester jasper from a rather obscure quarry in Vermont. Further study will be required to settle this debate. What is not open for debate is that fact that Joe and Gwen Ostrowski along with their wonderful "red fluted point" are bona fide New York State treasures!



Photo 8 & 9:  
Bonta Bridge-  
Barnes Point  
and reverse



## **Beardsley continued:**

### **Gordon & Barbara DeAngelo**

**Gordon and Barbara DeAngelo are icons of New York State archaeology. Much has been written to extol their innumerable contributions to our knowledge of our past. Gordon and Barbara gave selflessly of themselves to assist others. It is not within the scope of this brief article nor would it be even possible to try to recount their many achievements. Indeed, the William Beauchamp Chapter of the New York State Archaeological Association released a 91 page volume dedicated to Gordon's memory and his good works. Upon Gordon's passing on September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2010 a Syracuse Post Standard Newspaper headline declared that the "Grand Man of CNY Archaeology is Gone".**

**Instead, I wanted to share a quick story about Gordon that some may not know and make an observation about the kind of very special fellow that he was.**

**Gordon was a 1954 graduate of the New York State College of Environmental Science and Forestry. He worked for 34 years as a landscape architect for the New York State Department of Transportation. Gordon was both a naturalist and an avocational archaeologist. He was one of the founders of the William Beauchamp Chapter, and was a Past President of the NYSAA. Gordon and Barbara were both very involved in the Chittenango Landing Canal Boat Museum where Gordon had served as a Director.**

**Gordon and Barbara married in 1989 ([Photo 10](#)). They were a "perfect match". They shared common interests in ceramics, botany, archaeology, surveying, etc. Gordon was a skilled surveyor and together they created invaluable maps of the sites they worked on. From Fort Stanwix, Fort Orange, the Pen Site, Fort Brewerton, and a host of other sites stretching to a castle in the middle of Loch Lomond, Scotland Gordon left his mark far and wide.**

**Gordon was considered the "go to" expert for questions regarding everything from trade axes to clay pipes, bricks to bale seals, and for exceedingly old coins there simply was no one better. Gordon built a massive archaeological library of 1,088 items. The Gordon DeAngelo Collection, as it is now referred to, was donated to Binghamton University and is available in their Bartel Library for all to access.**

**Gordon would have liked this because at heart Gordon was an educator. David R. Starbuck, Plymouth State University, has commented that Gordon and Barbara's greatest strength was their willingness to teach. They taught surveying skills to students and to other avocationalists. They conducted archaeological workshops at the Chittenango Landing Canal Boat Museum. They worked tirelessly with the Fayetteville-Manlius High School Archaeology Club in their summer archaeology camps. Gordon had boundless patience and seemed to truly be in his element when working with children explaining the way things used to be as only Gordon could. He was referred to as a "living library", a "walking encyclopedia", an "expert storyteller". All these things and more was Gordon DeAngelo.**

Gordon's forte as we know was primarily historical, post-contact archaeology. So, what was Gordon doing walking in a sandy bean field on the north side of the Seneca River looking for arrowheads? Gordon was not a surface collector. In fact, Gordon told me on several occasions that he really didn't like field walking, and that he'd repeatedly put off a friend's persistent requests that Gordon join him for a stroll. One fateful day in the late 1950s Gordon said yes and history was made. By Gordon's telling he was walking along a particularly deep furrow on the edge of the field near the Mosquito Point Bridge (north of Port Byron, NY) (Photo 11) when suddenly there lay an incredible Paleoindian spear point untouched by human hands in 13,000 years. In his one day field walking venture Gordon found what many of us will never find in a lifetime of following plows...a Clovis Classic. While Gordon was pleased with his find he wasn't "blown away". For Gordon the Clovis was just another tool to educate about those who'd gone before.

Our family had walked this same Mosquito Point Bridge Site for years and while the site had been very good to us it was a lot more generous to Gordon. Yes, my sister Brenda did find a spectacular Adena spear there made from a cream colored chalcedony...her best find ever. The multi-cultural site offered a typical Seneca River assemblage including Bifurcate, Lamoka, Brewerton, Susquehanna, Meadowood, Norman-skill, Ground Slate, etc. (Photo 12) There was some unusual tool stone as well including Pennsylvania yellow jasper, root beer colored sugar quartz, lovely green Norman-skill chert, etc. Yes, many great points and many fond memories...but no flutes for the Beardsley's.

Are you seeing a pattern here? Our family scoured the Bonta Bridge Site but never found anything as nice as Gwen Ostrowski's red Barnes point. Ditto for the Mosquito Point Bridge Site and Gordon's treasure...lots of hours invested, but no flutes.

Well, Gordon's Clovis (now re-christened a Gainey point) ended up with a starring role on page 2, item 5 in William A. Ritchie's 1965 work The Archaeology of New York State. Ritchie called it a "modified Clovis". The point is stunningly crafted from Upper Mercer Chert (Ohio), and is an impressive 3 3/4" long by 1 1/8" wide (Photos 13 & 14). I can just imagine it as Gordon must have seen it laying out on the Mosquito Point Bridge Site's tawny sand.

The first time I met the Mosquito Point Gainey was at Gordon's house here in Chittenango. We went into his basement workshop and there it was resting rather precariously in a Styrofoam cup on a small and narrow ledge high above the concrete floor. I gasped. I'd have had this magnificent artifact wrapped in cotton, placed in a bomb proof box, and secured with several locks. Gordon's rather cavalier treatment of what, to me, was a discovery that I'd never equaled caught me as a collector way off guard. It took me a long time to understand and even longer to appreciate how Gordon valued this incredible treasure.

A year or so later I asked Gordon to once again visit the Gainey. I'd assembled the best of our family's points from the Mosquito Point Bridge Site, and I wanted to take a "group photo" as it were including Gordon's "star" center frame. Gordon agreed, but called me a few weeks later to say that he couldn't find the point.





**Photo 10**  
**Gordon & Barbara DeAngelo**

**Photo 11**    **The Mosquito Point Bridge Site (looking SE)**







**Photo 12 Mosquito Point Bridge Artifact Assemblage (above)**

**Photo 13 Mosquito Point Bridge Gainey point (left below)**

**Photo 14 Mosquito Point Bridge Site Gainey point (reverse, right below)**



### **Beardsley continued:**

He'd given a presentation to some school children and had the point in a bag with some other artifacts. The bag was gone. Gordon had looked everywhere. He felt that the point must be in the house somewhere, but left on the table that the bag could have been mistakenly tossed out or left at the school. I was devastated. And so, the point remained for 5+ years...lost.

I often pulled out the photos of the Gainey that my wife Nancy took at Gordon's house before it disappeared, hoping against hope. I even chose the photo of the point as my computer's wallpaper for good luck. Nothing!

Sadly, in 2010 Gordon passed. It was left to Barbara to shoulder the responsibility of sorting through their papers, library, collections, etc. It was a daunting task that she undertook with tenacity and grace. One afternoon I received a call from Barbara. She said that she may have found the missing bag of artifacts. I hopped in my Astro van and exceeded the speed limit most of the way to Barbara's home.

There it was, a gallon size plastic freezer bag filled with artifacts from all ages. And, among them, I could see the missing Mosquito Point Gainey. Naturally, I was thrilled. Then, I took a step back. I realized that this bag had been packed by the incomparable Gordon DeAngelo to do what was closest to his heart...educate. In addition to the Gainey Gordon had selected an eclectic mix including a Lamoka point, a broken Orient Fishtail, several incised Iroquois potsherds, a busted kaolin pipe, several trade beads, 3 rusty cut nails, a broken piece of blue willow china, and a Mrs. Winslow's Soothing Syrup BIMAL medicine bottle. These artifacts were all props, players in the story that Gordon would weave for the children to help them walk with him through time...from the earliest Americans to the present.

Gordon, so inspired to educate, placed equal importance upon all of his teaching aids. The Gainey played its role no more, no less well than the rusty nails or the common patent medicine bottle. I realized that Gordon's objective enabled him to put a rare and precious Paleoindian treasure into that zip-lock bag with what some would consider a "bunch of junk" with no qualms. Gordon was committed to his principles. It's not that Gordon didn't appreciate the rarity of the Gainey. In his broader pursuit that didn't matter. It helped him tell his story.

I realize that I will likely never be that good. The collector in me somehow won't let me put rusty cut nails and a classic Clovis on the same plain. Gordon could do it. I struggle. But, I get it. Gordon DeAngelo was one of a kind. He had a higher calling that I can only applaud and admire. Here's to you Gordon, you are greatly missed!

### **Beardsley continued:**

**As a PS, Barbara let me purchase Gordon's Gainey point to safeguard same as she was downsizing and selling her home. My wife Nancy & I enjoyed and cared for the magnificent spear for several years. We collected up all of my families artifacts from the Mosquito Point Bridge Site and placed the Gainey right in the middle of the Riker mount...kind of a Mosquito Point projectile family reunion. What a classic Seneca River story this frame tells. Nancy & I presented the collection to Jon Lothrop and the New York State Museum last year. It was given in tribute to Gordon & Barbara DeAngelo and to my wonderful parents (Leigh & Mary Beardsley) who nurtured our love of New York State archaeology. Gordon's spear is where he would have wanted it...a place where all can look, study, and learn.**

**Three Paleo treasures...Three wonderful couples. We have indeed been blessed.**

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# A Short Paper on Misnomered Owasco Artifacts

F. J. Buzz Hesse, Fellow NYSAA

## Abstract

The following paper puts forth the idea that two artifacts commonly found in the tool inventory of the Late Woodland Owasco culture, namely the sinew stone and the strike-a-lite, are misnomers. Further the paper suggests alternative names and uses for these artifacts. The consideration of these new terms and uses are confined to the Owasco culture.

## Preface:

The Upper Susquehanna River region in New York State has yielded numerous Owasco village sites. This region encompasses an area from the source of the Susquehanna River at Otsego Lake, Cooperstown, NY westerly towards Binghamton, NY, and particularly including the Oneonta, NY area, a geographical area of about 75 miles as the crow flies. These Owasco village sites include the famous Hilltop site reported on by Dr. William A. Ritchie in 1944, the Lookout site, Kelly's Corners, Otsdawa 1 & 2, Whites, Castle Creek, Basin Clove, Vestal, Bainbridge and the Egli site. There are numerous other locations in the Upper Susquehanna River basin and adjacent river systems where the presence of camps of the Owasco culture have been found. No doubt other sites have been located but have not been reported. I think it should not be overlooked that with so many Owasco village sites in the Upper Susquehanna region, this may well indicate an epicenter for the Late Woodland Owasco culture, 1,100 to 950 AD.

In 1967 I wrote a short article entitled "A Hypothesis on two Owasco Artifacts" in the *Susquehanna Archaeologist*, Jan. 1967, Vol. 1, No 1. The Owasco artifacts (Late Woodland circa AD 950) being discussed were the so-called "sinew stone" and the "strike-a-lite". The Owasco culture, characterized by the broad isosceles triangular Levanna point, has an abundance of "sinew stones" and "strike-a-lites" in its tool inventory, more so than other prehistoric cultures. Early writers (such as Arthur C Parker in his 1922 "The Archaeology of New York, Part 1", pg.432; William A Ritchie in his 1944 "The Pre-Iroquoian Occupation of New York State", Rochester Museum Memoirs No. 1; and Lenig, Miller and Ritchie in their 1953 "An Early Owasco Sequence in Eastern New York" circular 32, pg. 37) make reference to the "sinew stone" and "strike-a-lite". My intention is to put forth the argument that these terms are misleading insofar as to their practical application and to further postulate a new construct that is more applicable regarding these artifacts. First it is important to think of the "sinew stone" as an abrading stone and the "strike-a-lite" as a pressure flaking tool used in the knapping of chert. The term "sinew stone" undoubtedly came about because of the visual similarity to that of a cobbler's beeswax block that was used for drawing cordage over it to impregnate the cordage with wax, thus making the cord waterproof. The cobbler in the process of doing so created grooves in the beeswax block. These grooves are similar to those grooves we see in a "sinew stone". An assumption was made that sinew was sized on the "sinew stone" and that this was the cause for the grooves found on "sinew stones". However, it is not possible to size sinew by abrading it, because it simply frays when drawn over stone. In order to size sinew it has to be split to size by hand, then twisted by hand and moistened as this process is undertaken. So sinew cannot be the cause for the grooves in "sinew stones".



What then could cause the grooves ? I believe that the companion artifact, the “strike -a-lite” offers the answer. “Strike-a-lite” is a name applied by Dr. William A. Ritchie, “Father of Northeast Archaeology”, who wrote of this artifact being used to strike against iron pyrite to create a spark for the starting of fires. Having read the archaeological reports by Dr. Ritchie, and specifically noting the artifact inventories of Owasco sites which show a high number of “strike-a-lites”, I noticed that there were no iron pyrites present in the inventories. The lack of iron pyrites casts doubt on the theory that the so-called “strike -a-lite” was part of a fire starting tool kit. About fifty years ago when I was working as an archaeologist for the New York State Museum & Science Service, I had the opportunity to speak with Dr. Ritchie in his office about the absence of iron pyrites from the artifact inventories. His response was that the iron pyrites had simply disintegrated over the years, thus explaining why they were not present. However, iron pyrites are not prone to disintegration; they are impervious to decay. I couldn't resolve Dr. Ritchie's explanation.

I believe that the “strike-a-lite” was used as a flint knapping pressure flaking tool. This artifact is equilateral in cross section, teardrop shaped, heavily ground down on the lobate end and pointed on the other. The smoothing of the lobate end is accomplished by grinding it on the abrading stone (“sinew stone”) thus creating the grooves on the abrading stones. As a matter of note, I have actually taken “strike-a-lites” and “sinew stones” from the same sites and compared the curvatures of the ground ends of “strike-a-lites” with the grooves in the “sinew stones”; and they do indeed match. I would further postulate that the abrading stone was also used in the shaping of other tools such as those made of bone, horn and possibly other materials. Regarding the suggested use of the “strike-a-lite” as a knapper's pressure flaking tool, I have taken these actual artifacts, placed the pointed ends in wooden handles and used them successfully to make finished projectile points and knives from chert.

It is also interesting to note that in the study of “sinew stones” it is possible to place them into three categories, Youthful, Mature and Old Age. Youthful specimens have lightly incised grooves. Mature specimens have more deeply moderate grooves. But Old Age specimens have deeply incised grooves, very often on both sides, and more completely surrounding the periphery . Additionally, although fewer in number, some specimens are broken in two. If these artifacts were indeed used as proposed, they were not impacted through use in a way as to break them in two. A reasonable conclusion is that they were intentionally broken, perhaps to be passed down to younger persons as heirlooms or simply to be shared with apprentices.



Owasco Levanna points

Old age Owasco abrading stones (sinew stones)





Owasco chert pressure flaking /  
knapping tools (strike-a-lites)



Broken Owasco abrading  
stones (sinew stones)



Mature age Owasco abrading  
stones (sinew stones )





Youthful Owasco abrading stones (sinew stones)

**In conclusion, I myself have excavated and surface hunted several single component Owasco sites, and I have never found any iron pyrites on those sites. Therefore it is my opinion, based on previously reported archaeological information and on my own work on Owasco sites, that the artifacts called “sinew stones” and “strike-a-lites” are misnamed and that they should more appropriately be referred to as Owasco “abrading stones” and Owasco “chert pressure flaking / knapping tools”.**

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1969      *The Archaeology of New York State*  
1944      *The Pre-Iroquoian Occupations of New York State*

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**NEW YORK STATE**  
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**ASSOCIATION**



New York State Archaeological Association  
103rd Annual Meeting, April 26-28, 2019  
Holiday Inn, Johnstown, NY  
**Call for Papers**



The Van Epps-Hartley chapter is proud to host the 103rd Annual Meeting of the New York State Archaeological Association (NYSAA) and the annual Spring Meeting of the New York Archaeological Council (NYAC).

The NYAC spring meeting will be held Friday afternoon at the conference hotel. Conference tours will include Fort Johnson on Friday afternoon and the Schenectady Stockade on Sunday afternoon. The NYSAA annual business meeting will be held on Friday evening, with paper presentations all day Saturday and Sunday morning. The annual banquet and awards ceremony will be held Saturday evening. Our special guest speaker for the Saturday banquet will be Dr. David Givens, who will present on the Jamestown Rediscovery Project.

All events will be held at the Holiday Inn, located at 308 N. Comrie Avenue, Johnstown, NY.

This is an open call for submitting abstracts for papers, posters or paper sessions on any subject of interest in the archaeology of New York and adjoining regions. Abstracts should be 150 words or less. Presentations should not exceed 20 minutes in length. One paper/poster per presenter (although individuals may co-author multiple papers). Presenters must be NYSAA members and must register for the conference.

Abstracts, authors, affiliation and AV preferences must be received by March 1, 2019 for consideration. Meeting registration must be pre-paid by April 1, 2019, or your paper will be dropped from the program. Registration information will be available online at <http://nysarchaeology.org/conference>

Paper submissions and any questions about the conference program can be sent to Jonathan Lothrop at: [Jonathan.Lothrop@nysed.gov](mailto:Jonathan.Lothrop@nysed.gov). Paper submissions should include: your name, title, abstract, mailing address, phone, e-mail, institutional affiliation (if any), NYSAA chapter affiliation, and A/V preference.



**New York State  
Archaeological Association  
103<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference  
April 26 – 28, 2019  
Hosted by Van Epps-Hartley Chapter**



The Van Epps-Hartley Chapter of the NYSAA is proud to be hosting this year's annual conference at the Holiday Inn, Route 30A North, Johnstown, NY 12095 on April 26-28, 2019.

Hotel reservations at the Holiday Inn can be made on line at [www.holidayinn.com](http://www.holidayinn.com) or by calling Holiday Inn Nationwide 1-800-HOLIDAY, or calling the hotel directly at 518-762-4686. When registering, mention you are reserving for the NYSAA conference or use group code RCH to receive the conference rate of \$92 per room per night.

**Deadline for hotel reservations is April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2019.**

Our banquet speaker will be David Givens, Director of Archaeology at Jamestown Rediscovery! We are looking forward to Mr. Givens' insight into colonial America.

We will host two tours this year. Our Friday tour will be at the Old Fort Johnson in Fort Johnson, NY. This historic limestone building built in 1749, was home to Sir William Johnson and his family members up until the

Our Sunday tour will be in the Stockade Historic District of Schenectady, NY. Beginning at Brouwer House, 14 North Church Street, with an orientation and buffet lunch for those interested, we'll continue to First Reformed Church - 8 North Church Street, Schenectady and Saratoga Railroad - 12 Union Street, Former House Site - 107 Union Street (now front yard of First Reformed Church), Robert Yates House - 109 Union Street, and French & Indian War Site - 32 Front Street. Lunch and tour is \$13, tour only is \$5.

Please indicate on the registration form whether or not you would like to participate in either tour, and if you would like lunch on Sunday.

**New York State Archaeological Association**  
**103<sup>rd</sup> Annual Conference**  
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	Number	Amount
<b>Registration Fee</b>		
Regular Member	\$40.00 _____	_____
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<b>Banquet</b>	\$35.00	
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\*Please indicate any special dietary accommodations next to entrée selection

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Friday Night, Hot & Cold Buffet	\$18 _____	_____
Saturday Breakfast Buffet	\$13 _____	_____
Saturday Lunch	\$18 _____	_____
Sunday Breakfast	\$13 _____	_____

**Friday Tour:**

Old Fort Johnson	\$4 _____	_____
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**Sunday Stockade Tour**

There is a buffet lunch available to those who are interested

Tour \$5 _____	Lunch & Tour \$13 _____	_____
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**REGISTRATION & MEALS TOTAL** \_\_\_\_\_

Make checks payable to the **Van Epps-Hartley Chapter, NYSAA**. Mail Completed registration forms & checks to *Sarah Vidulich, 119 Egelston Rd, Fultonville, NY 12072*. You may also register on line, using PayPal. (Remitter is responsible for all returned check fees). **If purchasing meals, please remit registrations by April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2019.**

**Note:** For book room space reservations, please contact Diana Carter at [dcarter-1217@nycap.rr.com](mailto:dcarter-1217@nycap.rr.com) . Vendors will be responsible for collection of any required sales tax.