

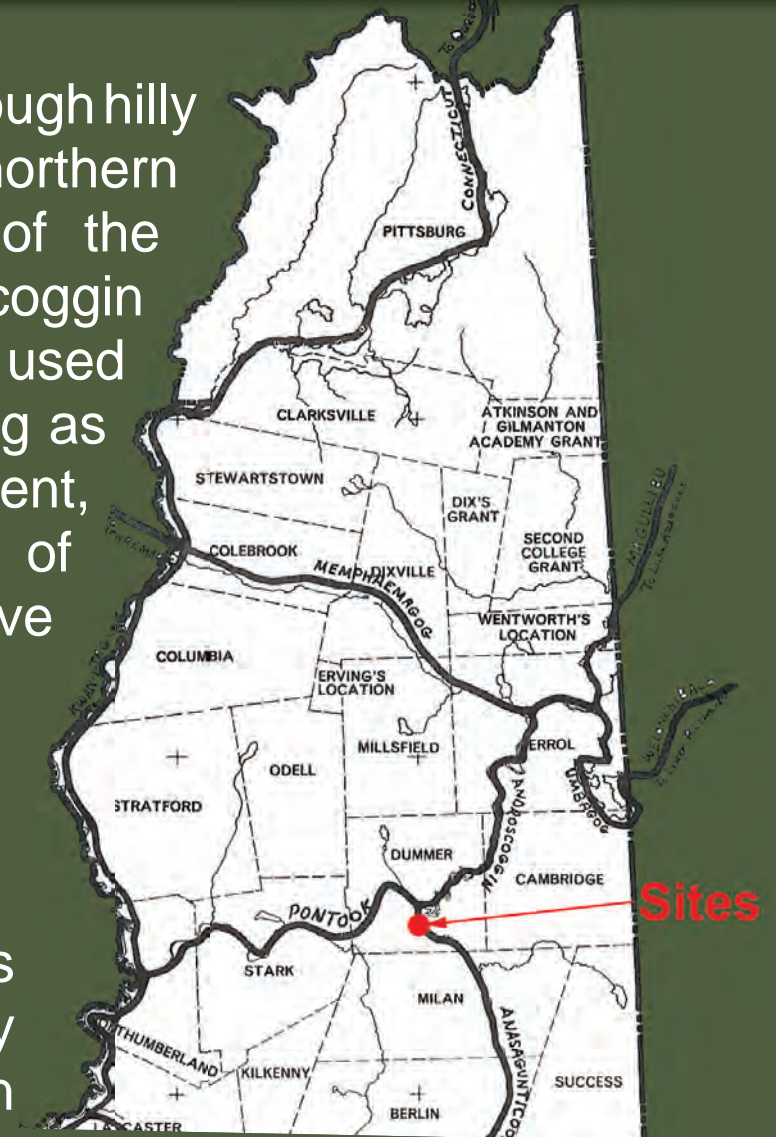


Archaeology of the Upper Androscoggin River: Learning About the Past from the Dummer Route 16 Improvement Project

The New Hampshire Department of Transportation Dummer Route 16 Improvement Project included work at two newly identified archaeological sites, 27-CO-148 and 27-CO-149. We learned that these were campsites located along the edge of the Androscoggin River Valley occupied by Native people between 7,500 and 10,500 years ago.



NH Route 16 traverses through hilly and rugged terrain, and in northern New Hampshire, much of the road parallels the Androscoggin River. Rivers have been used as travel routes for as long as people have been present, as shown by this map of the trail system of Native peoples.



The first people to explore and make their home in this region did so soon after the glaciers receded, about 13,500 years ago. The two sites found at Dummer both date to the period shortly after this initial occupation. These sites tell us that people have been using the Androscoggin River and its valley as a travel corridor for many thousands of years. Other sites of similar age are known along the river, both upstream at Aziscohos Lake, and downstream in the town of Rumford, Maine.

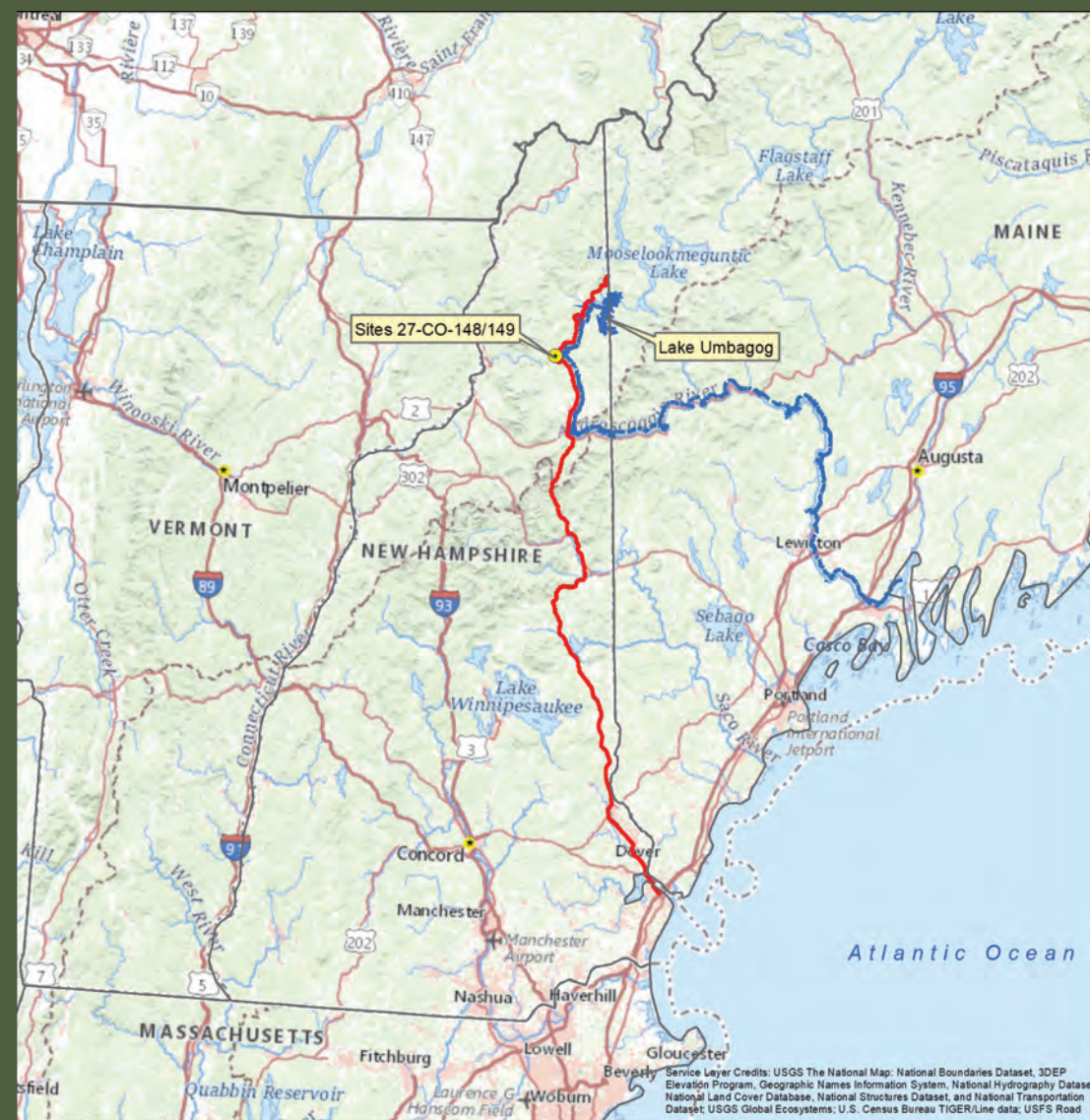
Archaeologists use small test pits to sample a project area. If artifacts are found, they then dig larger excavation units to explore the archaeological deposits.



Archaeologists systematically excavate in squares and vertical levels to carefully keep track of where artifacts are found in relation to each other and within soil layers. It is not the artifacts alone but their context that allows us to piece together the distant past.



The results of this archaeological study indicate both sites are eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places because they represent rare glimpses into Native people's use of the land during a little known period of history. The sites therefore provide important information on a particular time and place.



Location of the archaeological sites, the Androscoggin River and Lake Umbagog (blue), and NH Route 16 (red).

The archaeological study was conducted in 2017 and 2018 by the New Hampshire Department of Transportation and Northeast Archaeology Research Center in advance of unavoidable impacts to the sites related to much needed road improvements. The study complies with the National Historic Preservation Act, a law designed to protect our cultural heritage and history.

Both sites within the proposed new road construction footprint were completely excavated by archaeologists.



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What Did We Find?

Archaeologists recovered hundreds of Native American artifacts, almost all of them chipped stone tools and the waste from their manufacture. Stone tools used for hunting, cooking/food processing, and making clothing and shelter were identified.



Students from Milan Elementary School sift for artifacts.

What Were People Doing?

We can't always tell from the archaeological record exactly what people were doing. Evidence of their activities does not always survive, although we can learn about their lives and past environments from other clues. For instance, even though no fish bones or fishing tools were recovered, as these sites are located close to prime fishing locations on the river, water resources must have been important to the site occupants.

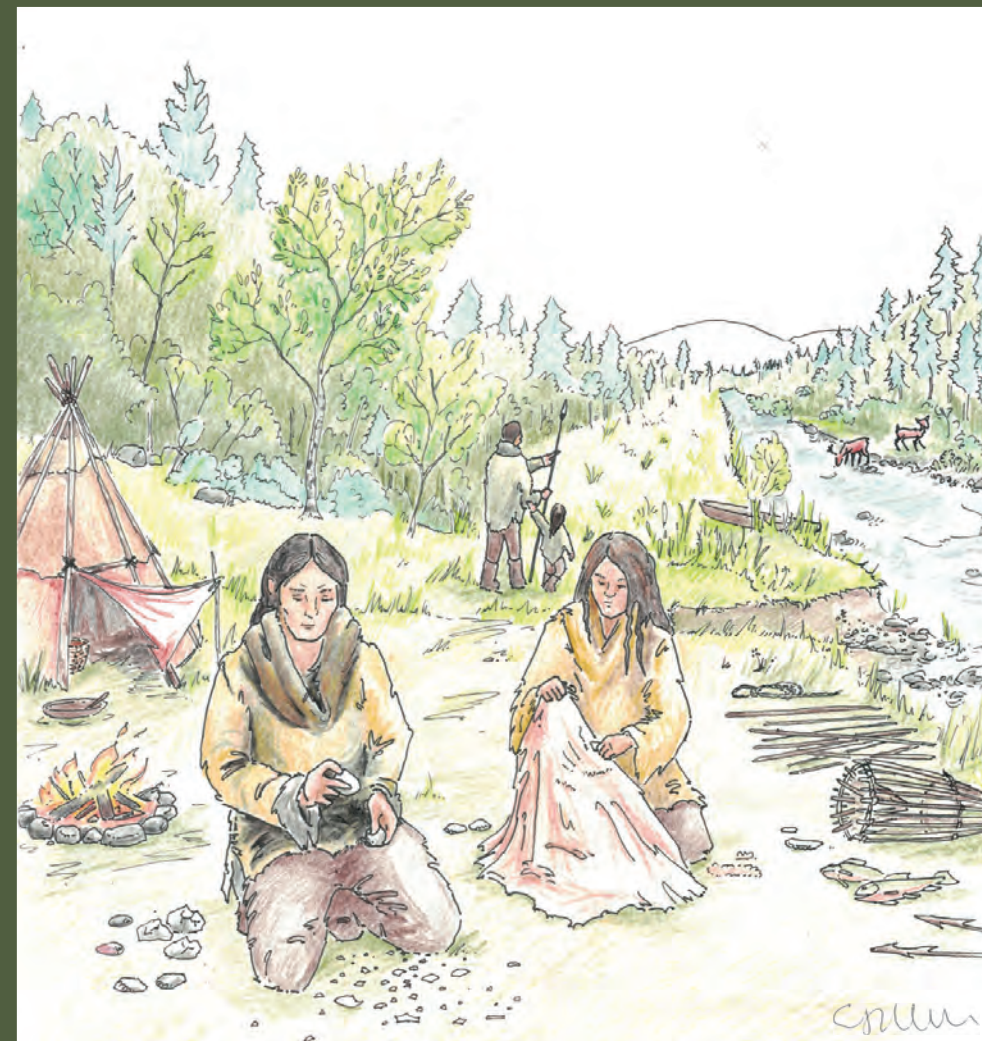


At the time of site occupation, the landscape witnessed the first forest growth following the post glacial tundra. Unlike the coastal region or the St. Lawrence Valley farther north, the Androscoggin Valley looked much as it does today by the time people came to these sites.

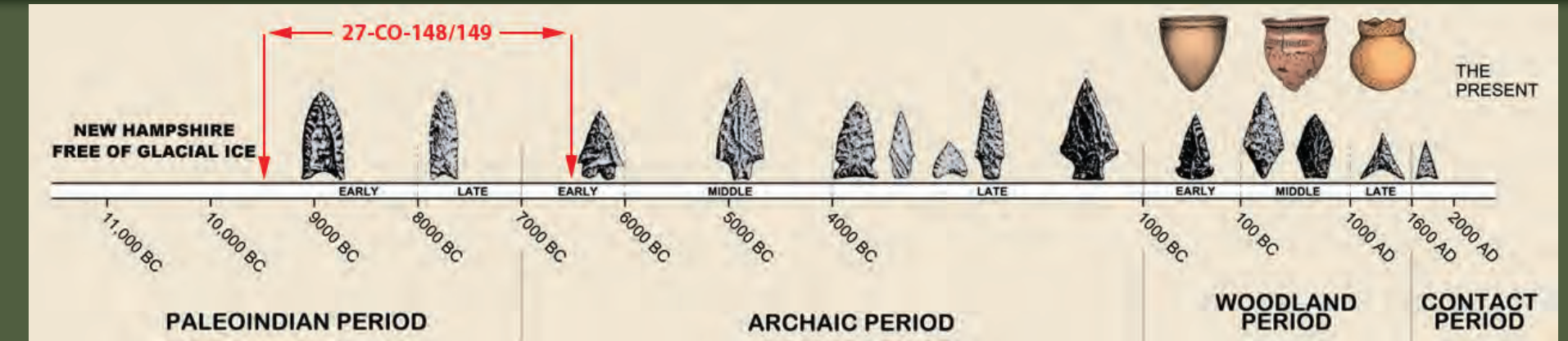
Organic materials and artifacts, such as cloth, wood, baskets and cordage rarely survive in our region's acidic soils. Of all the varied items that people used, only those made of stone remained at these sites, providing a glimpse of life in the past. But through inference and analysis of the archaeological record, along with comparisons with other sites, we get a more complete picture.



These matchstick-shaped fragments of quartz are broken from the edge of engraving tools called burins. Burins were likely used to make marks in wood, antler or bone. What marks might they have made?



Life along the Androscoggin involved more than just routine everyday tasks. Visiting family and friends, trading, and other community and social activities undoubtedly were elements of daily life.



Distinctive styles of artifacts and a scientific method of dating organic material called radiocarbon analysis tell us the age of these sites.



This is the base of a projectile point, probably used to tip a spear. It is of a style that was made in the Late Paleoindian period, about 9,500 years ago. It may have been used to hunt animals like caribou or white-tailed deer. Arrows are not thought to have been used in this part of North America for at least another 5,500 years.



This is the base portion of a spear point or knife that was broken before it was finished. It is made of chert. Cherts can be found in various places, but this dark red variety likely came from northwestern Maine.

These sites were more than just a place to fish, hunt, and gather plant foods. They are located on an important route connecting the ocean to inland regions and connecting north to south. People traveled and traded with other communities for stone tool material and other resources. Tools were made from a variety of stone types, including some from the local area and others from a greater distance. The variety of stone types tell us about exchange, mobility and the stone technology used.



This little scraping tool is made of a type of chert that comes from Vera Cruz in Pennsylvania, over 450 miles away! The material is occasionally found at sites dating around 9,000-10,000 years ago. Even at that time, people were trading over great distances for things that were important to them – as we still do today.

These scraping tools are made of white quartz. This stone is commonly found all over the New England region – you have probably seen some as pebbles in a river or on the beach. Scrapers were likely used for cleaning hides for clothing, blankets, and tent coverings. They were also used for working wood, antler, or bone. Example products might be spear shafts, tent poles, traps, weirs, and hooks or barbed points for fishing.



Who Lived There?

Archaeologists can determine when and how long a site was occupied, and by how many people, from the items left behind. The different types of artifacts tell us what kind of activities people were engaged in. Waste material, including stone flakes from tool making and rocks used in cooking hearths, can indicate the variety and frequency of activities. The two sites along Route 16 are small, no more than a large room in an average modern house. Both were likely occupied by a small group of people, such as a family or hunting party, for only a few days – between 7,500 and 10,500 years ago.