

The Rescue of Fort Massapeag

At the end of a street in the suburban community of Massapequa, in the Nassau County town of Oyster Bay, New York, is an oversized quarter-acre corner lot with a couple of thin groves of trees on it. If one peers closely at the grassy surface, some weak linear relief could be seen on the eastern and southern ends. Small white things peeping through the sod are not paper scraps, but broken clam shells. A wooden sign post identifies this mini-park as the site of the 17th-century Indian fort and a historic landmark.

Behind the erection of this bit of intelligence is a story, of which this little tract is tangible evidence which by happy chance was preserved for us.

Fort Massapeag is named after the local Indians, the Massapeags (also called the Massapeguas), who resided on Fort Neck in the early and middle years of the 17th century. Through the persistence of a local historian, the Town of Oyster Bay was persuaded to buy the land in 1958 to set aside as a public park in order to preserve its history.

Fort Massapeag is the only Indian fort known to exist on western Long Island. As a historic gem of the first magnitude, I sponsored its nomination as a National Historic Landmark in 1989. The property was designated four years later (Solecki and Grumet 1993). Worth telling is the story of how the fort was saved from destruction.

The first real knowledge we have of Fort Massapeag is a communication by land owner Judge Samuel Jones to Governor De Witt Clinton and read by the latter before a New-York Historical Society meeting in 1811 (Clinton 1821). In this letter, Judge Jones relates what his father had told him as a young boy about the fort site. The fort palisades, which formerly stood on an embankment surrounded by a ditch were by then gone, but the earthen features were still quite visible. Judge Jones told of another palisade fort which had stood on the southern point of the "Salt Meadow." But this one had eroded away. Judge Jones also related the local tradition of a disas-

trous conflict between the Massapeag Indians and the English under Captain John Underhill.

Although the exact site of this fight remains unknown, many local historians have identified Fort Neck as the scene of combat. Other records, however, indicate that the battle occurred elsewhere (Solecki n.d.).

Aside from passing references in books as the site of the "only battle with the Indians on western Long Island," more than a century passed before the fort locale was again brought to public attention. Few people knew about the fort's location. Only a few artifact hunters and curiosity seekers dug their way into the earthen embankment or sifted through nearby midden deposits.

All this changed when the Harmon National Real Estate Corporation acquired this part of Fort Neck and announced plans for construction of a large residential development named Harbor Green in 1933. Workmen were soon clearing areas of land to the north of the old fort site. First one, then 20 more human skeletons were unearthed by the workers. These discoveries revived the story of an Indian massacre at Fort Massapeag. Alerted by newspaper stories of the finds, local treasure seekers soon descended upon the area. Given free access by the property owners, they began to systematically ransack the locale.

Fortunately, Charles E. Herold, a local Seaford historian, managed to convince the developers to save the still-undisturbed Fort Massapeag site area. Planning to preserve the locale as a centerpiece of their development, they cleared the brush from the property and fenced it in during the spring of 1934. It is unfortunate that the extensive deposits to the north of Fort Massapeag did not receive similar treatment. Located directly in the path of the bulldozers, the deposits were stripped piecemeal by local artifact hunters and destroyed. It is unfortunate that these deposits did not receive the attention of trained archeologists while they were still untouched. It is important to remember, however, this was a period when few archeologists interested in the metropolitan New York area were employed in regional universities or museums.

News of the finds at Harbor Green attracted the attention of several young members of the Flushing Historical Society and their friends. The roster of investigators reads like a who's who of Northeastern archeology. A promising young amateur named William Claude salvaged burials at Harbor Green from 1933 until his tragically premature death in 1934. Portions of his collection are today preserved at the Nassau County Museum at Garvies Point. Containing a substantial assemblage of prehistoric material, the collection lacks historic trade goods, which were recovered in numbers at the fort site. Claude left no notes about the recovery of the Indian burials, but did photograph them *in situ* from several angles. No mention was made of any artifacts associations with skeletons, and we assume that there are none. Nor was there any mention of any evidence of foul play. An examination of Claude's photographs indicates that the interments were primary burials. They were not, however, carefully buried. It is possible that they met death elsewhere, and were brought back to the village site. Residences now cover the old burial ground and village site of the Indians on Harbor Green. However, reminders of Massapequa's prehistoric past are evident from time to time when stone projectile points, potsherds, bone fragments, and broken old pieces of chalky white clam shells turn up under lawns in the Harbor Green area.

The late James Burgraff intermittently worked in the area between 1936 and 1938. His collection, the largest body of material drawn from the locale, is presently curated at the New York State Museum in Albany. Burgraff regarded the site as a single component occupation. He further thought that the midden was an unstratified deposit. He was the first to note that large areas of the midden had been disturbed by looters. He recovered numerous

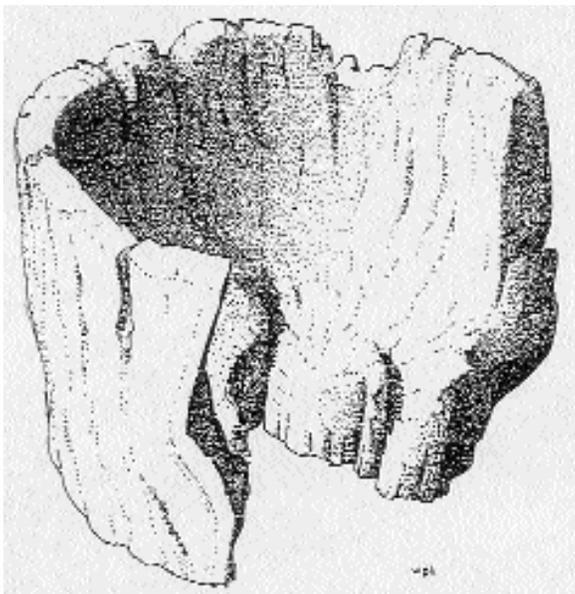
cut whelk columellae (the central sections of the shells), and hundreds of small bits of the purple anterior sections of large hard clam shells throughout the midden.

Several members of the Flushing Historical Society paid visits to Fort Massapeag in 1937 and 1938 to sample site deposits and examine the area's stratigraphy. Two Society members, myself and Carlyle S. Smith, later went on to earn doctorates in anthropology. Smith's doctoral dissertation findings, which remain the seminal synthesis of coastal New York archeology, drew heavily on his work at Fort Massapeag (Smith 1950). Other Society investigators, like Matt Schreiner and Robert Kusy, became respected avocational regional specialists.

Fort Massapeag was a remote locale during the 1930s. It could not be approached by car. Vehicles had to be parked about a quarter of a mile away on the newly cut street where the Harbor Green site deposits had been found and destroyed. The fort site lay in a growth of young trees and tangled brush. There was an opening to the south overlooking the vast salt meadow, with the Great South bay shimmering in the distance. The brush and vegetation had been cleared all around the ditch area, leaving the embankment still covered with young woody growth. The ditch, about 2' deep, could be easily traced around the almost perfect square measuring about 100' on each side. There were appendages on the northwest and southeast corners, which probably served as bastions for defense. A level area cutting through the embankment and crossing the ditch at the southeastern corner of the site probably served as the fort's entry way. A 50'-long shell midden heap located beyond this area appeared to be a good clue confirming this interpretation. It seems logical that occupational refuse would be dumped at a convenient exit. Spade tests conducted inside the enclosure brought up nothing but gravelly earth, a disappointment. The interior was quite overgrown and one had to hack one's way in through the brush and thickets.

On closer inspection, the shell midden turned out to have been damaged by treasure hunters. Undulations in the low hummock revealed the tell-tale marks of shovel holes. Indeed, it was difficult to find an intact spot in the midden not yet touched by the spade. One of the more practical minded collectors used an unarcheological potato hook in order to get through the masses of shells, an unorthodox but sadly effective use of the instrument.

Artifacts were recovered at depths ranging from 6" to 8" below the ground surface. Sterile soil appeared at about a foot to a foot and a half from the surface. In one afternoon, the group recovered



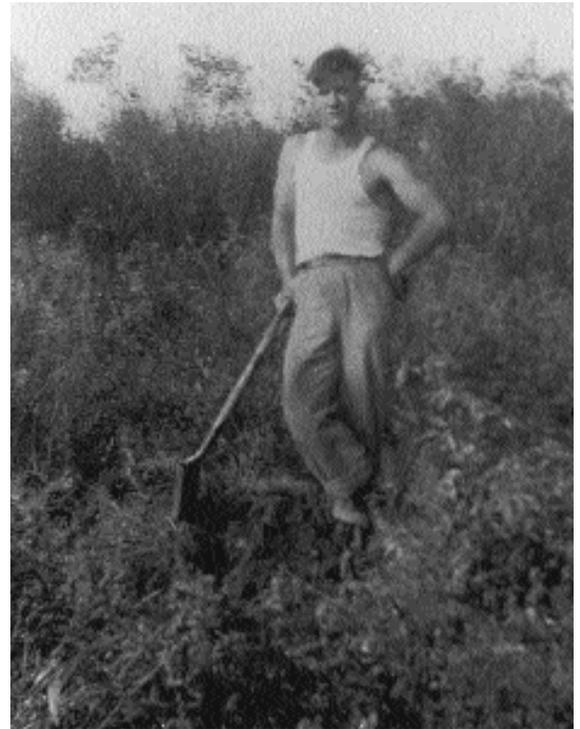
Wooden mortar found at the Fort Massapeag Site by William Claude in 1934 or 1935.

The author, Ralph Solecki, at Fort Massapeag, 1938. Photo courtesy of the author.

a brass mouth harp bearing a stamped trade mark "R", a white clay European pipe bowl with the trademark "EB" within a circle on its heel, several white clay pipestems, a white quartz arrowhead, a grooved stone axe-head, a number of stone flakes, several potsherds, and some worked whelk columellae and worked quahog shell pieces. A test cut made across the southern embankment did not reveal palisade post molds.

The Indian burials were not touched by the Flushing group with the exception of a test pit excavation by Schreiner. The investigation of the fort site with its proven potential of historic colonial trade goods plus the Native American Indian artifacts was considered to be more interesting. Furthermore, the Fort Massapeag trade artifacts, especially the white clay trade pipes, were distinctive enough to place them in the catalog of known dated trade goods. We now know that the pipes were fabricated in the Netherlands about the middle of the 17th century. This confirmed written documents indicating that the Massapeguas living in the Oyster Bay area of western Long Island were under the dominance of Dutch colonists from New Amsterdam (present day New York).

Some of the Native American artifacts, such as the grooved stone axe and the stone arrowhead, were similar to types made before the coming of the Dutch. Among the Indian potsherds were examples of Shantok wares. This pottery was named after certain distinctive diagnostic ware originally identified at the Fort Shantok site in Connecticut. Indians living in this area suffered greatly in a terrible massacre committed by

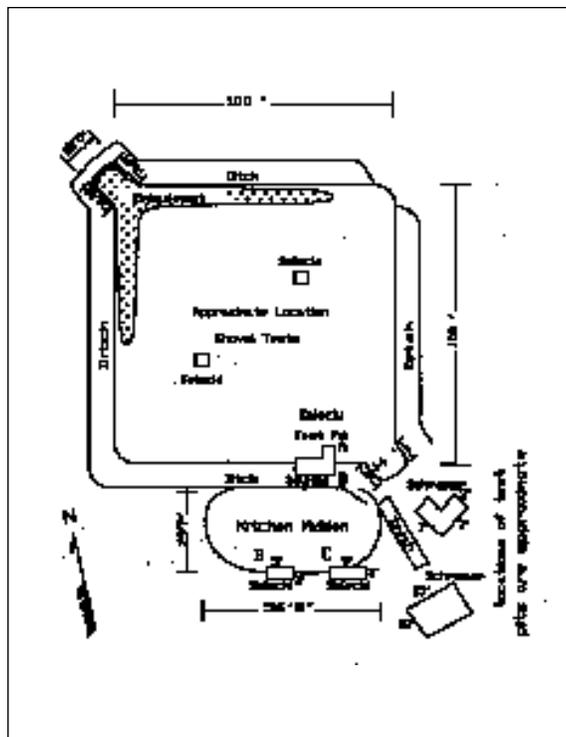


English troops led by captains John Mason and John Underhill in 1637 during the Pequot War. Many survivors of the conflict were subsequently forced to become servants of Long Island Indians who had aided the English. Sherds from their distinctive vessels have also been found at the contemporary Fort Corchaug on eastern Long Island (Solecki 1950).

Discoveries of masses of worked shells revealed the strategic importance of Fort Massapeag as a wampum manufactory. Scores of columellae, central stems of periwinkle shells, were found. These were detached from the enclosing shell, ground to shape by grit stones, and cut into lengths of cylindrical beads. These were drilled with iron "muxes" or drills. Long Island was famous for its sea shells, and the beads, highly regarded among the Indians, were in high demand among northeast native people. When colonial coinage became scarce, good wampum became very acceptable at agreed-upon exchange rates. Amplifying the ramifications of the wampum trade, it was soon discovered that after the very profitable fur trade local Indians suffered because of the depletion of the fur bearing animals, an alternative strategy had to be found. Luckily a solution was not long forth coming. This was to trade European goods for local wampum, and then in turn take this commodity to trade with the northern Indians for their beaver pelts (Burgraff 1938).

Mention is made in the colonial documents of the construction of a Dutch fortification at Oyster Bay in 1656 (Solecki and Grumet 1993;

Diagram of Fort Massapeag test excavation and features, 1937-1938. Courtesy of the author.



Solecki n.d.). We suggest that because Massapequa originally was called "South Oyster Bay" up to over 100 years ago, it is conceivable that the Massapequa fort was the structure ordered built by the Dutch. The bastions on the northwest and southeast, offering covering fire along the walls, more closely conformed to European military architectural conventions. Moreover, the rot resistant cedar palisade posts found along the embankments earlier in the century were cut and pointed with iron rather than stone axes.

We are fortunate to have four independently made scale maps of the Fort Massapeag earthworks. The first of these was drawn by Solecki with Schreiner's help in 1937. Unknown to them, Carlyle Smith and a friend made others one year later. Surveyors of the town of Oyster Bay produced a fourth plot map in 1950 depicting planned "paper" streets crossing the fort site boundaries. Here we have the all too familiar race of the real estate developer rushing through construction in order to forestall any objections. Indications grimly suggested that the old promise made in 1933 had evidently been forgotten.

Happily, another preservationist named John O'Halloran rose to meet this challenge to the site's continuing survival in 1953. Finding the site totally obscured by dense vegetation, O'Halloran had to relocate the fort embankment from the air. He then invited Carlyle Smith to revisit the site. Information gathered during this visit, published the following year (Smith 1954), helped O'Halloran convince the Town Board of Oyster Bay to agree to acquire the tract on August 4, 1953. Five years later, the town purchased the land and made it part of the municipal park. Shortly thereafter, a wooden marker noting the significance of the site was erected at the locale.

The park had been quietly maintained as a passive use area for more than 25 years when the Oyster Bay town historian Dorothy Horton McGee emerged as the most recent champion of Fort Massapeag preservation. Responding to a New York State Historic Preservation Office notice requesting information on potential National Historic Landmark property nominees, Ms. McGee suggested that Fort Massapeag be considered for designation through the Historic Contact theme study. Working closely with National Park Service

staff and myself, her efforts finally resulted in the designation of Fort Massapeag as a National Historic Landmark on April 19, 1993. The nomination form prepared for the site subsequently became the first of several theme study property reports published in scholarly journals (Solecki and Grumet 1994).

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Properties Designated Through the Historic Contact Theme Study

The following list contains the 14 properties designated as NHLs and the three existing NHLs for which a new thematic component was added through the Historic Contact theme study. Sponsors provided documentation, contacted landowners, reviewed nomination forms, and were given the opportunity to formally present the nomination to the History Areas Advisory Board in Washington, DC.

Property	Sponsor
Camden Historic District NHL (thematic upgrade) Caroline County, Virginia	Mary Ellen N. Hodges Martha W. McCartney E. Randolph Tumer, III
Cocumscussoc Historic Site Washington County, Rhode Island	Patricia E. Rubertone
Cushnoc Archeological Site Kennebec County, Maine	Leon E. Cranmer
Fort Massapeag Archeological Site Nassau County, New York	Ralph S. Solecki
Fort Orange Archeological Site Albany County, New York	Paul R. Huey
Fort Shantok Archeological Site New London County, Connecticut	Kevin A. McBride Lorraine E. Williams
Mashantucket Pequot Indian Reservation Archeological District New London County, Connecticut	Kevin A. McBride
Minisink Historic District Sussex County, New Jersey and Pike County, Pennsylvania	Herbert C. Kraft
Mohawk Upper Castle Historic District Herkimer County, New York	Dean R. Snow
Nauset Archeological District Barnstable County, Massachusetts	Francis P. McManamon
Norridgewock Archeological District Somerset County, Maine	Bruce J. Bourque Ellen R. Cowie James B. Petersen
Old Fort Niagara Archeological Site NHL (thematic upgrade) Niagara County, New York	Douglas Knight Patricia Kay Scott
Pemaquid Archeological Site Lincoln County, Maine	Robert L. Bradley
Pentagoet Archeological District Hancock County, Maine	Alaric Faulkner
St. Mary's City Archeological District NHL (thematic upgrade) St. Mary's City County, Maryland	Henry M. Miller
Schuyler Flatts Archeological District Albany County, New York	Paul R. Huey
Ward's Point Archeological Site Richmond County, New York	Jerome Jacobson