

Lake Champlain Voyages of Discovery

Reflective Essay

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The icy blue waters of Lake Champlain stretch 107 miles from north to south and cover almost 490 square miles. Lake Champlain has been a crucial geographical factor for indigenous and non-native cultures for thousands of years. Confronted with the beauty and mystery of the lake, several questions become apparent to the observer: What brought people to this place? Why was this place meaningful to so many cultures? Who were the people who came here? How did Lake Champlain play a role in the determining which cultures would flourish and which would perish? Finally, and perhaps most importantly, how do we find answers to these questions?

The program *Lake Champlain Voyages of Discovery: Bringing History Home* introduced local teachers and community members to the process of archaeological exploration within this historically significant region. By using the remnants of material cultures (artifacts), oral history, and historical documents, participants in the program were given the opportunity to develop a sense of the cultural, historical, and social meaning lying just below the surface of the Lake Champlain region.

Through the development of this context, participants were given a glimpse of the depth of history surrounding the lake. Three critical ideas were developed through this experience. First, I developed a broader understanding of the use of archaeology as a tool to discover and order historical cultures and societies of the past. Second, the archaeological information that was presented throughout the course allowed me to identify several themes critical to understanding how regional and cultural geography are crucial to cultural development. Finally, through our study of the different cultures that have left clues to their past, I developed a strong notion of history as narrative.

Archaeologists must incorporate a wide range of skills when delving into the past. Scientific ordering, historical questioning, cultural understanding, geographical reasoning, and identification of factual resources are all crucial to uncovering the mysteries of the past. Confronted with this multitude of information, developing a

sense of order is essential. My first objective was to try and develop a linear sense of Lake Champlain's history. Using information provided to us in the course, I identified two specific periods as being critical to the cultures living in the Lake Champlain region. Those periods were the indigenous or Native American period of 9,500 B.C to 1500 A.D and the contact period of 1500 - 1760 AD. Interestingly, I developed an understanding of each of these periods through different aspects of the archaeological experience.

Material remains and artifacts indicate that Native Americans or Paleo-Indians first entered Vermont at the end of the last Ice Age.

"About 12,000 years ago, the last glacier that covered what is now Vermont had melted and retreated northward. Soon after that, the nomadic Paleo-Indian move in to occupy the newly uncovered land. That movement marks the beginning of Vermont's archaeological past!"¹

As Native American cultures entered the region, they began leaving important archaeological clues as to why they were here and how they survived. Across the Paleo-Indian, Archaic, and Woodland periods, these clues included projectile points, ceramic shards, organic material, and stone artifacts. Vermont archaeologists have discovered numerous sites that have provided examples of Native American adaptation to the local climate and geography. My understanding of this period is based largely on archaeological assumptions related to these material remains. The specific archaeological evidence gives us answers to essential questions about why and how Native Americans first came to the region. Despite these discoveries, gaps in the oral history and lack of historical documentation leave much unanswered. Even with the archaeological evidence, it is hard not to develop a sense of curiosity about these early Vermonters. However, it can be reasonably inferred that the Lake Champlain region was host to a wide range of cultures for thousands of years preceding contact with non-Native Americans.

The second period that was clearly identified through our coursework ranged from 1500-1760 AD. Often referred to as the Contact Period, this was the era wherein European explorers began coming into contact with Native American cultures. For the archaeologist, this period offers more information in the form of written and oral histories of events. "Although archival records chronicle earlier contacts farther north in Canada, Giovanni da Verrazzano's journal of his 1524 voyage contains the first written record of a meeting between Europeans and Indian people in the portion of the North Atlantic region now within the borders of the

¹ An Introduction to Vermont Archaeology: Native American Archaeological Sites and the Chittenden County Circumferential Highway. University of Vermont Consulting Archaeology Program, 2003, pgs. 4-5.

United States." ² In conjunction with material remains, historians, scholars, and educators can find more detailed answers to questions of why, how, when, where, and who was occupying the Lake Champlain region. This is particularly true with regards to the exploration of the Lake and the earliest settlements of non-Native or European explorers. In addition to resources such as journals and personal writing, there is also a significant amount of historical documentation. Examples include the *Jesuit Relations*. "The Jesuits' writings are essential texts for determining the strategies and methods used in the conversions of Aboriginal peoples....Given the lack of writing by Native people, the *Relations* are almost the only documents available which reveal [Native Americans] their reaction to missionary offensive." ³ Additionally, land deeds and directives from the French government still exist. Using the material in these documents in conjunction with material remnants, historians can begin developing a more complete understanding of the social, political, and economic forces at work in the Lake Champlain region.

In addition to the broader understanding of archaeological discovery illuminated through our coursework, I also developed a strong sense of core themes that serve as a foundation for the history of the Lake Champlain region. Three of these themes are cultural conflict, the importance of place, and the linked roles of transportation and trade. Obviously, the theme of cultural conflict is one that runs through much of the exploration of North America. The devastation of aboriginal cultures across North America is a historical fact. "Most available evidence indicates that all aspects of North Atlantic Indian life were irrevocably transformed by contact during the 1600's. Indian people only dimly aware of Europeans were forced to contend with new neighbors, tools, and ideas as wars, disease, and dispossession devastated their communities." ⁴ Despite this, the curious educator can find plenty of questions to explore. How did different tribes accommodate the non-Native explorers, traders, and missionaries? What were the specific causes of cultural destruction? What remnants can the archaeologist find that can broaden our understanding of the cultural destruction? Exposing students to these questions and using an inquiry based, archaeological approach to answering them helps us to develop a better understanding of cultural conflict. To extend that thought, it also

² Grumet, Robert S. Historic Contact: Indian People and Colonists in Today's Northeastern United States in the Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995, pg. 59.

³ "Accounts of a Missionary Offensive." The Jesuit Relations and the History of New France. Library and Archives Canada. 28 June 2007 <<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/jesuit-relations/h19-210-e.html>>.

⁴ Grumet, Robert S. Historic Contact: Indian People and Colonists in Today's Northeastern United States in the Sixteenth through Eighteenth Centuries. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995, pg. 61.

allows us to make comparisons and connections with cultural conflict occurring today. Archaeology can be used to foster a historical understanding of cultural conflict but also to develop links to the present.

A second essential theme drawn from the *Voyages* coursework was the importance of place in the geographical and cultural sense. For more than 9,000 years, cultures have settled on the banks of the lake. Why? What geographical, climatic, and natural resource features occur here that make it significant? The vibrant Lake Champlain ecosystem provided the necessary environment for cultures to flourish.

"...through all of Vermont's environmental changes, native people were and still are living their lives and caring for their families here. Just like today's Vermonters, the original Vermonters did this by adapting to the environment and by developing special techniques and tools to help them get the food and comfort they needed for survival." ⁵

Across cultures, the historian can begin identifying the local geographical features that make an area likely to develop and foster different cultures. Once cultures have been established in these areas, the sense of place itself becomes an essential part of the culture.

"To people who have lived there for generations, homelands are not blank space, terra incognita, awaiting someone else's knowledge and charting. Indians had their own cartographic conceptions, maps that conveyed accumulated knowledge of place and were stored in the memories of individuals who could communicate the information by speech, gesture and depiction in response to specific needs and requests." ⁶

By developing a sense of the importance of place, observers can explore the archaeological evidence in order to find out how that sense of place was embedded in the culture. As with the theme of cultural conflict, the observer can also begin making connections to his or her own culture. Comparing value systems within a common place enables historians to reflect on cultural differences. This is a crucial skill that can help students develop an understanding of cultural change across historical periods.

A third theme that reoccurred throughout our coursework was the tandem of transportation and trade. As an essential inland waterway, Lake Champlain offered a means of transportation for Native Americans, non-Native explorers and Europeans. In search of the Northwest Passage, fur, and religious converts, Europeans took

⁵ [An Introduction to Vermont Archaeology: Native American Archaeological Sites and the Chittenden County Circumferential Highway](#). University of Vermont Consulting Archaeology Program, 2003, pgs. 4-5.

⁶ Calloway, Colin G.. [One Vast Winter Count: The Native American West before Lewis and Clark](#). Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2003, pg. 11

advantage of Lake Champlain's navigable territory. In particular, the French explorer Samuel de Champlain opened up the region with his exploration of 1609. Recognizing the benefits and potential for trade, Europeans, by the late 17th century were plying the waters of the region in search of trade goods. This exploration, based on available transportation and the benefits of trade was the first portent of Native American cultural destruction.

"Nevertheless, the new commercial situation was at best a mixed blessing. The fur trade proved to be a Trojan horse in Indian North America, unleashing catastrophic forces at the same time as it delivered desired gifts. The trade tied its Indian patrons into the expanding world of European capitalism and threw neighboring customers in desperate competition...." ⁷

These three themes: cultural conflict, a sense of place, and transportation and trade are key, interrelated players in the historical tragedy of the Native American peoples. Using material remnants, historical documents, and oral histories, archaeologists can untangle these threads so that observers more clearly understand the web of our regional history.

The third essential understanding born in the *Voyages* course was the notion that history is a complex narrative. Archaeologists use a wide range of historical, scientific, and cultural skills to develop an understanding of the evidence. However, without a narrative, without a story behind the evidence, the observer sees just that: artifacts. By establishing some form of narrative based on the available evidence, observers are able to begin tying together the threads of the past. For example, in our study of Crown Point it was revealed that the fort supplied settlers with a daily ration of bread. Settlers, most likely, would canoe to the fort to receive news, supplies, and of course, their daily bread. Thinking about this, I began to develop numerous questions. Did early settlers canoe in rough weather? Was canoeing a necessary skill or was it viewed recreationally, as it is today? Who built the canoes? Were there contests to determine who was the most skillful canoeist? These might not be the most pointed historical questions. However, using the tools of archaeology, perhaps we can find answers to them. More importantly, in doing so, we begin to develop a story of these early settlers. They become people, like us, struggling to survive in a world much harsher than ours. As these figures become characters, and our sense of history a narrative, we become more attracted and interested in the conflicts, events, and resolution of those stories. I would argue that

⁷ Calloway, Colin G. [The Western Abenakis of Vermont, 1600-1800 War, Migration, and the Survival of the Indian People.](#) pg. 43

the exercise of creating a narrative with the archaeological evidence creates a passion for history that once sparked, is difficult to ignore.

The *Lake Champlain: Voyages of Discovery* course was a superb introduction to the depth of history surrounding Lake Champlain. Perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of the course was the amount of history that *we don't know*. Despite the wealth of artifacts, historical documents, and recorded oral history, there remains much that is a mystery. Exploring that mystery using sound science, logical lines of inquiry, and the best available resources enables the participant to appreciate what makes this region such an important cultural and historical area. In exploring the past, we can develop a narrative of the history, the events, and the people that make this a special place. Furthermore, we can use that narrative to develop connections and relationships to the past that perhaps someday will also be of archaeological importance.