

## The Iroquoian Occupations of Northern New York: A Summary of Current Research

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*In the late precontact period, northern New York state was home to several distinct yet related Iroquoian village settlements. Archaeological collections from these sites, derived from both controlled and uncontrolled excavations, reside in various museums across the eastern United States. Brief researches by the New York State Museum, the Smithsonian Institution, the Heye Foundation, the United States Army, and SUNY Buffalo have resulted in a concrete seriation of the ceramic tradition in the area and a preliminary view of village settlement patterns. Since 1994, I have been conducting my own research on the St. Lawrence and Sanford Corners sites. New excavations have shown that, despite being plowed down, looted, or destroyed by development, these sites still have intact features and therefore the potential to tell us a lot about settlement patterns and subsistence. Chronology remains a problem, as few sites in the region have been reliably dated, but this aspect, too, is being addressed by current research.*

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### Introduction

In the late precontact period, from about A.D. 1300 until the early 1500s, northern New York was home to several clusters of Iroquoian village and related sites. Their inhabitants have been variously recognized by the terms St. Lawrence Iroquoians (Pendergast 1990), Jefferson County Iroquoians (Engelbrecht et al. 1990) or Northern New York Iroquoians (Abel 2001). In more recent years, some have questioned the utility of any of these labels, preferring instead to talk only in terms of localized village clusters.

Information about these late precontact Iroquoian manifestations began to be published in the early nineteenth century. Unfortunately, many of the sites visited by early authors, such as Taylor (1850[1802]), Squier (1848, 1851), Skinner (1921), and Hough (1850, 1851, 1853, 1854) were undergoing active processes of destruction by agriculture and uncontrolled excavation. By the early twentieth century, many of these sites had been destroyed. A survey of sites in the 1960s by Sidler (Engelbrecht et al. 1990) revealed that approximately 55 such sites once

existed in Jefferson County, of which about half could be relocated for further research. Another five St. Lawrence Iroquoian village sites were once present in neighbouring St. Lawrence County (Abel 2001). Marian White conducted research at three Jefferson County sites (Caen, Potocki, and Durham) under a National Science Foundation grant in the late 1960s, but only one of the investigations was ever documented (Sidler 1971). Peter Pratt conducted excavations at the Camp Drum 1 site in Jefferson County and at the Pine Hill and Washburn sites in St. Lawrence County. Earl Sidler took up White's research for his doctoral dissertation, which, unfortunately, he never completed. While White's research is archived at the museum in her name at SUNY Buffalo, what remains of Sidler's research notes is in my possession. Engelbrecht and others have summarized the results (Engelbrecht et al. 1990).

My own interest in the St. Lawrence Iroquoian occupations of northern New York began in 1994. As members of the newly formed 1000 Islands Chapter of the New York State

Archaeological Association, David Fuerst and I supervised chapter excavations of the late fifteenth century St. Lawrence site, in the Clayton Cluster from 1994 to 1999 (Figure 1). The Clayton Cluster is a sequence of Iroquoian villages near Clayton, New York, that appeared suddenly around A.D. 1400 and seemingly disappeared just a short 100 or so years later. The cultural assemblages (Figures 2 and 3) and settlement data (Figure 4) from those excavations became the basis for my doctoral dissertation (Abel 2001). Since then, those assemblages have contributed to several other research projects by me and by others.

In 2013, I conducted an archaeological reconnaissance of a proposed sewer project in the town of Leray, New York, a project which resulted in the rediscovery of the Sanford Corners site. This village site in the Rutland Hollow Cluster (Figure 1) was among those thought to have been destroyed by agricultural development, but fresh testing revealed that at least some material culture remained (Abel 2013). Monitoring of the excavations for the sewer construction revealed

that intact features remained as well, leading to data recovery excavations in the summers of 2014 and 2015 (Abel 2016). Since then, the 1000 Islands Chapter has been conducting further archaeological testing to explore other areas of the site.

### Summary of Past Research

The St. Lawrence Iroquoians of northern New York shared many traits with neighbouring Iroquoian communities in Ontario and New York. They lived in palisaded villages characterized by multi-family longhouses approximately 7 m wide and up to 30 m long (LBA 1994). Each village contained between 3 and 5 longhouses, for a population estimate of 150–250 people per village. A few larger villages formed in the early sixteenth century, including the Morse and Potocki sites, and these may have contained upwards of 600 people.

Subsistence studies document that these villages were supported by a diffuse economy based on agriculture, heavily supplemented by hunting, gathering, and fishing. Floral assemblages

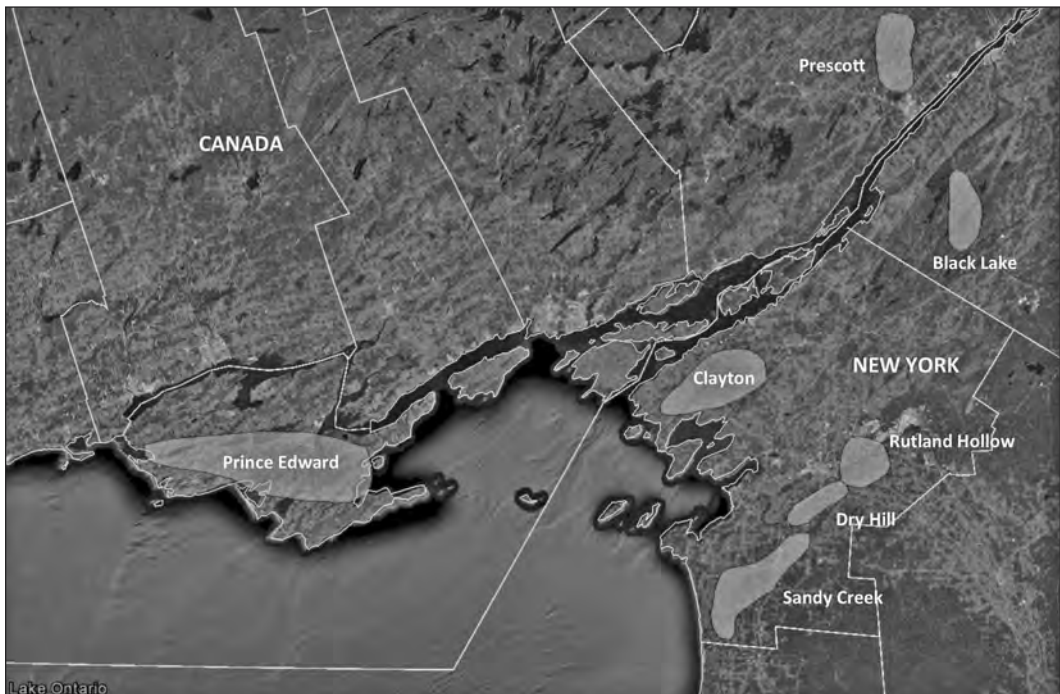
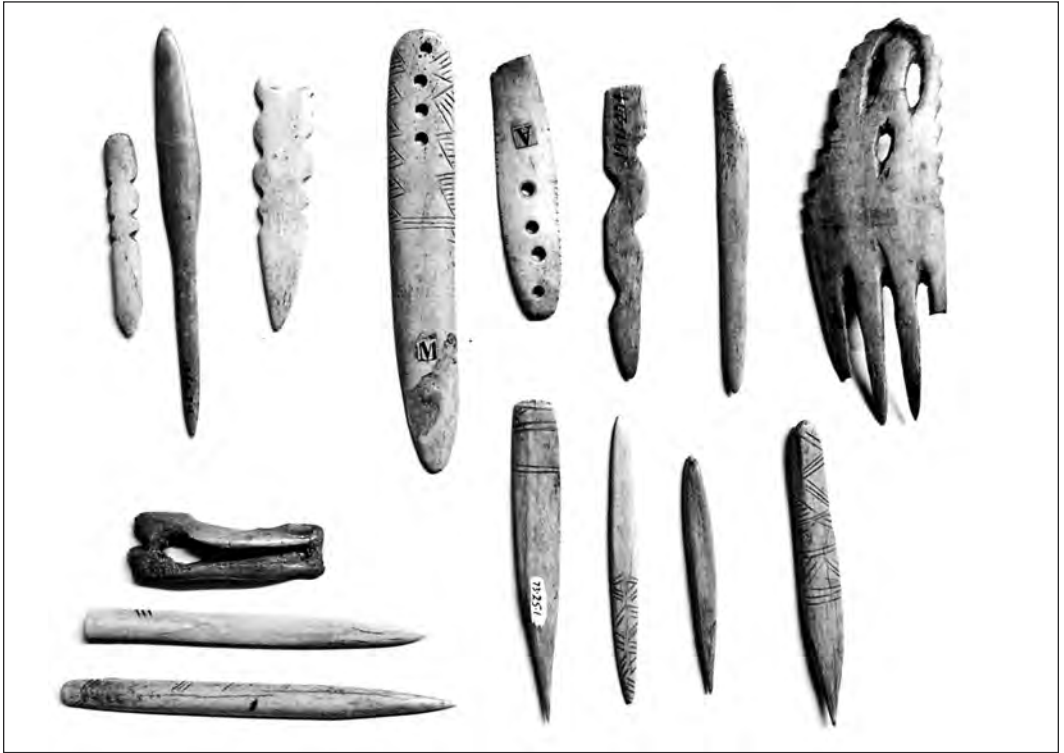


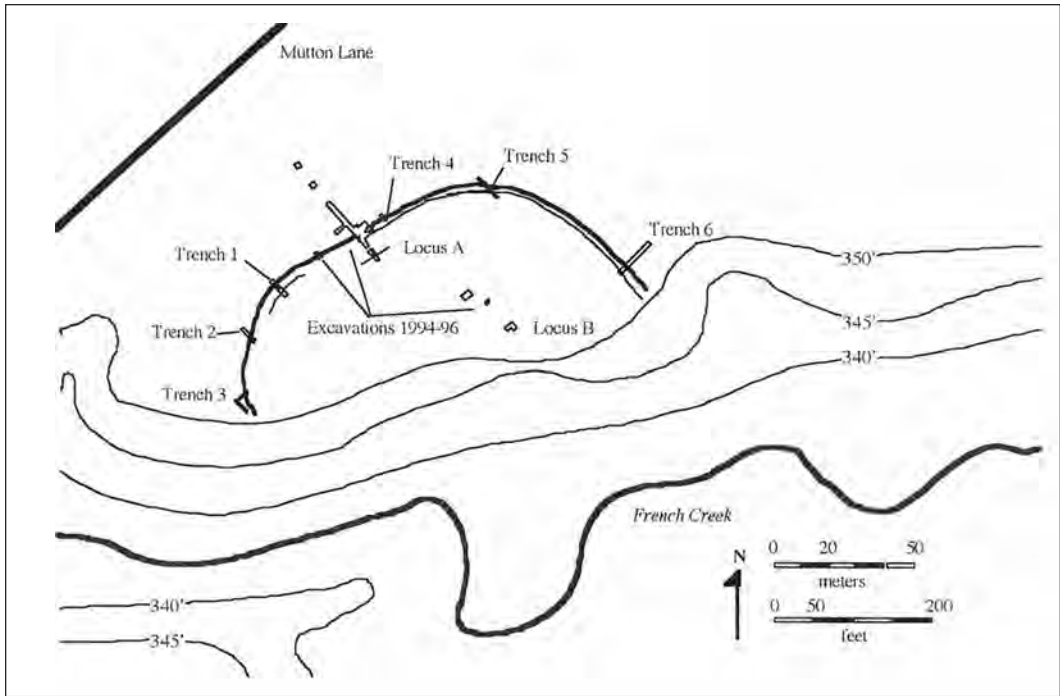
Figure 1. Locations of village clusters mentioned in the text.



**Figure 2.** Sample of ceramic rims from Jefferson County. S=Swarthout, all other proveniences unknown (Jefferson County Historical Society collections)



**Figure 3.** Variety of bone tools from Jefferson County Iroquoian sites. M=Matteson, A= Allen (Durham), all other proveniences unknown (Jefferson County Historical Society Collections).



**Figure 4.** Excavations at the St. Lawrence site by the Thousand Islands Chapter, NYSAA, 1994-1999.

document the cultivation of maize, beans, squash, sunflower, and tobacco, as well as the utilization of many indigenous wild species, including bramble, strawberry, Lamb's quarter, sumac, and St. John's wort (Fecteau 2013). Faunal assemblages are, unsurprisingly, dominated by deer, but numerous species of mammal, fish, and reptile are also present (Abel 2001; Cottrell 1979; Vavrsek 2010). Faunal representation is likely skewed by poor bone preservation on many sites.

The material culture is characterized by a ceramic assemblage dominated by large, globular, grit-tempered jars with high, flaring, collared and castellated rims. Decoration is mostly confined to the collar, consisting of alternating parallel obliques and verticals executed in either dentate stamping or incising. Annular punctates, some forming effigy faces, often adorn the castellations. The collar base is often underlined with one or more horizontal lines, over which large tool impressions have been executed. The lips are often decorated with interior and exterior ticks or punctates (Engelbrecht 1995). Also prominent is

a pipe assemblage consisting of ceramic elbow forms with elaborate collared, ring, or effigy bowls. The lithic assemblage is unspectacular, dominated mostly by expedient flakes and ground stone tools. There are few chipped stone tools, a fact explored by Engelbrecht and Jamieson (2016). The lack of a stone tool assemblage seems mitigated by a rich bone assemblage made up of projectile points, awls, drills, punches, rasps, combs, and needles (Jamieson 2016).

The origins of this Iroquoian manifestation remain unclear. There is currently a gap in our knowledge regarding sites occupied during the A.D. 1000–1300 period—that is, prior to their appearance. Materials pointing to a smooth cultural transition from earlier Middle Woodland occupations (cf. Gates St-Pierre 2004) have not been recovered. This absence may or may not support the conclusion that Iroquoian populations are intrusive to the region (Snow 1996). Clearly much more research is needed. From A.D. 1300 to the beginning of the sixteenth century, northern New York was home to at least five discrete village

sequences (Engelbrecht 1995). These sequences were the result of both fission and fusion within and among an unknown number of contemporaneous village communities. A sequence of occupation among the villages is largely unrealized due to a paucity of chronometrically dated components.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of all St. Lawrence Iroquoian research, and the one that has received the most attention over the past 100 years, is the apparent disappearance of indigenous Iroquoian populations from the St. Lawrence valley between 1540 and 1603 (Jamieson 1990b; Pendergast 1993a). My dissertation research in the late 1990s focused on this research question from the perspective of the Clayton Cluster. I analyzed and compared ceramic attributes from Clayton Cluster and a number of neighbouring Iroquoian sites. What I found suggested that Clayton Cluster people abandoned northern New York to merge with ancestral Wendat populations in Prince Edward County, Ontario (Abel 2002).

In St. Lawrence County, New York, comparative ceramic analyses documented a probable population movement out of northern New York as the likely basis for the Prescott Cluster (Abel 2001, 2002; Adams 2003; cf. Jamieson 1990a). This shift likely occurred c. A.D. 1400–1450. Comparative ceramic analyses make it further apparent that populations in southern Jefferson County abandoned the area shortly after A.D. 1500. Lineages realigned and coalesced with communities of the ancestral Haudenosaunee, who were more politically organized (Engelbrecht 1995). These conclusions are supported by the influx of St. Lawrence Iroquoian ceramics and pipes on contemporary Onondaga (Bradley 1987) and Oneida (Pratt 1976) village sites.

### Recent Research

While the foregoing ideas remain to be refined and further tested, numerous other research projects have been ongoing using collections from the Clayton Cluster St. Lawrence site. In 2012, flotation samples and other floral assemblages from the site were analyzed by Rudy Fecteau. This

analysis resulted in the identification of cultivated and wild species of plants utilized by the St. Lawrence site community (Figure 5). Cultivated plants made up approximately 43 percent of the assemblage, while wild species made up 47 percent (including charcoal). What was surprising, however, was the amount of tobacco recovered from the flotation samples (208 seeds), an amount that surpasses any other known assemblage in the Northern Iroquoian world (Fecteau 2013). We are now in the process of inventorying macrobotanical remains from screened material to add to the total picture of plant utilization by the St. Lawrence site people.

Another intriguing assemblage from the St. Lawrence site is its collection of 38 steatite and talc beads that have been and continue to be analyzed by researchers at the Université de Montréal, Archaeological Services Inc. and the University of Georgia. Chemical signatures of these beads are being compared with those from steatite beads found at contemporaneous sites throughout the St. Lawrence valley and the north shore of Lake Ontario, all the way to Huronia (Williamson et al. 2016). As well, research is being conducted to source the material used to produce the beads (Barron et al. 2016). Preliminary results indicate that northern New York was a significant centre for the manufacture and distribution of these beads throughout the region and that it was likely the source for steatite beads being found in the southern ancestral Wendat territory.

Research at the Sanford Corners site is in the initial stages, but it has produced some surprising data, considering that this village was considered by most to be destroyed. The Sanford Corners site lies in the Rutland Hollow Cluster, in southeastern Jefferson County (Figures 1 and 6), a cluster which also includes the Camp Drum 1 site (LBA 1994). Monitoring and data recovery excavations at Sanford Corners (Figure 7) uncovered several features that have produced small ceramic, bone and floral assemblages. The ceramics are so far consistent with those from other village sites in the area, indicating an early period (c. A.D. 1300–1400) temporal placement (Figure 8). Also present are pipes and gaming pieces. The lithic assemblage, like those from



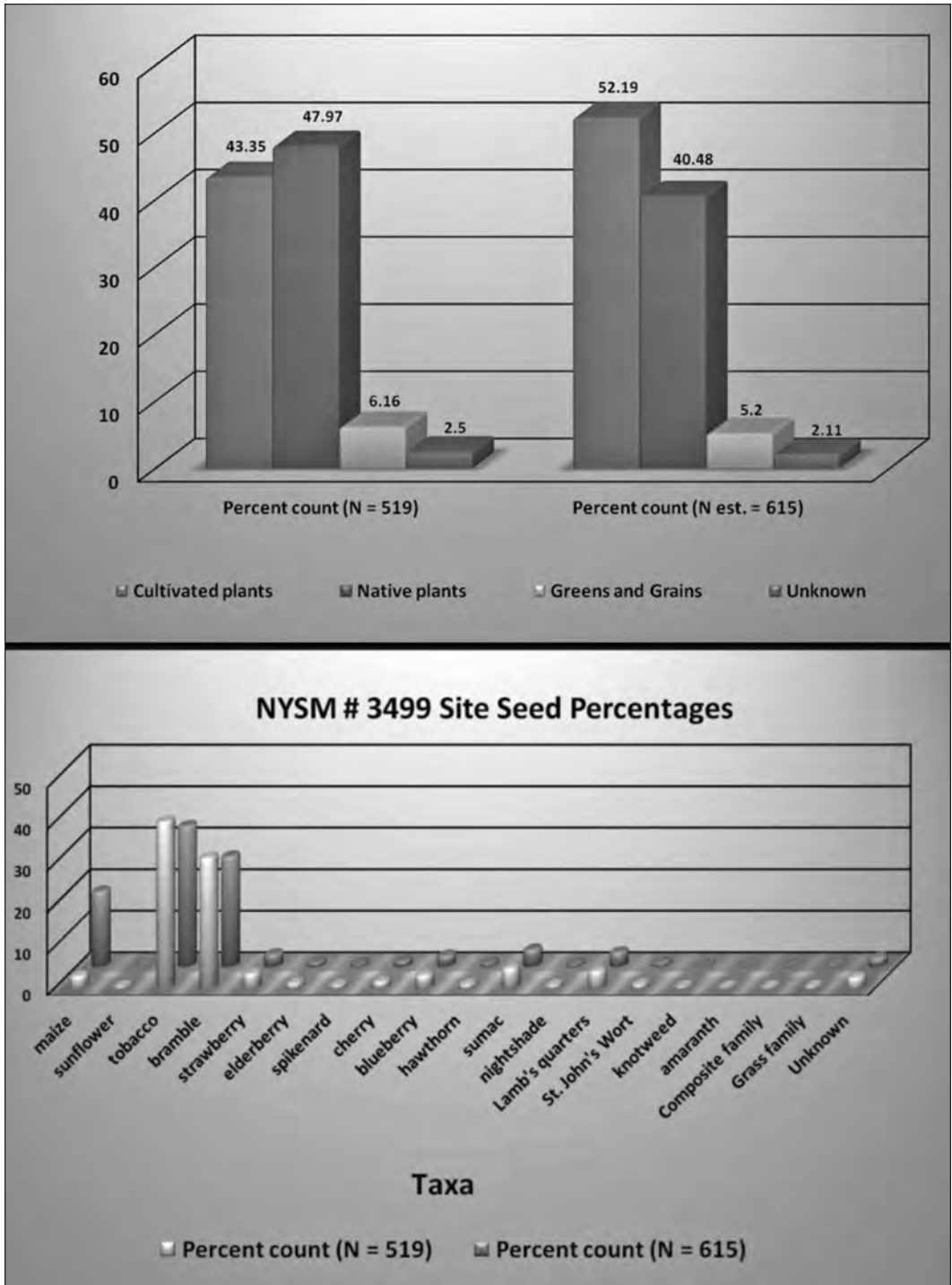


Figure 5. Frequencies of cultivated and non-cultivated seeds; frequencies of all seeds by species; St. Lawrence site flotation samples.

other St. Lawrence Iroquoian sites in the area, is rather sparse, being made up of bipolar cores and expedient flake tools. There is some bone, but no bone tools have been recovered, likely due more to poor preservation rather than a real absence.

Two human interments were found during the monitoring and data recovery investigations. The first appears to have been a secondary burial, redeposited during road construction in the historic period. It was located 30 m west of the

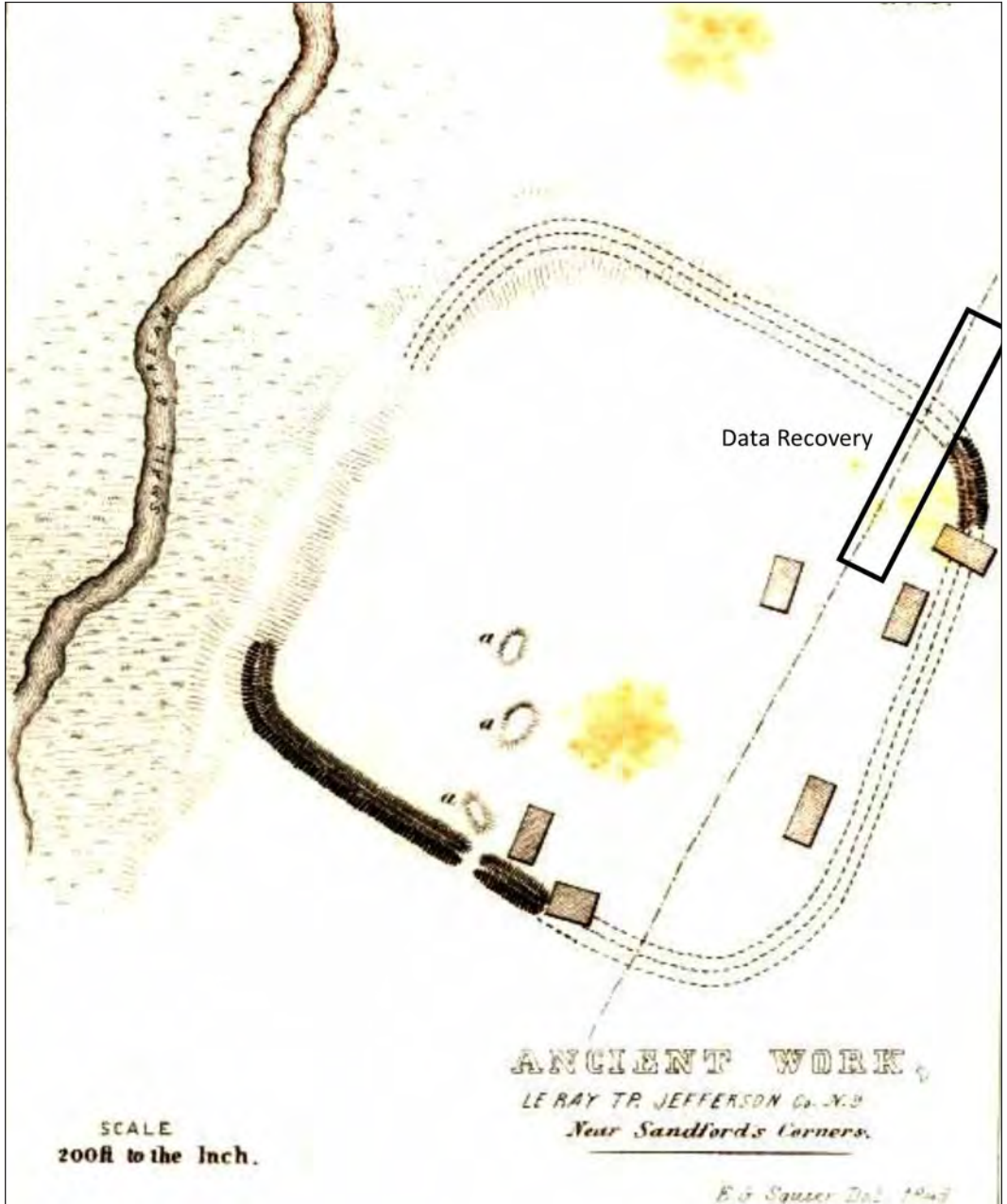


Figure 6. Squier's (1849) map of the Sanford Corners site, with 2014-15 investigations.

village. The second burial, found within the precontact village, was intact, consisting of an adult lying flexed on the right side, facing southwest. After consultation with the monitoring Onondaga and Oneida Nation representatives, the burial was preserved in place with no further study. These discoveries are consistent with an emerging pattern of mortuary ritual, in which

primary burials seem to be common within the village, while village cemetery areas west of the village contain both primary and secondary burials. This suggests that some individuals were buried in longhouse floors, perhaps during winter, and were later moved to village cemeteries. Only one ossuary is known in the region, from the Enderton site.

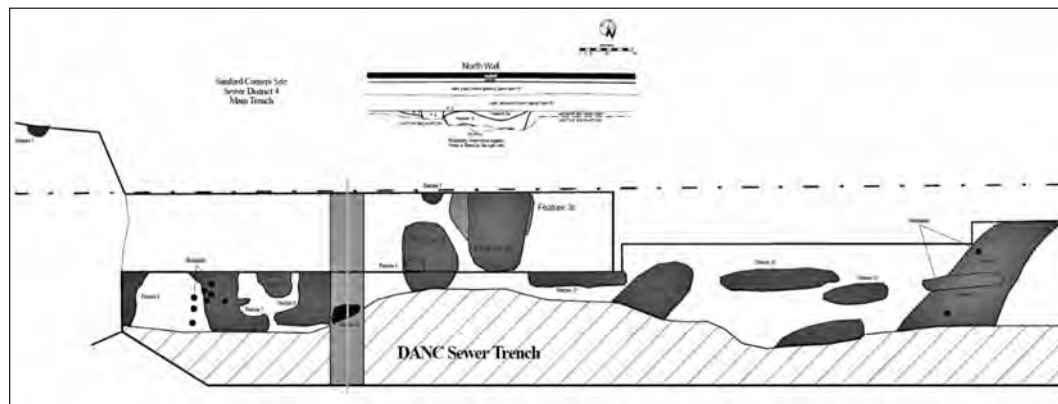


Figure 7. Data recovery investigations, Sanford Corners site 2014-2015.

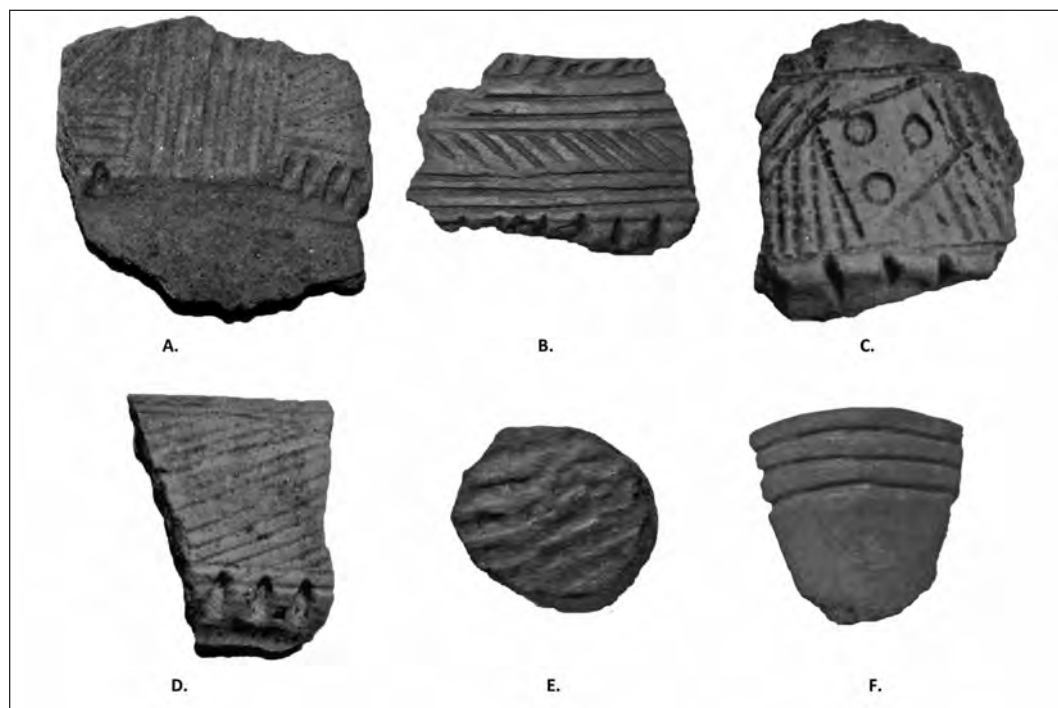


Figure 8. Ceramic artifacts from Sanford Corners, 2014-15 excavations. A-D rims; E ceramic gaming piece; F ring-bowl pipe fragment.



### Future Directions

Northern New York still holds data to address many important research questions about these Iroquoian peoples. What research I have conducted has shown that while much has been lost, much settlement and subsistence data remains intact, even at sites widely believed to have been destroyed. It is precisely this settlement and subsistence data which needs focused attention. We have very little data on the precise number and arrangement of longhouses within these villages. In addition, we have little information on the internal arrangement of these longhouses. To date, only two partial longhouses have been investigated and reported on (Abel 2001; LBA 1994).

In addition, much more needs to be done to document subsistence within these villages. As noted above, floral assemblages from the St. Lawrence site are under analysis now, and there are some preliminary results (Fecteau 2013), but this analysis is so far unique in northern New York. Faunal analyses from the St. Lawrence (Abel 2001) and Pine Hill (Cottrell 1979) sites document a diffuse hunting and fishing strategy, but these are the only ones that have been reported in northern New York so far. Pollen studies have been explored (Brown 2002), but much more could be done.

Another problem that needs to be addressed is the lack of a well-dated chronology for these components. Radiocarbon dates exist from only three components. Reliable dates from three components (Potocki, Camp Drum 1 and St. Lawrence) place their components in the mid- to late 1400s. Two other dates from Camp Drum 1 span the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and therefore cannot be considered reliable. Pendergast has lamented the unsuitability of radiocarbon to the task of seriating these components (Pendergast 1993b, 1996). Unfortunately, with so few dates, we cannot begin to determine which of these dates are accurate, other than those obviously erroneous from Camp Drum 1. A project to obtain dates on more Jefferson County components is in progress.

### Conclusions

Research on the late precontact Iroquoian communities of northern New York has been sporadic at best. Of 55 known archaeological components, about half remain extant for research. Of those, only seven have received some level of professional excavation and documentation. Partial palisade ditches have been documented from two components. A partial longhouse has been excavated at only one component, while a short longhouse has been documented at another. Ceramic traditions are well understood, but they are poorly anchored by chronometric dates. Subsistence has only begun to be documented. In summary, we are a long way from claiming any specific knowledge about these communities. What we do know comes largely from unsystematically excavated cultural assemblages housed in museums and from analogy to other, more thoroughly excavated and documented regions. With perseverance, however, some answers may be forthcoming.

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*À la fin de la période précontact, dans le nord de l'état de New York, il y avait plusieurs villages iroquoiens distincts, mais apparentés. Des collections archéologiques provenant de fouilles archéologiques contrôlées et non contrôlées de ces sites se retrouvent dans divers musées à travers l'est des États-Unis. De brèves recherches entreprises par New York State Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Heye Foundation, United States Army et SUNY Buffalo ont abouti à une sériation concrète de la tradition de la céramique dans cette région et à une vision préliminaire de configurations de villages. Depuis 1994, j'entreprends ma propre recherche aux sites du Saint-Laurent et de Sanford Corners. De nouvelles fouilles ont démontré que, malgré avoir été enfouis, pillés ou détruits par le développement, ces sites présentent encore des vestiges intacts et pourront alors potentiellement élucider sur les configurations d'établissement et de subsistance. La chronologie reste problématique puisque peu de sites de la région ont fidèlement été datés. Par contre, cet aspect est aussi adressé par des recherches actuelles.*

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