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Digging into the Peskeompskut massacre

Archaeological team takes first steps toward mapping historic Montague battle site

By AVIVA LUTTRELL Recorder Staff

TURNERS FALLS — The Battle of Great Falls/Wissantinnewag-Peskeompskut, also known as the Peskeompskut massacre, was arguably the most decisive battle of King Philip's War. Now, a Connecticut-based archaeological team is taking the first steps to unearth and map the sites of the gruesome, but historically significant event.

The project is funded by a \$60,000 site identification and documentation grant from the National Park Service's American Battlefield Protection Program, and aims to identify the likely locations of King Philip's War, which took place from 1675 to 1676, and to engage local officials, landowners and the public in efforts to protect the battlefields and associated sites.

The Town of Montague, with support from the Battlefield Study Advisory Board composed of representatives from Montague, Greenfield and Gill and five Native American tribes, selected the Mashantucket Pequot Museum & Research Center and its research director, Dr. Kevin McBride, to conduct the study. In the first phase of the project, researchers are gathering data and visiting institutions and repositories across New England to search for relevant artifact and document collections.

"We've been trying to track down many of the leads we've been turned on to over the last few meetings," military historian David Naumec told the advisory board Wednesday.

Naumec is one of four researchers from the Mashantucket Pequot Museum involved in the project. He said the team's findings have been hit-or-miss. While some institutions have partially lost collections of mostly pre-contact artifacts, researchers have had success with others, such as the Institute for American Indian Studies in Washington, Conn.

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"Things have been lost in the mix," Naumec said. However, a collection belonging to the institute contains artifacts from the vicinity of Turners Falls, including brass and wampum beads

attributed to seven contact-period graves excavated on Fort Hill at Riverside between 1914 and 1915. Naumec said the team is pursuing those leads.

Project coordinator David Brule of Erving suggested the advisory board discuss how to coax out local individuals with collections of their own.

“Through the course of this research, we’ll be able to fully document (artifacts), figure out where they came from and where they should go now,” Naumec said.

He added that the University of Massachusetts and the Massachusetts Historical Commission are two stones that the team has not yet turned, and contacting those institutions is one of the next big steps in this phase of the project.

Researchers will also gather oral histories from the Narragansett, Mashpee Wampanoag, Wampanoag of Gay Head, Nipmuck and Stockbridge-Munsee-Mohican tribes.

“This is a unique opportunity to allow the tribes to give their narratives of what happened,” Brule said.

During the battle, which took place May 19, 1676, more than 150 colonial militia attacked a village and killed approximately 200 Natives in less than an hour, according to a historical context provided in the team’s proposal. After the massacre, Native men from several other area villages mobilized and attacked colonists, killing 38, including commander of the English militia Capt. William Turner, after whom the village of Turners Falls is named.

In the first phase of the project, researchers will also study existing written and oral records from both the colonial and Native perspectives, historical archaeological research, military terrain analysis and conduct windshield and walkover surveys.

But despite the technical aspects of the project, Stockbridge-Munsee-Mohican tribe representative Bonney Hartley said, “The whole purpose behind this should be to understand and heal and be cognizant that these are people’s lives we’re talking about.”

The board hopes this research will be the first step in a longer-term project. A draft of the team’s technical report is due Oct. 1 and if all goes well, the board plans to apply for further funding in January to support a second phase of the study.

According to Brule, the next stage will involve the support of the community, as researchers will need the permission of landowners to conduct archaeological excavations on their property.

“We all need to work close enough with community members,” Naumec said. “Ultimately, the landholder has the complete power.”

Joe Graveline, advisory board member and president of Franklin County native advocacy group the Nolumbeka Project, warned that many residents have had bad experiences in the past dealing with researchers.

“Folks in this area are really gunshy,” Graveline said. “... It’s not a light matter around here; it’s really serious stuff. Folks around here have gotten hurt a lot.”

Naumec said the team will have to “nip (that fear) in the bud” through education and outreach.

“It’s up to the landholder. If they let us dig up their whole yard, we’d be happy to do it. That’s how you get the ceramics, the lead flints,” he said, adding that lead and brass, typically found six to eight centimeters below the ground, will help identify village sites.

Ideally, the National Park Service would like to place all recovered artifacts in a single repository, according to Naumec.

“Ultimately, it would be curated somewhere pretty close by,” he said.

The board hopes results of the project will also benefit the village by increasing scholarly and tourist interest in the area.

Already, Brule said interest is “exploding” around the issue.

Last month, two walking tours of Native American historical sites drew about 100 participants each. And on Aug. 1, the community will celebrate its people, history and culture with the Pocumtuck Homelands Festival.

As far as next steps in this phase of the project go, Naumec said the team would like to get walkovers underway by late July to actually see the land. The board is also planning to host a public information session and panel discussion in September.

“You have years of projects around here if you want to,” Naumec told the advisory board. “This is a couple of miles of combat we’re dealing with,” he said. “This could possibly be two or three grants.”

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