Archaeological Field Work on the Maine Coast in 2010

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While the modern Maine coast is well known for its proud inhabitants and frequent vacationers from across the world, ancient Maine was also a place of great cultural and economic importance. Native Americans began settling in Maine 12,000 years ago and were well aware of the many resources that the vast stretches of coastline had to offer.

Casco Bay, only minutes from Bowdoin College, is one of many areas with sufficient marine resources to attract the attention of Mainers for thousands of years. The islands of the Bay are dotted with evidence of past human habitation and use. Perhaps the most obvious indicator of human occupancy is a cultural phenomenon called a *shell midden*, which was the focus of my summer research. Middens, which are found around the world, are waste deposits where people deposited their domestic refuse. Shell middens are found along coastlines where people primarily consumed shellfish and discarded their waste in a specified location.

Shell middens are of considerable importance to archaeological field work because they are often a treasure trove for cultural materials that help inform us about the past. I worked closely with Drs. Scott MacEachern and Leslie Shaw of the Bowdoin Anthropology Department to excavate a shell midden on Haskell Island in Casco Bay. Dr. Shaw co-directed the dig along with Dr. Nathan Hamilton of the University of Southern Maine. Because of this I was able to work closely with several students from the University of Southern Maine during the excavations.

For several weeks we travelled to Haskell Island from the mainland by boat every day to excavate the shell midden. The process of excavating involved digging in a test unit, of which we had several. Each of our test units was 1 meter by 1 meter. We would carefully dig each test unit with a trowel – only descending 5 centimeters per each level. In each level we carefully screened and sifted through the dirt to look for animal bones, stone tools, ceramics or other cultural materials. Whatever we thought may be important in giving insight into the people living on the island we bagged and brought back to the lab where I carefully washed and labeled according to test unit, level and unique properties. Washing must be scrupulous and is a very methodical and time consuming process. The benefit is that during the cleaning process I developed a strong preliminary picture of life on Haskell Island and in Casco Bay. The shell and bones we retrieved show a regular diet of clams and fish as well as some small birds and mammals. We also retrieved pottery that could date back as far as three-thousand years. The levels close to the surface have a record of historic ceramics and metal artifacts such as nails from the past few centuries while deeper levels extend thousands of years into the past.

Archaeological fieldwork requires much time and resources. In order to gain the most insight into the Haskell Island shell midden it would be necessary to have specialists analyze the materials we retrieved. I will not be part of that process but instead will use my time on Haskell Island as a springboard for my Senior Honors Project this upcoming year where I will once again be studying the archaeology of Casco Bay. For this project, however, I will focus specifically on the stone tool remains found on islands across the Bay. By analyzing the stone source of the tools it will be possible to predict where inhabitants came from before they settled in the area. This will give a picture of human migration and ethno-cultural relationships in the area. Working on Haskell Island was a good start to this project, giving
me both practical experience in the process of archaeological fieldwork as well as familiarizing me with the nature of archaeology and the occupation of the area.

My summer fieldwork was featured in an article on the Bowdoin College website. This article can be found here:

http://www.bowdoin.edu/news/archives/1academicnews/007614.shtml

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