

## CURRENT RESEARCH

### Joint CTDOT and City of Waterbury Research / Preservation Effort at Platts Mills Park

C. Scott Speal

National Register Specialist, Archaeology  
Connecticut Department of Transportation

The City of Waterbury, with funding from the Federal Highway Administration and technical guidance from the CTDOT Office of Environmental Planning, recently implemented a rather creative combination of archaeological data recovery research / historic preservation and commemoration effort within the newly constructed ‘Platts Mill Park’ in the southern part of town near the boundary line with Naugatuck. This work was associated with a construction project extending the Naugatuck River Greenway multi-use trail along South Main Street from Eagle Street south to Platts Mill Road. Placement of this new pedestrian feature came to entail design of a new passive-use park with recreational facilities at the intersection of South Main Street and Platts Mill Road. Through a series of phased investigations incurred through compliance with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act given use of Federal funds, it became evident that a pre-European Contact archaeological resource existed within the footprint of this proposed park and would be affected by the undertaking as proposed.

The initial phase of survey for the project transpired in 2015 and was conducted by the RBA Group out of New Jersey—led by Leonard Bianchi and Jean Howson. The RBA crew identified a well-defined circumscribed site situated on a relatively level slightly elevated terrace on a rocky promontory extending into the Naugatuck just at the point where the river begins a large bend (Photo 1). Artifact recovery at the site consisted of a substantial number of lithics—primarily quartz and quartzite—and a few pottery sherds suggesting a Woodland Period occupation. Recovery of primary flakes with rounded cobble cortex implied on-site testing of fluvially deposited stones for tool manufacture. At the time, it was also postulated that the site may have served as a short-term fishing camp based upon the recovery of a rough piece of notched sandstone thought to possibly represent a net weight. As a result, it was determined that the Platts Mill Park Site could potentially be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places under Criterion D—its ability to provide important information regarding past indigenous riverine resource procurement patterns.

As it became increasingly clear that there was no way to construct a foot trail loop through entire park while avoiding this newly discovered archaeological resource—now given the designation State Site Number 151-7—and further site testing revealed intact stratified deposits beneath a considerable overburden of past alluvial flood sediments, an adverse effect determination for the project was made under Section 106 and a Memorandum of Agreement executed with CT SHPO. This agreement provided for a limited data recovery excavation covering the affected portion of the site, placement of a stone monument to commemorate indigenous occupation of the area, and long-term protection of the landform to preserve the natural setting in perpetuity. In exchange, the foot trail was permitted to traverse the site as was construction of a stone-reading circle directly atop the excavations to allow park visitors to comfortably linger and contemplate the setting and its historic significance.

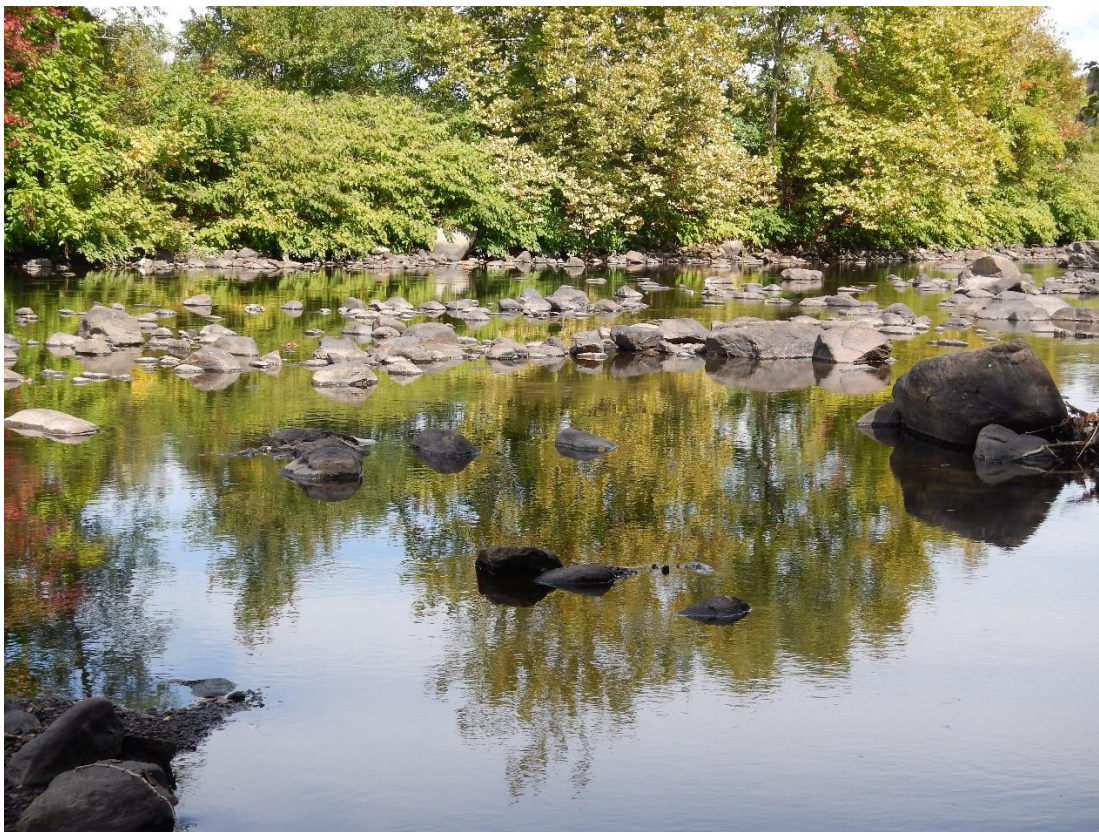
The subsequent data recovery operations were conducted by WSP, Inc. based out of Troy, New York in August of 2021. The effort succeeded in demonstrating that the Platts Mills Park site served at least partially as a riverine lithic procurement focus, just as hypothesized in the research design. Led by Dr. Jessica Vavrsek, the excavations resulted in discovery of both a concentration of tested stream-rolled cobbles (Photo 3) and a set of early stage bifacial preforms—mostly quartzite—(Photo 4) rather conclusively establishing raw lithic material procurement from the rocky riverbed and initial on-site reduction activity. This finding supports other researchers’ previous assertions that limited local quarrying options forced indigenous peoples of the Lower Housatonic watershed to rely upon fishing fluvial stone cobbles out of river drainages for their tool-making needs. The competing hypothesis that the site was predominantly a fishing station found no material support from the excavations—no further evidence of fishing net weights, hooks, or fish remains were recovered. Discovery of a hearth feature also suggests that the site served as an encampment area, not simply a brief daytime collection station. Also corroborating this inference was the unexpected find of a good size and well-rounded postmold feature below the intact C Horizon (Photo 5), which further indicates that site occupation was not of overly short duration. Time and energy were invested in placing at least one fairly substantial structure.

Excavations at the Platts Mill Park Site further confirmed the chronology of the site as predominantly Woodland Period based upon recovery of additional pottery (Photo 6) and a radiocarbon date from the hearth feature yielding a date of  $470\pm 25$  rcbp (ca. cal AD 1440). A complete chert projectile point was recovered as well, allowing attribution of lithic material culture tradition to some degree—though the typological assignment of the artifact is somewhat ambiguous (Photo 7). The excavators originally classified the point as Otter Creek, but the overall small size, thin profile and narrow side notches are not generally typical of that type and are in some ways more characteristic of Meadowood—which would also be more consistent with the Woodland Period chronological evidence found at the site.

The commemorative monument to indigenous occupation has at this point been successfully placed within the new park as well (Photos 8 & 9). The natural stone marker itself was designed to be consistent with Native American spiritual aesthetics. A plaque on the face of the marker presents a brief synopsis of what was learned about the Native American presence at the site from the archaeological excavations. The general consensus seems to be that the design came out quite well and fits in with the other features of the park. People can now linger around the stone “reading circle”, contemplate the river, and consider the people who used the same location many hundreds of years ago.

Not only was significant information gained about the pre-Colonial human past of southern New England from this mitigation effort, but most of the site remains intact for future archaeologists to conduct follow up excavations should they choose to do so, and commemorative signage is in place to convey the significance of the resource to the general public as well. The new park itself looks great, provides a welcome recreational benefit to the residents of southern Waterbury and northern Naugatuck, and the whole cultural mitigation aspect of the job cost under \$200k (very inexpensive for a Section 106 resolution effort involving archaeological impacts). Congratulations are due to the City of Waterbury on what seems to be an all-around historic preservation success story.

(Photos by CTDOT OEP unless otherwise noted)



*1. Bank of Naugatuck River along site margins at time of discovery*



*2. Site soil profile from Phase II excavations*



*3. Concentration of river cobbles, some tested for raw material consistency (Photo courtesy of WSP, Inc.)*



4. Early stage bifacial quartzite preforms recovered from Platts Mill Park Site (Photo courtesy of WSP, Inc.)



5. Deeply seated remnant postmold encountered below C horizon (Photo courtesy of WSP, Inc.)



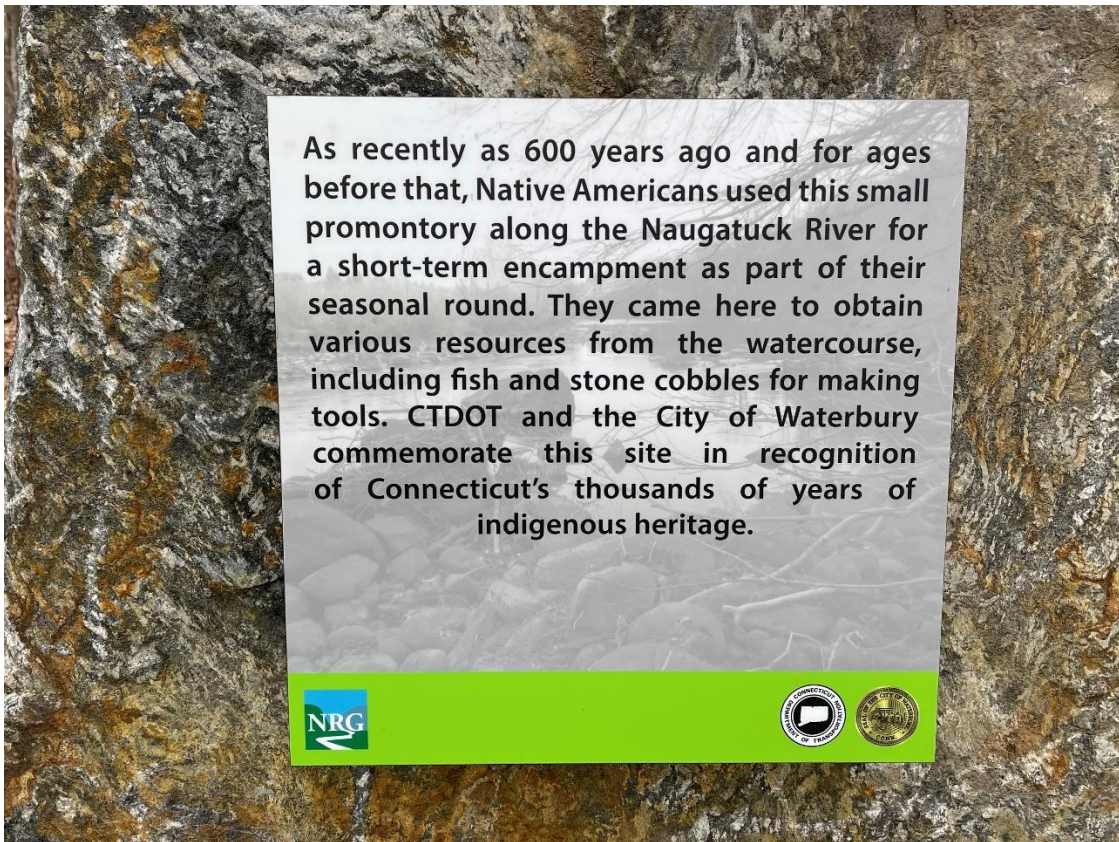
6. Pottery fragments, one with mend hole, recovered from Site (Photo courtesy of WSP, Inc.)



7. Side-notch projectile point recovered from Site (Photo courtesy of WSP, Inc.)



*8. Stone 'reading circle' within park containing commemorative monument*



As recently as 600 years ago and for ages before that, Native Americans used this small promontory along the Naugatuck River for a short-term encampment as part of their seasonal round. They came here to obtain various resources from the watercourse, including fish and stone cobbles for making tools. CTDOT and the City of Waterbury commemorate this site in recognition of Connecticut's thousands of years of indigenous heritage.



*9. Commemorative plaque upon stone monument*