THE SANDY KNOLL ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

People have been enjoying this stretch of the Connecticut River for over 9,000 years.

Why Was this Site Excavated?

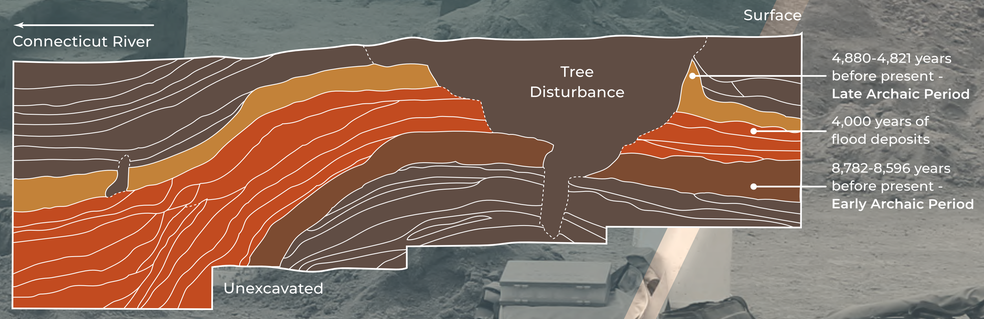
The University of Vermont Consulting Archaeology Program (UVM CAP) conducted excavations at the Native American Sandy Knoll site as part of the Lancaster-Guildhall U.S. Route 2 bridge replacement project. These studies were required by State and Federal laws designed to identify, protect and preserve significant cultural resources. This work was funded by the Vermont Agency of Transportation and the Federal Highways Administration.

University of Vermont archaeologists excavate the Sandy Knoll site. The bridge shown under construction was completed in 2020. The excavation area shown is now under the new road.

University of Vermont archaeologists draw profiles of the cultural and natural layers beneath the ground at the Sandy Knoll site.

Stratigraphy and dates

The Connecticut River, like most rivers, floods periodically when a spring thaw or big storm event raises water levels above the banks. When the waters recede after major floods, a layer of fresh silt and sand is deposited, building up the floodplain. People lived on the riverbank in between these flood events. Over time, the alternating of human occupations and natural floods create a deep layer "cake" of history. Native American occupations at the Sandy Knoll site go back nearly 9,000 years!



Profile of University of Vermont excavations in one area of the Sandy Knoll site showing the ages of Native American cultural layers identified and the natural flood deposits separating them. South wall profile.

Timeline

2020
NHDOT and VTrans replace the Parker high-truss bridge with a new steel girder bridge at a cost of $11.5 million

Late Woodland Period
1,000-400 Years B.P.

Middle Woodland Period
2,100-1,000 Years B.P.
Decoration on Native American pottery sherds found at the site date the pottery to the Middle Woodland time period

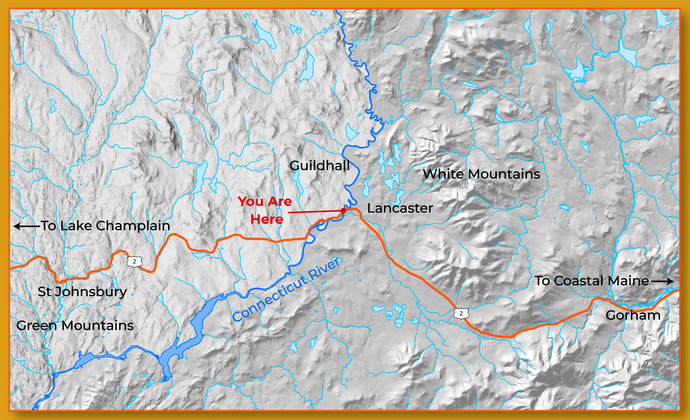
Early Woodland Period
3,000-2,100 Years B.P.

Late Archaic Period
6,000-3,000 Years B.P.
Burned white-tailed deer bone collected from a Native American fire hearth radiocarbon dated to ca. 4,800 years before present

Middle Archaic Period
7,500-6,000 Years B.P.
Projectile point tools and radiocarbon dated samples of deerbone and burnt maple bark show lots of Native activity at the site during the Middle Archaic period

Early Archaic Period
9,500-7,500 Years B.P.
A quartz processing tool and radiocarbon dated alder wood charcoal provide the earliest evidence of Native inhabitants at the Sandy Knoll site

Paleoindian Period
12,000-9,500 Years B.P.
Native Americans are the first inhabitants of northeastern North America including what is now Vermont and New Hampshire. They establish a major east-west trade and transportation route. Thousands of years later, this route becomes U.S. Route 2



Map showing the path of U.S. Route 2 through the Green Mountains of Vermont and White Mountains of New Hampshire. The Sandy Knoll site is one of many Native American sites along this general east-west route which was first established by Native travelers thousands of years ago.

Ancient Crossing

The Sandy Knoll site sits at a natural intersection that Native Americans passed through beginning thousands of years ago. Here, the Connecticut River, a north-south waterway and major transportation corridor, crosses an east-west overland route through the Green Mountains and White Mountains. This route, that we now call U.S. Route 2, follows valleys and passes through gaps along a pathway established by Native Americans as much as 12,000 years ago. Archaeological evidence for early travel and trade includes tools dating to this period in sites near Lake Champlain in what is now Vermont that are made of stone only found in the White Mountains of what is now New Hampshire. The same stone, called rhyolite, also was used by Native people who camped at the Sandy Knoll site.

Flora and Fauna

Archaeologists recovered tiny fragments of food bone and plant remains from the ancient fire hearths uncovered at the Sandy Knoll site. These clues provide a small sample of the range of species Native people camping at the site used for food, clothing, medicine, fuel, and other products. The list of plants and animals represented includes fruits such elderberry, grape, and raspberry/blackberry, wood including white pine, birch, maple, alder, and fir, as well as mammals, reptiles and birds including deer, beaver, turtle and waterfowl.

University of Vermont archaeologist excavating an ancient Native American fire hearth. Soil, plant and animal remains from the hearth were later studied to learn what plants and animals Native people were using.

Snapping turtle (Image sourced from animaldiversityweb.org
Beavers (Image sourced from Vermont Fish and Wildlife website)

All images courtesy of the University of Vermont unless otherwise noted.

Funding for this sign made possible by NHDOT. The sign fulfills a stipulation developed in consultation with the New Hampshire Division of Historical Resources to mitigate replacement of the historic Rogers' Rangers Bridge. Sign content by the University of Vermont. Graphic design by Douglas Scott.

Visit the sign on the New Hampshire side of the bridge to learn more about Rogers' Rangers Bridge and the history of the Lancaster-Guildhall crossing.