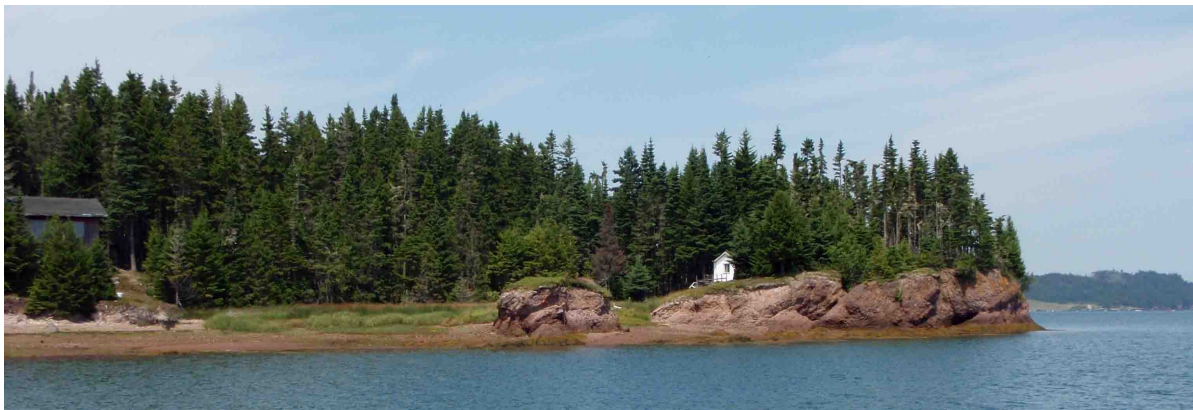


THE PINTLOWES COVE PROJECTILE POINT

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I often justify studying the past, to my students and colleagues, by saying we can learn lessons from the past that apply to the present. I believe these lessons take two forms: historical and personal. This essay concerns one of the latter—a personal lesson—and, incidentally, describes a complete and unexpected pre-contact artifact I found during Phase III of the Bliss Islands Archaeology Project.



The
Pintlowes
Cove
Site
(BgDr61)

Imagine this... After a hazy beginning, it has become one of those crystal, breathless, electric blue days, precious in their rarity, that punctuate the invasive damp, the horizontal rain, and the sodden batting of fog that make up so much of summer weather in coastal Charlotte County. The tide was low early in the day—Pintlowes and Fishermans coves resembled a tub at the end of washday, with a ribbon of water and a few toy boats stranded along its midline—now, the basin has filled again and the tide has begun to ebb. Surprisingly, the weather has not “breezed up” after tide change. Hard, bright sunlight bombards the surface of the water, rays rebounding like shrapnel against the rocks and trees. The air is salty dry. In the angles of the rocks, shadows have knife-sharp edges, contrasting with gritty unfocussed surfaces awash in light. From the emerald backdrop of the forest, shade beckons with skeletal, resinous fingers.

We traverse the northern shoreline of Pintlowes Cove (named for John Pentelow, a nineteenth-century landowner on the Bliss Islands), weaving among the rocks, squelching through the marshes, ducking branches along the trails, alternating between the cool of the forest and the salt of the shore. It is Canada Day, 1992, and we are on Bliss, celebrating the present, looking for the past.

This summer we are intent on historic archaeology—in fact, this afternoon we are looking for Euro-Canadian historic sites—but when time allows, I show my colleagues the Indigenous pre-contact sites that are a major focus of my research on the islands. An occasion presents itself. We arrive at the Pintlowes Cove site, a narrow strip of shell midden between a knoll and a salt marsh, visible as a scatter of clam shells eroding onto the beach below a fisherman’s camp.

Now, the Pintlowes Cove site has a place in the history of archaeology in New Brunswick: Spencer F. Baird (later Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and founder of the U.S. National Museum) visited the site during the summer of 1869 as part of what was, apparently, the first professional scientific examination of archaeological sites in the New Brunswick. As one of six sites I discussed in my doctoral dissertation, it is of considerable interest to me. However, the Pintlowes Cove site also has been a disappointment to me, and a source of some considerable frustration.



The Projectile Point

When the site was officially recorded in 1981, it was assumed that the shell deposit represented an Indigenous camp site, although no artifacts were found. The lack of surface artifacts was not surprising, since Baird had commented, more than a century earlier, that “the deposit is scanty and scarcely worth working”. In 1983, when I first investigated the Bliss Islands, I examined the eroding edge of the site, dug a couple of shovel tests, and likewise found nothing but broken shells. Almost all the shells are those of soft-shelled clams, and, since Indigenous middens usually contain a diversity of shellfish species, I came away half-convinced that the site was a Historic period shell deposit.



The Pintlowes Cove Site in 1986

In 1986, when I conducted the field work for my doctoral project, I was determined to uncover the secrets of Pintlowes Cove. I had some field school students examine the eroding edge of the site, dig some shovel tests, and excavate two 1m² units. They found three pieces of flaked stone, five pieces of animal bone, a fragment of beaver incisor (probably part of a pre-contact tool), and thousands of broken clam shells. I concluded that Pintlowes Cove was, after all, an Indigenous camp site. However, without

diagnostic artifacts, uncontaminated charcoal for dating, or obvious hearth and dwelling features, I had little to say about it in my dissertation.

So... On Canada Day, 1992, I have no expectations of the Pintlowes Cove site. This is a perfunctory visit: We will take a quick look, we will see some eroding clam shells, we will go back to camp and make dinner. The site will reveal nothing.

As my colleagues look over the surface, I crouch beside the eroding shoreline. I take out my trusty Marshalltown trowel and begin flipping over clam shells—the best way to examine an eroding shell deposit—amid the seaside plantain and wild flowers. The trowel rings faintly against the stones and shells, but I have little enthusiasm for this task. I am a little resentful of this site. In spite of the glorious day, I am just going through the motions.

I should know better: I flip a broken shell and something catches my eye. There, at the base of a clump of beach peas, embedded in the black midden soil among the bleached clam shells, is a piece of sharp-edged stone as green as the peel of a Granny Smith apple. A complete projectile point! Once again, the people of the past have left something to jolt me from my bad attitude, to remind me not to resent the natural world, and never to take the remnants of the past for granted.



Finding the Projectile Point

“Projectile point” is a conventional term used by archaeologists to describe any bifacially flaked, pointed stone tool shaped for attachment to a shaft or a handle. This artifact class probably includes tools that Indigenous people used as spear points, arrow points and knife blades. Corner-notched types, like the Pintlowes Cove projectile point, were made and used by the ancestors of Maliseet (Wolastoqiyik) and Passamaquoddy (Peskotomukatiyik) people during the millenium immediately before Europeans arrived in large numbers in New Brunswick and Maine.

Chastened, I took another chance on the Pintlowes Cove site. Later in the summer, a student and I excavated a 1m² unit right where I found the projectile point. We trowelled down 40 cm through sodden organic soil to the base of the site. We finished the day in filthy clothes, our faces and fingers streaked and stained with black midden soil.

What did we find? Thousands of broken clam shells.

Postscript... I submitted some of the clam shells for radiocarbon dating—the result is a date of 680+/- 50 BP. The Pintlowes Cove site and the projectile point date to a time just before European contact.



Testing the Pintlowes Cove Site in 1992



Rock outcrop adjacent to the Pintlowes Cove site