

Frequently Asked Questions: Northampton Archeological Site/Roundabout Issue

Q) Where is this archeological site and a planned roundabout?

It is at the Y intersection of Hatfield Street and North King Street/Rte 5 & 10 in Northampton, just south of River Valley Co-op's North King Street location.

Q) Aren't there a lot of Native American historical sites protected by inclusion in the National Registry of Historic Places (NRHP) in Massachusetts already?

No, statistics show very few Native American Historical Sites on the NRHP in Massachusetts, with less than 20 in total. This is far lower than the surrounding states. We have an appalling 300:1 ratio of colonial historical sites to Native American historical sites on the Massachusetts National Registry of Historic Places. This data suggests that our state has a long history of choosing to disregard the importance of Native American sites.

Q) Is this particular archeological site really that important?

Yes. This is why thousands of community members, multiple Native American Groups and others from throughout our region are calling for historical preservation of the site and are working for the return of the artifacts taken by the state.

The state's own archeological report reveals that the site shows a very unique and rare slice of ancient Paleo/Plano cultural history. Sites of this time period are so rare that very little is known about this transitional period of time from Paleo to Archaic cultures here in the Connecticut River Valley.

Regional Indigenous historical experts have described the site as a multi-component site where people lived over thousands of years with additional hearths, artifacts, and other cultural features remaining in the path of construction.

A look at any of the maps of that area will reveal that a chokepoint or restricted passage area exists directly down below where the caribou, on their seasonal migrations to summer and winter, and their birthing and feeding grounds, would have had to pass through some 60,000 to 100,000 at a time with the Connecticut River in the East on one side, and the basalt hills on the West to the other. The hunter-gatherer (Plano) peoples of that time understood how special this landscape was to their survival. They set up shop at the foot of the hill, where the proposed roundabout is planned, and they would climb to the top of the ridge on any given day, look down and make a plan to hunt the compromised they could pick out in the herd as they moved through that chokepoint below. This was a highly desirable location to live in ancient times. Pre-colonial and colonial-era Native Americans also lived near this site for thousands of years until the land was stolen by colonists in the 1600's.

Q) Which Native American Groups are historically connected to this site?

Hundreds of different Native American Groups have ancestral and historical connections to this site. For thousands of years, this has been Pocumtuck land. This is still the homelands of Pocumtuck, Norottock, Woronoco, Agawam, Nipmuc, Abenaki, Wampanoag, and Narragansett. Many of these and other First Nations People are living throughout the state and region.

Both the Aquinnah Wampanoag and Narragansett have legal standing in relation to the evaluation of the archeological findings and the cultural importance of this site. Both these sovereign Native American Nations are well respected for their historical preservation expertise and work in Western Massachusetts and throughout the region. There are a number of Native American Groups and individuals in the region that are highly skilled in historic preservation and archeology. They often work together to review and evaluate as well as protect important cultural and historic sites. The historic preservation of this site is highly supported by many of these regional experts.

Q) I thought all the artifacts had been removed? What is left to save?

First of all, the removal of artifacts is not the same as historical site preservation. While hundreds of artifacts were removed, much remains in the ground in the path of construction. Preserving this 8,000-10,000-year-old historical site means keeping it intact for future generations, not quickly removing some artifacts and bulldozing over the remainder, destroying it forever.

The state study itself recommends preservation of the site to further study the additional hearths and important artifacts likely remaining on the site. The state study recommends the site for inclusion on the National Registry of Historic Places on two different criteria. Approximately 20-30% of the site was excavated. This means 70-80% of the site remains in the path of destruction from the planned roundabout construction. Further, the excavated portions stopped short of the depth where burials from this time period would rest in this type of site.

The specifics of the state archeology study's scope were developed with approval by the Massachusetts Historical Commission. The study has been criticized as inadequate and too coarse by other experts specializing in the study of this time period. Most importantly, the state study's scope was never agreed to by the Aquinnah Wampanoag or Narragansett, which both have legal rights in this matter.

Q) Why is the co-op involved in this issue?

River Valley Co-op supports social justice and has pledged to stand against BIPOC injustices. Standing against this planned destruction is an act of standing against an act of cultural erasure of our First Nations People's long history right here in our own neighborhood.

We had also opposed the roundabout long before the existence of the historical site was known. We opposed it because of the serious financial impacts of the disruption to our business over multiple years. Other neighborhood businesses have also been opposed to the project because of its negative economic impact to their businesses. We had been advocating for either a less disruptive solution for improving the intersection or overnight construction. We had been negotiating behind the scenes with state and local officials for changes to the plans to mitigate threats to our business. However, when the historical site was discovered and its importance was revealed, we could no longer advocate for overnight construction. Stopping the destruction of the historic site was the most urgent and important issue. We were caught by surprise in mid-June 2020 that site work was planned to start July 1, 2020. At that time, we informed our co-op owners of the urgency of these issues.

Q) Isn't a roundabout the best solution for intersections like this?

The issue here is not really whether you like roundabouts or not. The issue is that the roundabout will destroy an important ancient Native American cultural site, which makes the roundabout an inappropriate solution for this intersection.

We need to move on to an alternative plan to preserve the site for future generations.

There is a MassDOT study of alternatives, including one with the intersection straightened out with a traffic light. The straightened out intersection scenario is recommended because it could be done in a way that protects the historic site. The long term costs of maintaining a light vs roundabout is projected to be a little higher, according to the MassDOT study of economic impacts of alternative scenarios. However, the value of preserving a rare archeological site was not factored into the study at all.

Nobody knew the historical site was there when construction planning started. But, now we do, and we know it is important, and our plan needs to be changed. We know a key objection of the state is that a new plan will

require different funding. They have grant funding available for a roundabout.

While we understand funding is an important issue, using federal grant funding to destroy an important historical site isn't justifiable. While new funding sources may not be immediately available, reduced speed limits, enhanced signage and street lights would go a long way to support traffic calming at significantly lower costs to the state in the interim.

We hope that we take this moment in 2021 to start to put an end to historic preservation policies and practices of cultural erasure in our state. We look forward to celebrating that this important site, which has been undisturbed over thousands of years, was discovered at a time when the community came together to preserve it for future generations. This issue is not about whether you like roundabouts...it is about justice in our approach to Native American historic preservation in our community and state.

Q) How was the site discovered, and what transpired after the discovery?

The site was discovered in 2018 as state workers began digging test pits in the soil on the property owned by the Skibiski's in preparation for the construction planning of a roundabout. The state contracted for an archaeological study to evaluate the site, and preliminary findings were presented in the fall of 2019 at a Historic Northampton event. Many area historic preservation experts attended that presentation and became concerned about the planned destruction of the site.

In November 2019, the state hired landscapers to bulldoze over the archaeological site located on the Skibiski family's property. This happened prior to the state taking possession of the Skibiski property by eminent domain. Police support was required to get the bulldozers to stop. Shortly afterward, according to the MassDOT website, the funding was pulled from the project, and status changed from starting in March 2020 to no status. Based on this, we thought the historic preservation issue was prevailing until we learned in mid-June 2020, construction was about to start July 1. In late April, we missed that the MassDOT website posted new COVID-related stimulus bridge funding and a June 2020 start date for construction of this project.

The Skibiski's have been working for the preservation of the site. They have networked with regional experts on historic preservation. As the former landowner, they had few legal options available. To stop the destruction of the site as the former property owner, a legal basis can only be established by attaching a dollar value to the artifacts. That can only be established by a full study and appraisal of all artifacts, including those remaining in the ground. They proceeded to file this lawsuit, likely requiring a full stop to the construction pending legal considerations. Press reports about the Skibiski lawsuit filed in June 2020 were confusing.

The Skibiski Family also developed a petition to help stop the destruction of the site. The petition was signed by over 55,000 people and submitted to city and state officials. The petition called for completing the federal review process in consultation with Native American Groups and public feedback. They learned this review process was required due to the federal funding for this project prior to construction. They learned it had not yet been undertaken on this project. River Valley Co-op supported this petition and alerted our co-op owners to the issues.

The Attorney General stopped the July 1, 2020, planned start for construction of the roundabout until the required federal archeological review process in consultation with Native American Groups and public comments could be completed. The Skibiski's are working in partnership with the Narragansett to return the artifacts to the land and preserve the site. The Skibiski's withdrew their lawsuit pending the outcome of this federal review process.

The federal review process is under the jurisdiction of the Federal Highway Administration. The review process began at the end of July 2020 with submission of a draft archeological completion report to the federally recognized Native American Groups involved with this project. River Valley Co-op received consulting party status as an abutter to this project in the federal review process. This allows us to participate with public feedback and gave us the opportunity to request and review documents as well as to ask questions.

The federal review process has not yet been concluded. The Aquinnah Wampanoag and Narragansett are federally recognized Native American Nations with significant legal rights in this matter. They are calling for preservation. However, the State and Federal authorities have signaled they disagree and plan to move forward with construction. At this time, the Federal Highway Administration has made no formal ruling to conclude the review process. The Massachusetts Attorney General requires this review process to be concluded with an FHA ruling on the matter before she will consider allowing the start of construction.

On December 18, 2020, a public comment period was announced by the Massachusetts Environmental Protection Agency (MEPA) that MassDOT had filed for an exemption from completion of full Environmental Impact Study for its roundabout project. In addition to environmental issues, MEPA has jurisdiction over archeological resources and has a public watchdog role to ensure state agencies are in compliance with all required regulations and processes. The comment period planned to extend to January 14, 2020 was ended abruptly on January 4, 2020 due to the unusually large volume of comments in opposition to this project, primarily associated with the destruction of the historical site. MassDOT temporarily withdrew the filing and is planning to conduct its public outreach before re-filing. They have not given up on pushing this project through and destroying the historic site.

Q) How can I help stop the destruction of this site?

Regardless of what the FHA does, the Massachusetts Governor's Office could withdraw the approval for this MassDOT project and ensure this site's preservation in Northampton.

You can help by going directly to the office of Governor Baker and Lt. Governor Polito now to request they stop the MassDOT project and establish historic preservation for this ancient site.

- Email Jose Delgado: Western Mass Office of Governor Baker and Lt. Governor Polito: jose.delgado@mass.gov
- Submit your comments to the Governor's Office: <https://www.mass.gov/forms/email-the-governors-office>

Please request our Governor and Lt. Governor use their authority and influence to:

1. Declare the ancient historic site in Northampton in the path of the MassDOT's plans for construction of a roundabout on a protected historic site.
2. Stop the MassDOT from moving forward with any construction that would threaten or disturb the historic site.
3. Request that the state move forward to secure the listing of this site on the National Registry of Historic Places.
4. Hold the MassDOT accountable for compliance with all Federal requirements related to the discovery of Native American historic sites in this development project.
5. Take further action going forward to rectify our appalling state record in its treatment of Native American historical sites with its over 300:1 ratio of colonial sites to Native American sites on the National Registry of Historic Places.

Thank you! Your support now can help preserve this 8,000 - 10,000-year-old site for future generations!

Additional Resources

[Click here to view River Valley Co-op's letter to MEPA on January 4, 2020](#)

[Read the State Archaeological Report on the historic site with key issues highlighted](#)

[State backs off Northampton roundabout project at 10,000-year-old native site on North King Street](#) by Jim Kinney, MassLive