

THE SURMA SITE: FORT ERIE

May 1965

W. C. Noble



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I INTRODUCTION

The Surma site in Fort Erie is located at the juncture of Queen Street and the Niagara Boulevard, on the property of Mr. and Mrs. R. Surma, proprietors of the Queen's Hotel. It was largely through their kind co-operation and interest, plus that of several of the townspeople, notably, Mr. E. Barnhart<sup>d</sup> and Mr. G. Taylor, that the find was brought to the attention of the Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto.

A number of burials had been encountered on the Surma property during bulldozing operations for the foundation of an extension to the Hotel. Several of these skeletons were brought to Toronto, and the elaborate nature of the associated grave goods seemed to warrant further work in the manner of a controlled excavation at this find.

The interest in the Surma finds has been a direct result of the interest generated by a find made under somewhat similar initial conditions at the Marinaccio Site (ARGf-1) in July, 1964.

In response to the Surma find, a small crew of graduate and undergraduate students from the University of Toronto, and working under the auspices of the University of

Toronto, excavated at the Surma site from May 15 to May 26, 1965. This was under the direction of Mr. W. C. Noble.

The students participating were:

D. Warner	A. Tyyska
G. Gaherty	L. Allworth
P. Ramsden	P. Fair
J. Holt	M. McKenzie
D. Lumsden	J. McAdam
D. Smith	R. Whaite

In addition, local help from Fort Erie was recruited, and invaluable assistance was rendered. Some of these were:

Mr. E. Barnhart	Mr. D. Henries
Mr. G. Taylor	Mr. J. Barton
Mr. G. Moot	Mr. W. Boyd

The co-operation and continued interest of the Surmas helped greatly in the success of the excavation, and their kindness is greatly appreciated.

## II DESCRIPTION OF THE SITE

The site lies on a sandy plain, 250 feet back from the Niagara River, between what is now the southern side of the Queen's Hotel, and Queen Street. To a limited extent it also extends out under the front lawn of the Hotel, and also across Queen Street. Three areas were excavated (see map of site).

The first of these areas was Area A, located be-



tween the south side of the Hotel and Queen Street. This was the vicinity in which the initial burials had been encountered, and thus, excavation began here. Thirty-seven five-foot squares were excavated and eleven burials were recovered. More will be said of these shortly.

The second area (Area B) was in the narrow strip 60 feet by 8 feet near the front region of the Hotel, between the Queen Street sidewalk and boulevard. This area produced post moulds and an occasional pit. No burials were encountered.

The third area (Area C) resulted from an independent excavation by one of the local residents, Mr. William Boyd. This was made in the earthen floor basement of the Kline residence directly across Queen Street from Area A of the Hotel. Similar pits and projectile points were encountered in Area C as in Area A, but no burials were recovered.

In all, a total of 366 square feet was excavated in the three areas mentioned above.

#### Stratigraphy

The stratigraphy of Area A was disturbed for some seven feet out from the foundation walls of the Hotel. In the central portions of the excavation, however, the normal soil profile was as follows:



Level I comprised the following two layers:

- 1) a top layer of recent fill and gravel, 7 to 13 inches thick.
- 2) a layer of dark black sandy soil containing Historic materials, and portions of an old red brick road or driveway. This level was six to nine inches deep.

Level I on the average was 12 inches thick. It varied, however, in some instances.

Level II (12 to 28 inches). This level was composed of dark brown/black sand soil, and yielded Genesee points as well as others. The burial pits and intrusive historic pits cut through this level. It was not discernable, however, whether the burial pits were intrusive because the pit fills were of the same colour and type of soils.

Level III (28 to 40 inches). This level was composed of yellow sandy subsoil. Most of the burial pits extended into it, otherwise, it was sterile.

The stratigraphy of Area B had basically the same three-fold nature found in Area A. The top level (12 inches) was mostly disturbed black sandy soil. Under this (13 to 15 inches) lay Level II. This was the major occupation level. Level III underlay Level II and was composed of sterile sandy sub-soil.

Area C had this same soil profile.



### III MATERIALS FOUND

#### A) Burials

Burials were only recovered from Area A, which, during the excavation in May, 1965, yielded eleven individuals. To this may be added five more. These were represented in the skeletal material sent to Toronto in December, 1964. Mr. Earl Barnhart also informed the author that he had seen a child burial in a pit extending under the sidewalk at the Lounge entrance to the Hotel off Queen Street. This we did not excavate. The total number of individuals, then, that can definitely be accounted for as having come from Area A, is seventeen.

We found the general state of preservation of the bone to be very fragile due to heavy water saturation and crushing, both from roots and heavy vehicles that over-rode this part of the site. Recovery of the burial material was, as a result, somewhat frustrating.

In a generalized synthesis regarding the burials, the following statements can be made.

1) The attitude of the burials was usually flexed with the individual lying on his back and the upper body in anatomical position. From the waist down the legs were folded over upon one another.

2) All burials were interred in shallow single graves.



These were oval and ranged from three to three-and-a-half feet in diameter, with depths from two to two-and-a-half feet. In the case of the dismembered burial No. 10, the depth of the trench-like pit in which the body was interred went to three feet. All other burials were in shallow flat-bottomed pits which had a general orientation of east/west.

3) Dismemberment occurred in the case of burials 6 and 10. In addition, burials 1 and 11 had whole portions missing.

4) A cursory examination of the dentition showed that most of the teeth in the adult individuals were excessively worn down. In some cases the flat-wear pattern had exposed the dentine and pulp chambers.

5) In over all appearance, the racial and physical type of these burials most approximate the early Middle Woodland Indian population of the Donaldson site (see Wright and Anderson: 1963).

6) Grave goods were associated only with males, but not all of the males (see Chart 1). The goods were not overly numerous, but tended to be fairly elaborate. More will be said of this in the following.

#### B) Artifacts

The artifacts from the Surma site can be classified as coming from three time periods. First, there are the substantial number of Archaic projectile points; second,



there are the grave goods associated with the aforementioned burials; and finally, there is a small quantity of historic material. In other words, it would seem that the Surma site has three distinct components.

Of the Archaic artifacts, Genesee type projectile points were very common, not only in Level II of the stratigraphy, but in a number of the many pits distributed over the site in Areas A, B and C. Lomoka type points were also found.

The grave goods associated with the burials seem to fall within middle to late Middle Woodland times. Cord wrapped pottery (cording on the exterior surface only) was found in direct association with several of the burials. A brief tabulation of the type of grave goods in association with these burials is as follows:

- 1) long white cylindrical conch shell beads
- 2) polished stone platform pipes
- 3) polished slate pendants
- 4) turtle shell ornaments
- 5) a bone spatula pendant
- 6) worked beaver teeth
- 7) nodules of red ochre
- 8) concave triangular cache points (Levanna type)

All of the above artifacts associated with the burials would seem to indicate a relative date of Middle to Late Woodland times, i.e., 300 BC to 200 AD.



The historic materials encountered included brass buttons, broken glass and pieces of scrap iron. These seem most likely to date to the period of the War of 1812. The fact that a portion of the Queen's Hotel was once a barracks of that time makes interpretation of these artifacts more intelligible. Several historic pits had been dug in Area A and portions of an old brick road were also found. In Area B two coins were recovered, both dating 1919. These were a large one cent piece and a small nickel.

#### IV DISCUSSION

From the preliminary examination of the artifacts found at the Surma site it would seem, as has already been mentioned, that we are dealing with components of three time periods, namely, the Archaic, late Middle Woodland and Historic. As there is no perceptible way of determining conclusively whether the pits for the burials encountered were intrusive through layer 2, which yielded the Archaic materials, there are two possible interpretations regarding the burials. Either (a) they are to be considered as discrete late Middle Woodland burials (0 to 200 AD), independent from the Archaic material; or

(b) the Archaic type projectile points and several pieces of Early Woodland pottery are survivals into Middle Woodland times.



The skeletons, by their pattern of burial and the type of grave goods associated with them, seem most likely to fall within late Middle Woodland times. Hopewellian influences are indicated, and were probably adopted by the indigenous peoples living in this part of the Niagara frontier. As so little work has been done on the Canadian side of this area, few generalizations can be made about this particular time horizon.

The influences of Hopewell into southwestern Ontario are definite, but the route by which they diffused is as yet undetermined. It may be as Johnson believes that the Genesee Valley was a centre of Hopewellian influence for both ends of Lake Ontario (see Johnson's report on Serpent Mounds, nd). Platform pipes tend to be regarded as late Middle Woodland time markers, and the ones found at the Surma site are definitely of a material alien to the local area. The conch shell beads also indicate an import to the Fort Erie region and most likely have reached this area via aboriginal trade from the Gulf of Florida.

No definite village area was encountered for either of the two aboriginal occupations at the Surma site. Post moulds were found in Area B, but they did not follow any recognizable pattern. It would also be very difficult to establish whether these post moulds were associated with any of the manifestations in Area A.



Area C contained no burials, but did have pits which yielded the Archaic Genesee type projectile points. It is quite likely then that there was an extensive Archaic component in and around the Surma site. No Early Woodland component was encountered at the Surma site as did at the Orchid site immediately down the street at Marinaccio's.

Several sherds of Vinette I ware did occur with burial 8. These, however, were found above the burial, and Levanna type points were directly associated with the skeleton. The inference is, then, that some Early Woodland ware survived to late Middle Woodland times.

#### V SUMMARY

The Surma site is significant because it represents one of the few excavations done on the Canadian side of the Niagara frontier region. As such it has represented at it two possible aboriginal components -- i.e. Archaic and late Middle Woodland -- plus an Historic component. The associations of the Archaic material are not as yet clearly understood and will not be, until a final analysis is made. From the late Middle Woodland burials, seventeen individuals can be definitely accounted for as coming from Area A of the Surma site. Eleven of these were excavated under controlled conditions by the crew from the University of Toronto and parts of five more individuals have been recovered.



CHART 1

Area A

<u>Number</u>	<u>Grave Goods</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Square</u>
Burial 1	polished stone semi-platform pipe	Male	A-11
Burial 2	Onondaga chert flakes	Female	A-19 & 22
Burial 3	cylindrical conch shell beads, polished slate pendant and 11 Levanna cache points	Male	A-27
Burial 4	whetstone	Male	A-15
Burial 5	none	Child	A-7
Burial 6	Levanna projectile point	undetermined	A-31
Burial 7	none	Male	A-31 & 32
Burial 8	3 Levanna projectile points	undetermined	A-32 & 25
Burial 9	whetstone, beaver incisors, gorget	Male	A-25
Burial 10	5 Levanna projectile points	? dismembered	A-31
Burial 11	pottery and shell necklace	Male	A-24