

## The Institute for American Indian Studies: Preserving the Archaeology, History and Culture of Connecticut's First Settlers

by Lucianne Lavin, Director of Research & Collections, Institute for American Indian Studies

Formerly known as the American Indian Archaeological Institute, the Institute for American Indian Studies (IAIS) is a small museum and research center nestled in the beautiful Litchfield Hills of Washington, Connecticut. IAIS is dedicated to preserving and promoting an appreciation of the archaeology, history and living traditions of the indigenous peoples of the Americas, especially in New England.

Visitors are invited to partake of a wide range of programming activities, from traditional indoor museum exhibits, a quality art gallery, films, craft workshops, dancing, drumming and storytelling events to outdoor archaeological and historical Native American displays.

From its beginnings, the Institute's main objective was archaeological research. During its formative years in the 1970s and 1980s, directors of research

manned large field crews to investigate and dig numerous prehistoric sites in the northwestern highlands of Litchfield County. One of its most famous discoveries was the Templeton site in Washington, a 10,190-year-old Paleo-Indian camp excavated by Dr. Roger Moeller — the oldest archaeological site in southern New England. The site's cultural remains lay three to five feet below the surface of a terrace overlooking the Shepaug River. They included rare fluted spear points and other stone tools used to collect and prepare foodstuffs, slice hides for clothing, and process bone, wood, and plant parts for the manufacture of other non-food items such as bone needles and punches, wooden spear shafts and tool handles, and mats for bedding, sitting, and covering shelters.

In the late 1980s the Institute began to focus on late prehistoric and early his-

toric Native American sites. Hoping to understand more clearly patterns of settlement and land use among the Weantinock and Pootatuck tribes whose homelands once encompassed much of present Litchfield County, Dr. Russell Handsman instituted an extensive survey of the Housatonic River drainage. Dr. Handsman's research indicates that the landscape contains a long and continuous archaeological record of Native American presence in northwestern Connecticut for thousands of years up to and including the historical period. His findings are in direct contrast to some historical sources, which claim that this region of the state was uninhabited prior to European settlement.

Dr. Handsman believes that this disparity arose because inland Native American settlements and land use patterns

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Institute for American Indian Studies



Schoolchildren at the Algonkian Village, the Institute for American Indian Studies.

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were so different from those of contemporary Europeans and coastal Native American societies, that colonists misread the landscapes they encountered, believing them to be uninhabited. In northwestern Connecticut they did not find nucleated, year-round villages, enclosed lands, or extensive agricultural fields. Instead, evidence uncovered by the Institute suggests a different kind of pattern. Following a seasonal round of ripening fruits/plants/nuts, anadromous fish runs, and other animal life-cycles (such as seasonal migratory habits of waterfowl, winter yarding habits of deer, etc.), northwestern Connecticut Native Americans practiced a settlement system of semi-sedentary base camps, smaller seasonal camps, and even smaller temporary camps that contained all or portions of the group's population at various times of the year, depending on the tasks at hand.

During the 1990s, the Institute changed its focus from archaeology to education, with an emphasis on contemporary Native American arts, crafts, and other community activities. Information from many of the sites excavated by the Institute was never published. In 2004, the Institute again refocused on archaeology as a complement to its educational activities. Its vast archaeological collections serve as a tool for educating schoolchildren and the general public by providing new details to broaden the context of Connecticut history and enrich our understanding of the region's cultural heritage.

The Institute also includes several out-

**Lobbying for Preservation, cont'd from page 4**

For the past decade, the National Trust for Historic Preservation (NTHP), the National Council of State Historic Preservation Officers, and Preservation Action have combined their lobbying efforts and goals. On Tuesday, March 1, more than 300 preservationists made a concerted effort to reach every member of Congress in some way. Four Connecticut citizens visited six of our seven members that day: John Simone, director of the Connecticut Main Street Center; Kathy Maher of Bridgeport's Barnum Museum; Alicia Lay Leuba from the National Trust; and myself. (Unfortunately, Rep. Christopher Shays' office was holding its annual staff retreat and we were unable to connect.)

Results from Lobby Day include Rep. Rob Simmons' joining the new Historic Preservation Caucus. Rep. Rosa DeLauro has signed a Dear Colleague letter in support of increased funding for the Historic Preservation Fund.

Obviously, the work continues past March 1: Save America's Treasures, the only federal "bricks and mortar" program, is threatened with a 50 percent cut. Appropriations for restoring historic barns have been approved for four years, yet no funds have actually been authorized. Heritage Corridors all over the country are in danger of being put "on hold." And the Historic Preservation Fund, the primary tool for funding federal programs and staff in every state, remains at a very low level.

All the Congressional staffers to whom we spoke on Lobby Day were extremely responsive. But competing interests and the shrinking dollar in Washington mean that we cannot take anything for granted.

*Anita Mielert is one of the National Trust's two Advisors from Connecticut. If you are willing to email, call or visit our members of Congress, please her at (860) 658-1190 or send email to wolfried@sbcglobal.net.*

door teaching exhibits. The most popular is our Algonkian Village, a replicated inland southern New England Indian settlement, whose form is based on the findings of the Institute's archaeology programs. The Village contains three pole-frame, bark-covered wigwams, a larger sachem's (chief's) house, a dugout canoe, a central firepit, drying racks for preserving food-stuffs for the winter months, a tanning rack for softening animal hides into cloth-

ing, and a garden in which maize, beans and squash are grown using indigenous planting methods. The museum's current interpretive program offers several perspectives on the Native past in Southern New England. 🌿

*The Institute for American Indian Studies is located at 38 Curtis Road in Washington. For more information, call (860) 868-0518 or visit [www.birdstone.org](http://www.birdstone.org).*

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