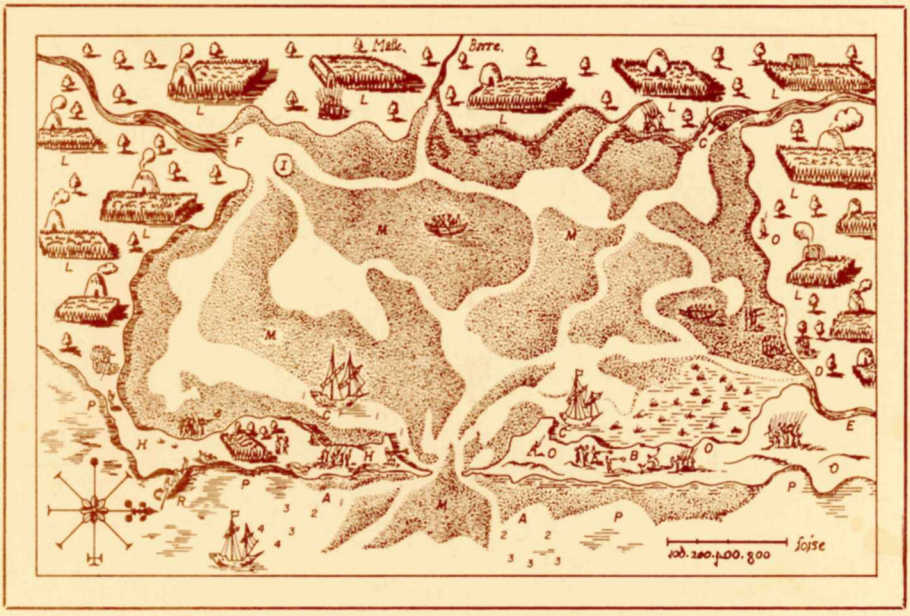
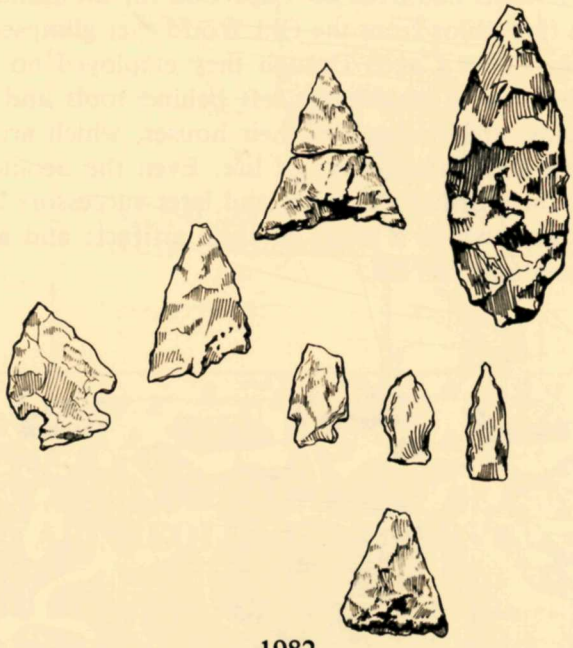
The Archeology of Cape Cod National Seashore



The Archeology of Cape Cod National Seashore



1982

Second, revised printing 1984

by

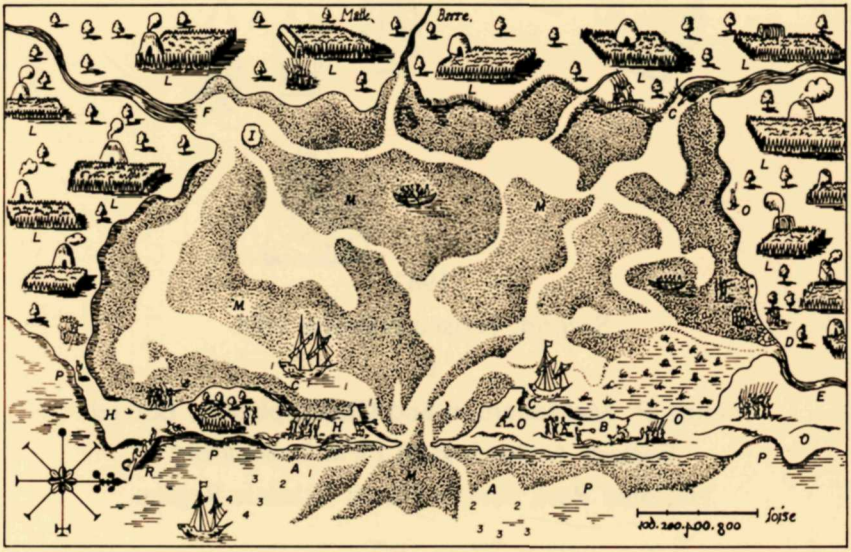
Francis P. McManamon and Christopher L. Borstel
Eastern Archeological Field Laboratory
National Park Service North Atlantic Region

Art work by James E. Owens

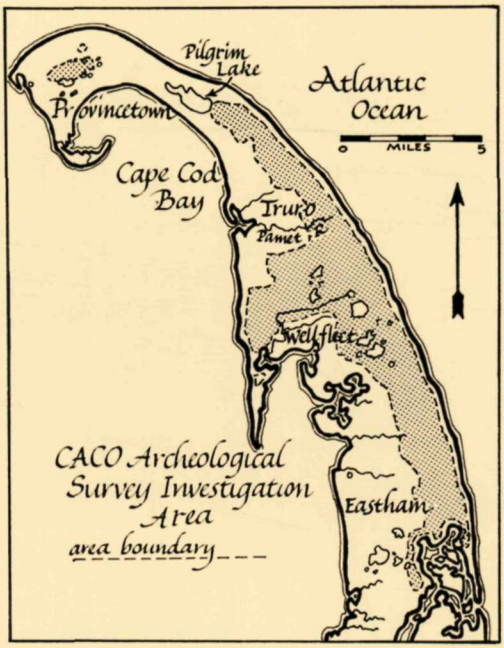
Editing and Layout by Michael Whatley

INTRODUCTION

When the French explorer Samuel de Champlain visited Nauset Bay in 1605, he found the shores well settled with native peoples. Native Americans had lived on Cape Cod for thousands of years before the first sailor from the Old World ever glimpsed the high cliffs of the Outer Cape. Though they employed no system of writing, these early inhabitants left behind tools and weapons, food remains, and outlines of their houses, which archeologists use to learn about their ways of life. Even the detailed written records of their British, Yankee, and later successors have blind spots and gaps which a study of their artifacts and abandoned stone foundations can fill.



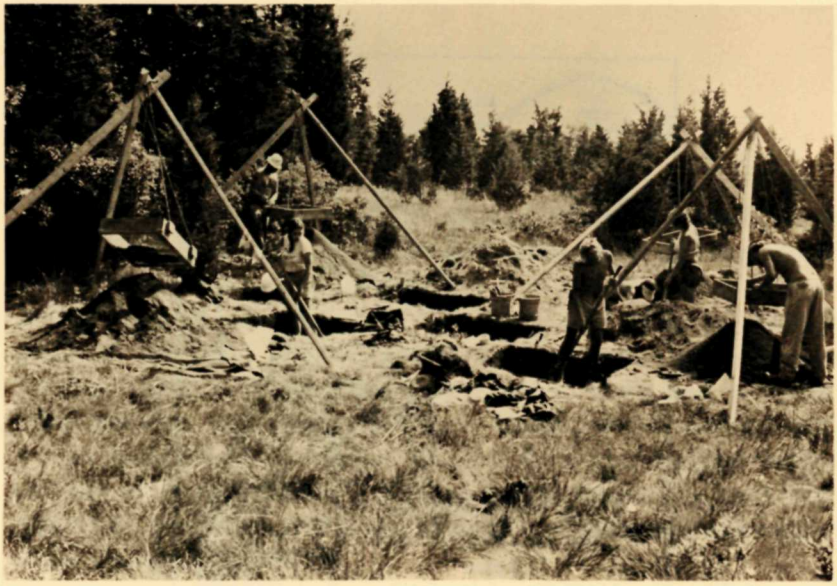
Samuel de Champlain's map of Nauset Bay.



THE CAPE COD NATIONAL SEASHORE ARCHEOLOGICAL SURVEY

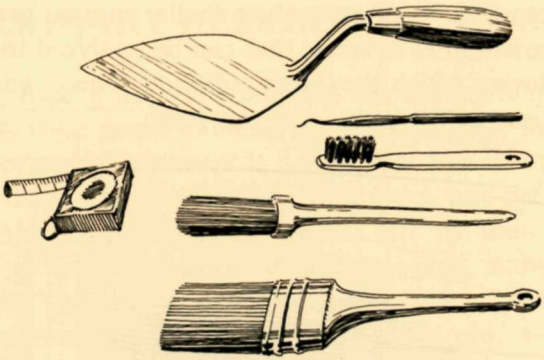
Since 1979 the National Park Service has been investigating the archeological record of the Seashore's past residents, from the earliest aboriginal peoples to the farmers and fishermen of the early twentieth century. Along with the protection of such visible features of the Seashore as the beaches and the plant and animal communities, the Park Service is also responsible for archeological remains. These remains are a nonrenewable store of scientific information and a portion of the Nation's cultural heritage.

The National Park Service must manage and interpret the archeological remains effectively and accurately. To do so it is necessary to know the locations, characteristics, and number of



archeological sites. The first step is to discover where sites are located. Ideally, archeologists would examine every acre of the park, but dense vegetation, deep sand dunes, and the size of the area to be studied (the park encompasses 44,600 acres, including 17,000 acres of seabed) makes this impossible. Instead, Park Service archeologists are studying randomly selected plots of land from different kinds of environmental zones and are using these data to predict statistically the locations and number of sites throughout the Seashore. The studies are carried out by field and laboratory crews composed largely of seasonal employees. Most of these men and women are students or have studied anthropology with special emphasis on archeology in college.

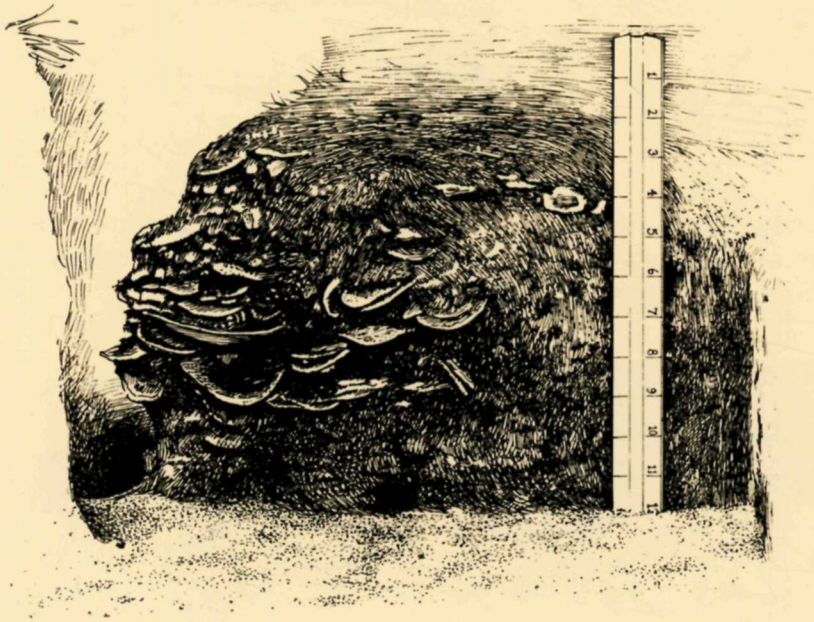
The characteristics of a sample of these sites are studied through more intensive investigations after they are found. Artifacts and other remains are recovered through trowelling, careful shovelling, and the sifting of soil from the site areas. The locations of finds within each site are recorded precisely so that they can be analyzed to interpret the past activities that occurred at the site. Analysis of the finds and their context also are used to identify the time period



and season a site was occupied. If undisturbed organic material is recovered it can be radiocarbon dated to learn rather precisely how long ago a site was inhabited.

Archeologist taking a soil column from a small section of the wall of an excavation unit. This soil will be processed with fine screens and water to collect a sample of fragile remains, such as seeds, fish vertebrae and other bones, small shells, and tiny flakes.

Mollusk remains, such as quahog shells, contain growth lines, similar to growth lines in trees, that can be analyzed to determine the season during which they were collected. This is an important clue to the time of the year a site was used.

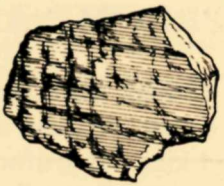


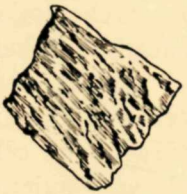
The archeologists rely on the interest and cooperation of local residents who tell them about former uses of the land that might have affected the sites. In addition, a landowner's permission to work on or cross his land is necessary when the study plots straddle it. The field investigations to locate sites and partially excavate them is only a portion of the archeological work. Careful planning of where and how to do the fieldwork precedes it and is followed by many months of painstaking cataloging and analysis of the data. On the whole, archeological field investigations are only a third of a complete study—although as the most visible portion they are the most familiar to nonarcheologists.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

Though work is not yet complete, the Survey is making good progress. A clear understanding of site locations, numbers, size and kinds of artifacts present is developing. People have been living on the Outer Cape for at least 7,000 years, and perhaps longer. A few projectile points (arrowheads) left by these earliest inhabitants gathered by amateur archeologists many years ago presently are the only evidence of the earliest inhabitants. More readily apparent are sites 3,000-4,000 years old, a time period labelled the Late Archaic by New England archeologists. Park Service archeologists have found several, including one buried beneath dune sands on High Head in North Truro. Other sites of this age are located around Small's Swamp in North Truro, in Wellfleet, and along the shore of Nauset Marsh in Eastham. The artifacts and other remains in these sites indicate that their inhabitants undertook a variety of activities. One major question yet to be resolved is whether the human groups from this period occupied the Outer Cape year-round or only seasonally.

During the Late Archaic, groups of two different cultures might have lived on the Outer Cape. One of the questions the Survey archeologists hope to answer is whether there were two cultures or only one whose members used different types of tools at different places. The Late Archaic inhabitants made many of their stone tools of quartz and probably had few or no pottery vessels of fired clay. They relied upon wild plants and animals for food, although probably their intimate knowledge of the natural environment enabled them to harvest various wild foods in a relatively sophisticated, regular manner.





GENERAL CHRONOLOGY FOR CAPE COD ARCHEOLOGY

A.D. 1936-37	U.S. Coast Guard Station built at Coast Guard Beach.
A.D. 1872-73	U.S. Life Saving Service erected stations along the Outer Cape coast.
A.D. 1849-55	H.D. Thoreau's 3 walking tours that resulted in his journal, *Cape Cod.*
A.D. 1620 (330 B.P.*)	The *Mayflower* anchors in Provincetown Harbor before proceeding to Plymouth.
A.D. 1605 (345 B.P.)	Champlain explores and maps Nauset Bay.
3,000-400 B.P.	During this period horticulture and pottery were used by the Cape's inhabitants. The largest number of remaining sites date to this period.
6,000-3,000 B.P.	First period from which substantial number of archeological sites remain.
10,000-6,000 B.P.	First human occupation of Cape Cod.
15,000-13,000 B.P.	Ice front retreats, forming Martha's Vineyard, Nantucket and Cape Cod.
15,000 Before the Present (B.P.)*	Ice covers all of New England.

*Before the Present; A.D. 1950 is the year used as the base from which years B.P. are calculated.

During later prehistoric times, referred to as the Early, Middle, and Late Woodland periods (3,000-400 years ago), inhabitants of the Outer Cape used mainly felsite and quartzite to fashion their tools. Some tools and tool fragments made of stone from other parts of the Northeast have been found in sites of this period. This suggests some type of contact among the Cape's inhabitants and those living elsewhere. The nature and extent of this contact is another topic being investigated by the analysis of tools. These people made pottery decorated with incised and pressed designs. The pottery was tempered with shell, sand, or pieces of crushed potsherds.

Sites of this late prehistoric period are the most common on the Outer Cape. They generally are found in the same locations as those of the earlier Late Archaic period but in greater numbers. The activities represented by the artifacts and remains at these sites seem to be more diverse than those indicated by the Late Archaic artifacts; however, this continues to be explored through more detailed analysis. During at least the last half of the Woodland period, settlement of the Outer Cape seems to have been year-round. In 1979 Survey archeologists excavated a prehistoric

burial which would have been destroyed by construction in Wellfleet. The burial included the remains of more than two dozen individuals of both sexes and all ages. Two radiocarbon dates of about 900 years ago have been made on bone from the burial. It seems unlikely that seasonal visitors to the Outer Cape would have carried the remains of their dead from their other places of residence to the Cape for interment. The individuals in the burial seem to have died over an extended period of time and their remains gathered together at one place and time for a common interment. Such community burial practices are known to have occurred during the last prehistoric period and 1600's in the lower Great Lakes region, the Chesapeake Bay area, and the coastal Carolinas.

Indian Neck ossuary was a prehistoric community burial containing the remains of a number of individuals who probably died over one to two decades, from a variety of causes. Such burials were previously unreported in New England. Radiometric dating indicates the ossuary was built about A.D. 880-1155. Located on private land, the ossuary was threatened by construction of a septic tank system. With the generous cooperation of the landowner, the Park Service provided expertise to rescue this important and sensitive feature. Archeologists dislike salvage archeology because careful, thorough, thoughtful excavation is often difficult; whenever possible, participation of archeologists in the planning of a project helps avoid such emergencies and means that sites may be preserved intact.

During the late prehistoric period the cultivation of domesticated crops began on the Outer Cape as it did in much of the Northeast. Cultigens were introduced into the area from farther west and south. The extent of domestic cultivation as well as when and why it began here are among the questions being investigated by the analysis of Survey data. By the time of the Champlain and the Pilgrim visits to the Outer Cape, corn, beans, and several other crops were being raised. Horticulture seems to have been a successful adaptation since the Pilgrims travelled to Nauset several times during the early 1620's to purchase corn from Native Americans.

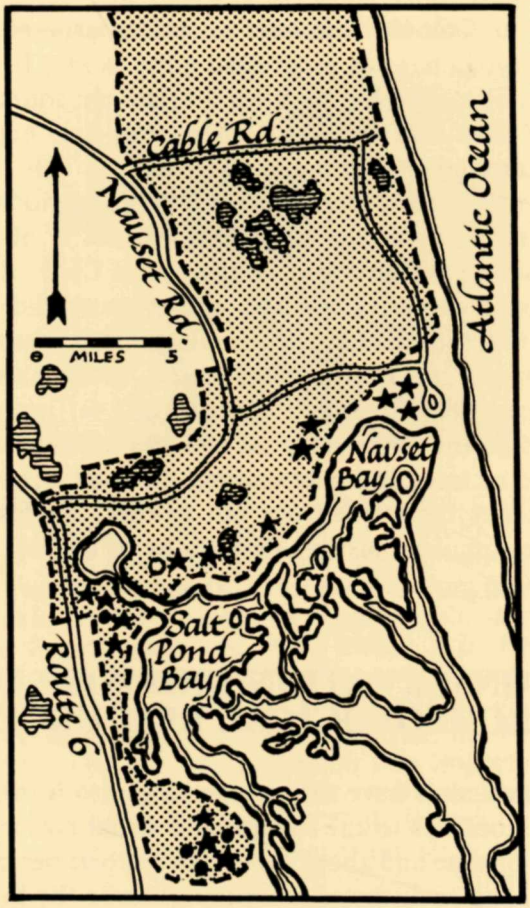
Work on the Colonial and later American aspects of the Seashore's archeology has not progressed quite as far. Just as for the prehistoric sites, archeologists have a relatively sound notion of the kinds of sites that exist and where they are, but know less about their internal structure and contents.

Many of the historic period sites date to periods when settlements were occupied or abandoned because of social and economic changes in the towns of the Outer Cape. Eventually it should be possible to learn much about the household economy of historic period homesteads. How important were different economic pursuits like farming, husbandry, fishing, and industry? To what degree were the Cape's residents self sufficient? How did they respond to the environmental changes brought on by stripping the land of trees and overworking the soil? Archeology cannot fully answer these questions but neither can historic documents. More complete answers develop by using both sources.

THE CONSERVATION AND WISE USE OF ARCHEOLOGICAL RESOURCES

Archeological sites have the unique ability to inform us about people's relationships to the natural and social environment over long periods of time and about aspects of historic period social life often overlooked or distorted in written records. By definition, no other source of information exists about human life before written

history. On the Outer Cape this means before about 1500, and even after that precious little was recorded for hundreds of years. By 1800 historical documents provided a reasonably detailed amount of information about some topics, but a wide variety of topics about household life, diversity of economic pursuits, and social relationships are unrecorded by the existing documents. For these topics also the archeological record is our only source of information.



One reason Cape Cod National Seashore was created is for the conservation and accurate interpretation of the historical and scientific data in the archeological resources within its boundaries. The purpose was to assure that future Americans will have the data stored in these sites. The value of these data will increase as archeologists develop better techniques for squeezing information out of them. Improved techniques will permit more accurate interpretation with less destruction of the remains by excavation.

Even carefully controlled, scientific archeological investigation such as the Cape Cod National Seashore Archeological Survey destroys a portion of the record. That which is destroyed cannot be retrieved; only the data that are recorded during the investigation remain. Since it is impossible to record *all* data, even for a small-scale excavation, some loss of data is inevitable. The loss is far smaller and more carefully controlled than when a site is unwittingly destroyed by a construction project or maliciously looted by vandals or unscrupulous artifact collectors. Any loss, however, is a concern for archeologists. Field tests and excavation for the Survey are kept to the minimum amount necessary in order to conserve the existing remains. In all cases this means that well under 5% of the volume of any site has been removed by Survey fieldwork. This is in keeping with the National Park Service's mandate and policies to conserve important national resources.

These policies and rules mean that visitors are expected to leave artifacts where they find them, even on paths and beaches. Let the park staff know if you find something but leave it where you saw it first. Remember, unauthorized digging for or collecting of artifacts destroys the archeological record and on federal lands is illegal.

CONCLUSION

Much as the beaches, dunes, forests and meadows preserved by the Seashore offer contrasts to the mechanized suburban or urban ways of life of many park visitors, so do the archeological sites

within its boundaries preserve information about very different ways of life from the past. By reflecting on such contrasts, you may gain a better sense of connections among the parts of the world and of past to present.

Postscript

Since this booklet was written, the Survey has continued to work both in the field and laboratory. Geochron Laboratories of Cambridge, Massachusetts, supplied 21 new radiocarbon dates from six different sites. These dates span a range from the Late Archaic period to the Late Woodland period. Among other things, these new dates confirm that Indians on Cape Cod began collecting shellfish at least 4000 years ago. Recent testing suggests that Late Archaic or older archeological deposits may be buried by salt marshes in some places. Laboratory analysis of quahog shells from sites indicates that during the late Woodland period some people stayed on the Outer Cape throughout the year. This helps support inferences, based on the Indian Neck ossuary, about the restricted nature of seasonal movements during this late time period. Preliminary study of bones from Outer Cape sites confirms prehistoric Indians exploited many habitats, both marine and terrestrial, to capture animals for food. Recent analyses of prehistoric pottery and stone tool rock types shows that, far from living in the backwater envisioned by some archeologists, the people of Cape Cod were in sustained communication with other native peoples of the Northeast.

In a related project Park Service archeologists have recently recataloged the collection from the Great Island Tavern site in Wellfleet and stabilized its fragile artifacts. This re-examination has confirmed the excavators' conclusions about the site's function and age. The site was the location of a historic period tavern that catered to inshore whalers, among other customers, from roughly 1690 to 1740.

For Further Reading

Here are a few references on historic period archeology, prehistoric archeology and Native Americans for the interested reader. Those books marked with an asterisk (*) are particularly written for young people.

(*)Bjorklund, Karna

1969 *The Indians of Northeastern North America.* New York: Dodd, Mead.

Bradley, James W., Francis P. McMananmon, Thomas F. Mahlstedt and Ann L. Magennis

1982 The Indian Neck ossuary: a preliminary report. *Bulletin of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society* 43:47-59.

Deetz, James

1967 *Invitation to Archaeology.* Garden City: Natural History Press.

1977 *In Small Things Forgotten.* Garden City: Anchor Press.

Ganong, W. F., translator

1922 Acadia and New England Part III of *the Works of Samuel de Champlain, Volume I,* edited by H.P. Biggar. Toronto: The Champlain Society. (Note: This is the best of several translations of Champlain's account of his New England voyages, which included visits to Eastham and Chatham.)

Hole, Frank and Robert F. Heizer

1973 *An Introduction to Prehistoric Archeology.* New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Kavash, Barrie

1979 *Native Harvests: Recepies and Botanicals of the American Indian.* New York: Random House.

McManamon, Francis P.

1981 Probability sampling and archaeology survey in the Northeast: an estimation approach. In *Foundations of Northeast Archeology,* edited by Dean Snow, pp. 195-227. New York: Academic Press.

1982 Prehistoric land use on outer Cape Cod. *Journal of Field Archaeology* 9 (1).

McManamon, Francis P., editor
1984 *Chapters in the Archeology of Cape Cod: Interim Report of the Cape Cod National Seashore Archeological Survey* (2 volumes). Boston: Division of Cultural Resources, North Atlantic Regional Office, National Park Service.

Moffett, Ross
1957 A review of Cape Cod archaeology. *Bulletin of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society* 19(1):1-19.

(*)Porell, Bruce
1979 *Digging the Past.* Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Ritchie, William A.
1969 *The Archaeology of Martha's Vineyard.* Garden City: Natural History Press.

Russell, Howard
1980 *Indian New England before the Mayflower.* Hanover, NH: University Press of New England.

Schuyler, Robert L.
1978 *Historical Archaeology: A Guide to Substantive and Theoretical Contributions.* Farmingdale, NY: Baywood Publishing.

Snow, Dean
1980 *The Archaeology of New England.* New York: Academic Press.

Trigger, Bruce, editor
1978 *Handbook of North American Indians: Volume 15, Northeast.* Washington: Smithsonian Institution.

Wilbur, C. Keith
1978 *The New England Indians.* Chester, CT: Globe Pequot Press.