

History Surfaces When Passaic River Runs Low



THOMAS E. FRANKLIN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

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In late summer, when the Passaic River runs low, a driver sitting in traffic on the Fair Lawn Avenue Bridge might be able to make out a long line of boulders and cobble stones peeking above the river's current.

A closer look means parking along Route 20, traipsing over broken glass and Coca-Cola cans and making one's way down a steep slope full of poison ivy.

But then the view becomes one of ancient times: There, the lack of rain amid a heat wave has unveiled a 100-yard-wide dam spanning the Passaic that historical evidence indicates is a centuries-old fishing weir. Before European colonization, indigenous peoples built such v-shaped dams using boulders and cobbles as a way to funnel and catch migrating fish.

When 74-year-old Tony DeCondo was a boy growing in Paterson just four blocks away, he and his friends would amble about the weir to play and cast fishing lines. A half-century later, DeCondo, now of Elmwood Park, and others have spent the past two decades studying, preserving and trying to protect the weir.

In 1989, DeCondo and Al Lutins of Johnson City, N.Y., a professional archaeologist, tried without success to get the weir on the National Historic Registry. It's hard to date stone, and it's possible that the weir was naturally made, or built by Dutch settlers. "What they're looking for is tangible evidence of Indian occupation," DeCondo explained.

But since then, DeCondo said he has found more solid evidence of indigenous habitation that dates the weir as possibly several thousands of years old. He said he is ready to send the evidence to the registry so it can reconsider the weir's landmark status.

His long search for evidence struck gold a decade ago, when DeCondo, a retired Hackensack school teacher, took on the project of cataloguing more than 300 arrowheads as a volunteer at the Paterson Museum. "In doing that, I found something which was actually incredible," He said. "You talk about serendipity."

Tucked away in one of the trays in the storeroom was a card filled out by Albert Heusser, a Paterson historian. In April 1924, he found an arrowhead and two knife fragments on the opposite foot of Third Avenue in Paterson — right by the Fair Lawn side of the weir. When DeCondo examined the arrowhead, he found its straight edges, stem and base were indicative of the Susquehanna style of arrowhead. He determined it may be from the late Archaic and early Woodland period: about 3000 B.C. to 200 A.D.

"That's it," DeCondo said. "That's telling you there was some type of activity and habitation."

Along with the arrowhead, DeCondo will send another piece of evidence: an oblong basalt boulder on the Fair Lawn side of the weir with five shallow concavities.

State geological surveyors and nearby property owners have both said they didn't make the holes, and the surveyors said the holes were not naturally made. DeCondo says indigenous children may have used the holes to crack open nuts while nearby, adults scooped up fish with a woven barrel.

On a recent Friday morning in the midst of a dry spell, the area around the weir was tranquil, save for a frantic school of hundreds of tiny fish quivering in the sunlight. Nearby, a turtle bathed on a boulder. A McDonald's cup floated by, and a tire remained lodged near the opening at the weir's apex – known as the sluice.

The mix of life and refuse was a testament to the weir's own history: once as a passive collector of striped bass, North American eels and shad, and in this past century, more likely a collector of thousands of tires that have floated down the river.

But the weir is much more pristine than it once was, thanks to the efforts of the Passaic Valley Sewerage Commission. DeCondo said that several times a year, students and others have removed hundreds of tires from the area.

While the weir DeCondo has studied is a common double-winged structure, another weir that has been found 1000 feet south is triple-winged with two apexes facing alternate directions. "It's quite a unique structure," DeCondo said. Recently, another potential weir was discovered nearby – but, DeCondo said, it turns out an underground creek had been throwing the line of rocks into the river.

Whether DeCondo's latest bid for landmark status will work remains to be seen. Lutins, a former Fair Lawn resident who studied the weir for his master's project, said dating it has been tricky. There has long been indirect evidence, he said, such as that the Dutch settlers' earliest names for areas they discovered seemed to imply the presence of weirs. The Paterson-Fair Lawn weir is one of many in the Passaic River – eleven were discovered by a Paterson archaeologist in the early 20th century, an industrial age when water levels were perpetually low.

Lutins would hesitate to say the Lenape Nation used the weir. "The Lenape are a name given by Europeans to specific groups of Indians that occupied the area at the time they arrived," Lutins said. The indigenous people who made the weir could be the Lenape Nation's ancestors, he said.

In a corner of the Paterson Museum on Market Street, a handmade model of the weir glimmers in the afternoon light.

DeCondo pointed to a nearby mural depicting how the indigenous peoples are said to have used the weir. Fish migrating upstream would get pushed to the sides of the weir, while fish migrating downstream would get caught in the sluice. "Their weir is a testament to the ingenuity of the aboriginal designers," DeCondo said.

"They would smoke the fish, and clean and gut the fish," DeCondo said, referring to early settlers' documentations of the practice.

Weirs have been increasingly studied by researchers around the world: In 2014, University of Victoria researchers investigated what may be a 13,800-year-old fish weir off the coast of the Haida Gwaii archipelago on the coast of British Columbia, Canada. The remains of weirs also have been found in Boston's Back Bay and the Potomac River and James River.

With a place on the historic registry giving the weir new prominence, more people could appreciate, study and learn about inland weirs and prehistoric food gathering, said DeCondo.

"This may well be the last remaining construction of its type in the northeastern portion of the United States," DeCondo said. "It's a beauty this thing; it's a beauty."

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