

Thousands of artifacts to be returned to First Nations after years boxed away in an Ottawa building

Archeologists and Indigenous youth are carefully cataloguing about 300,000 pots, tools and other items so the descendants of their ancient Algonquin owners can decide what to do with them

MARIE WOOLF >

OTTAWA

PUBLISHED 34 MINUTES AGO



These Meadowood cache blades, made on Onondaga chert, are estimated to be 2,500 to 3,000 years old. They were among the many Indigenous artifacts that lay in storage at a National Capital Commission building in Ottawa.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SPENCER COLBY/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

When Jennifer Tenasco, a 23-year old from the Kitigan Zibi community in

Quebec, hung a polished slate pendant round her neck on Monday, her friends remarked just how elegant the ornament looked.

The heavy black pendant, which she had threaded on a gold ribbon, was shaped from black slate and had a sixties retro look.

It was retro all right. The pendant had not been worn for 2,000 years.

It is one of hundreds of thousands of precontact Indigenous artifacts found near Ottawa that are only now being sorted and catalogued. The aim is to return many of them to the Algonquin First Nations whose ancestors made them, or acquired them through trade.

For years, around 300,000 finds – ranging from arrow heads to pots, pipe bowls and tools to make canoes – have been stashed in boxes in an office suite in a National Capital Commission building steps from Parliament.

Word of the cache's existence had circulated among Indigenous people, including Algonquin and Mohawk living in Ottawa. But few, except a coterie of archeologists and representatives of Algonquin First Nations agitating for access to their ancestors' artifacts, have actually seen them.

That is about to change, thanks to a small team of archeologists and a group of Indigenous young people from the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg First Nation located north of Gatineau and the Algonquins of Pikwakanagan, about 150 kilometres southwest of Ottawa, who have been resolutely cleaning, sorting and cataloguing the ancient finds.

The surge in activity has in part been helped by the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought archeological digs to a halt, and afforded the time to sift through stacks of boxes containing a wealth of artifacts dating back up to 6,000 years.

Around 88 per cent of the 300,000 finds – most of them from digs near Ottawa – have now been painstakingly catalogued, under the stewardship of the National Capital Commission's archeological team



The slate pendant, shown at top around Jennifer Tenasco's neck, was found in the region of Leamy Lake Park, on the Quebec side of the Ottawa River.

The search is now on for a permanent home for the collection, which will enable researchers and the Algonquin people who own them, to see, handle and study them.

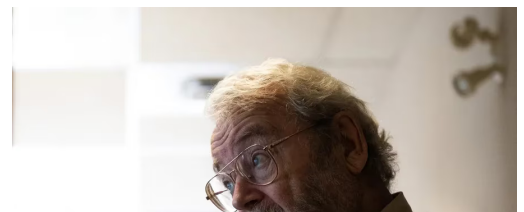


Archeologist Monica Maika holds a 'pseudo-scallop shell' made around 1,900 years ago. The pieces are held together by a wood glue that can be dissolved if new pieces are discovered, or existing ones are found to be in the wrong order.

Leading the mammoth endeavour is Ian Badgley, manager of the NCC's archeology program, who for 50 years has been excavating Indigenous sites from the Yukon to Ontario.

Helping him are 16 Indigenous young people from the Anishinabe Odjibikan, a federally funded archeological field school that for two years has been excavating

a precontact site in Leamy Lake Park, near the Gatineau and Ottawa rivers. They are now playing a key role in cataloguing the artifacts, and helping to determine their future.

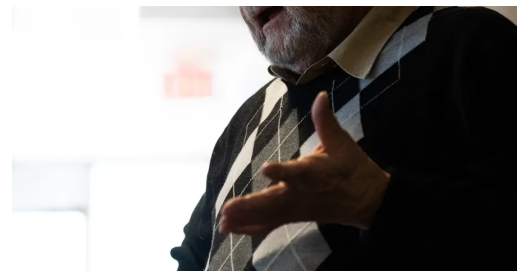


Among them is Emma Logan from Pikwakanagan who is taking Indigenous studies at Carleton University, with plans for a postgraduate degree in archeology.

At the NCC lab, Ms. Logan works on a piece of birch bark with a tiny tool, barely bigger than a thumbnail, known as a microlith. The archeologists had been puzzling about the use of the minuscule tools they had been finding, but Ms. Logan was convinced they had been used as engravers, and set out to test the theory.

As her ancestors may have done thousands of years ago, Ms. Logan carefully engraved a floral pattern on birch bark, to make a decorative hair barrette. “It’s still sharp,” she said on Monday, adding that the tiny tool was perfectly constructed to etch intricate motifs.

Her theory was substantiated by anthropologist Jennifer Davidson, who is writing a thesis at Carleton on “understudied” artifacts, including from the capital region. She says microliths were indeed used for artwork and decorative carving, including on bone, with many examples found in Ontario.



Ian Badgley is manager of the archeology program at the NCC.

SPENCER COLBY/THE GLOBE AND MAIL





Emma Logan, a Carleton University student from Pikwakanagan, holds a floral drawing on birch made with a microlith tool.

s. Logan, middle, looks at some artifacts alongside Drew Tenasco, ft, and Jennifer Tenasco.

Mr. Badgley gestures at a map of pre-contact trade networks that brought the artifacts to the area.

Mr. Badgley says the confluence of waterways – including the Ottawa River and Rideau River – linking the capital region to the St. Lawrence and Great Lakes meant that long before the Europeans arrived on sailing ships, the region was a rich trading area from which Indigenous peoples travelled thousands of kilometres by canoe. He said artifacts made from stone found in Northern Labrador, Ohio and Maine have been found near Ottawa. Soil erosion has meant that many were unearthed near the surface, perilously close to being washed into the Ottawa River. The finds are almost of all in stone or pottery, which survived the ravages of time, unlike wood and leather.

“The artifacts that have been discovered demonstrate that the National Capital Region was at the centre of a vast precontact communication and trade network that, beginning approximately 6,000 years ago, covered most of northeastern North America,” explained Dominique Huras, a spokeswoman for the National Capital Commission.

They also shed light on how Indigenous peoples lived thousands of years ago. Mr. Badgley’s team tested the residue from ancient pots they found, discovering local

Badgley's team tested the residue from ancient pots they found, also finding that people were eating fish and local game. They linked a later potsherd with a corn ear design on its rim to the St. Lawrence Iroquois who once occupied villages in the St. Lawrence Valley. The French explorer Jacques Cartier records meeting them when he arrived in 1535. But they had disappeared from the valley 80 years later when Samuel de Champlain, the French explorer who established Quebec, made contact.

One 3,000-year-old point – possibly the tip of a spear – was carved in a shape typically found at the time in the Ohio-Illinois area. But it was made from Mistassini quartzite, the source of which is in central Quebec, 1000 kilometres northwest of the capital region.

The team have also recently catalogued part of a 1,600- to 1,800-year-old pot in a typical Huron design. Mr. Badgley says it may have been traded to an Anishinabe Algonquin family camping on the Ottawa River or made by the Huron wife of an Anishinabe Algonquin.

On one pot, thought to be 1,800 years old, the potter left a thumbprint on the surface.



Jennifer Tenasco uses a phone to illuminate fragments of Indigenous pottery.

The NCC, which is providing the storage space and a suite of old offices, says it is playing an “advisory role” on the future of the collection. The ultimate decision of where the artifacts will go is up to the Kitigan Zibi and Pikwakanagan

communities who have joint ownership of them. “The NCC is acting as a caretaker of these collections on behalf of the Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg and the Algonquins of Pikwakanagan First Nation as they do not currently have a repository for these artifacts,” Ms. Huras said.

Discussions have taken place, the NCC said, with Algonquin College about the possibility of establishing an artifact repository and research facility at the college’s Ottawa campus to store the vast cache of artifacts.

Doug Odjick, a Kitigan Zibi Anishinabeg council member, says integrating at least some of them into the college’s museum studies course would allow students to study the artifacts and would probably attract more Indigenous students to the program. “We are talking about making it more accessible to Algonquin communities,” he said in an interview. He believes that at least some artifacts should be on display, and not hidden in boxes, and also available to researchers.

Drew Tenasco, a 23-year old member of the field school from Kitigan Zibi, says handling the artifacts, and researching their use has given her a palpable link to her people’s history. “To have something tangible, and proof our people were here from time immemorial – it’s an affirmation we have been here from the beginning,” she said.

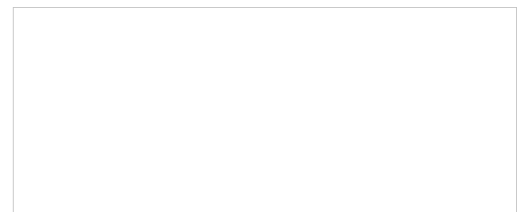
Mr. Badgley is among those who favour returning some of the stone artifacts to the Algonquin communities so they can be handled by people, and not just kept “behind glass.”

“It’s reappropriation of their own heritage,” he said. “These objects all have stories.”

Last year, a 4,000-year-old knife, found during an excavation on Parliament Hill, was returned to the joint ownership of the two Algonquin communities. The knife is to be displayed near the House of Commons where it was found, the two First Nations decided, but exact replicas of the artifact have been sent to their communities for people to see and touch.

Bryton Beaudoin, from Kitigan Zibi, has experienced the powerful emotional impact that handling ancient artifacts can have. With his

role in the team as an “explainer,” he says researching and cataloguing is “a step towards restoring the knowledge of our culture.” He took a number of the artifacts to his home community to show people,



including his mom. “My mom was crying a little bit. She was holding a piece of pottery. She said she had never held anything that significant before,” he said.

Kyle Sarazan, of Pikwakanagan, had a similar experience when he took a number of artifacts to his community for an open house. “The kids were the most excited,” he said. “They were feeling them and some said, ‘it’s still sharp.’ ”

Mr. Badgley wants to transform the Anishinabe Odjibikan – which means “Algonquin roots” – into a permanent fixture to allow the young people, who now have an extensive knowledge of professional curatorial techniques, to become the guardians of collections, and stewards of future archeological digs.

They are already having a profound influence on the way the artifacts are recorded. Twins Jennifer and Drew invited their grandmother – who is fluent in the Anishinaabemowin language – to see some of the artifacts, which she started naming in her mother tongue. “She’ll pick up stuff and know right away what it was for,” Jennifer Tenasco said.

Now when the Indigenous young people catalogue each artifact – with their age, where they were found and what they are made of – they record each name in English, French and Anishinaabemowin: words, such as mokaman, or knife, that thousands of years ago their ancestors would have used to describe them.

Reconciliation and repatriation: More from The Globe and Mail

How Taku River Tlingit brought home their robe from the private art world

Ottawa should fund Indigenous artifact repatriation, says the Canadian Museums Association

Indigenous objects repatriated from small British museum come home to Haida Gwaii

Delegates view Indigenous artifacts at Vatican with mix of awe and anger

How Indigenous researchers are reclaiming archeology and anthropology

Bryton Beaudoin is an 'explainer' on the team who brought some artifacts to his home community, Kitigan Zibi.

RAFAL GERSZAK/THE GLOBE AND MAIL