

BONES OFFER HISTORY LESSON

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THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

GIBBS WOODS — Human bones found last month that were first believed to be from a missing person belonged to an ancient American Indian, a discovery more common in northeastern North Carolina than anywhere else in the state.

About a dozen times a year, ancient human bones turn up and are reported to state archaeologists. Almost all of the finds are in northeastern North Carolina, said Steve Claggett, state archaeologist for the North Carolina Division of Archives and History.

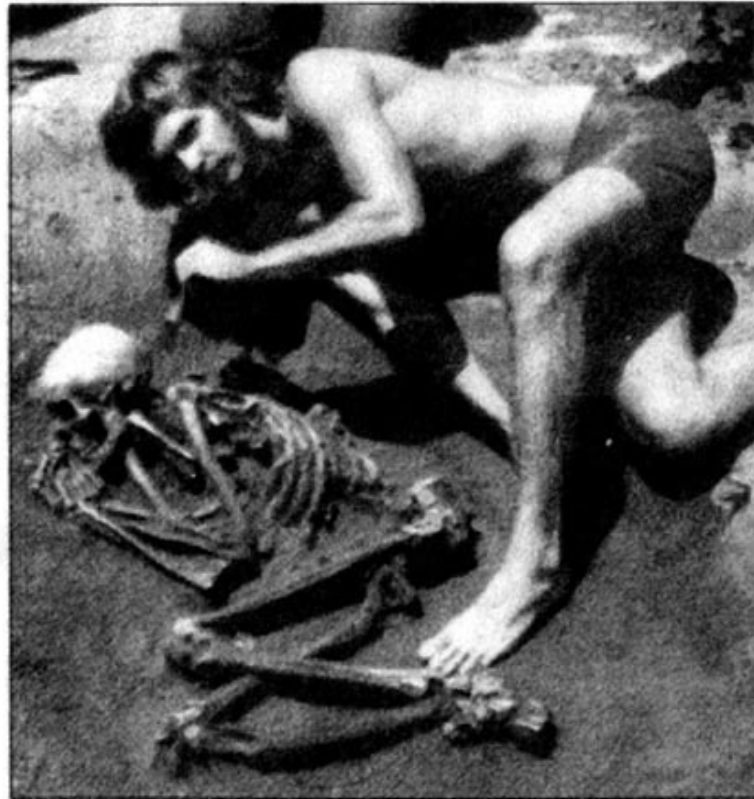
As in this case, they often are initially believed to be from the body of someone recently reported missing.

There's a reason so many ancient bones are found around here.

American Indians in northeastern North Carolina were the only tribes with the custom of burying their dead in mass graves, making it more likely their bones will be found, Claggett said. Heavy development, lots of activity along shorelines and erosion lead to more exposure of burial sites.

In seven northeastern counties, state archaeologists have mapped 450 American Indian burial sites, about 75 of them

Human remains found recently turn out to be from an ancient American Indian



COURTESY OF DARRELL MERRELL

Darrell Merrell helped uncover a massive American Indian burial ground near his Currituck home in 1972.

ANCIENT BURIAL GROUNDS

Archaeologists have mapped 450 American Indian burial sites in northeastern North Carolina counties. About 75 of them were in Currituck. The Gibbs Woods skeleton could signal a new site.

in Currituck. The skeleton found in Gibbs Woods could signal a new site. Where there's one set of bones, there's probably more, according to Mark Mathis, an archaeologist with Archives and History.

Mathis plans to inspect the area and record what's there.

"If we don't have to dig, we don't," he said.

The Gibbs Woods bones, found at the end of a creek used by fishermen to launch their boats, were mixed with bits of plastic, leading investigators to believe they belonged to the body of a missing person. Working with only a jaw bone and limb bones, forensic specialists at the East Carolina School of Medicine determined the remains were probably a woman of ancient American origin. The bones will be turned over to state archaeologists.

Chances are the plastic means someone uncovered the bones by mistake, said Mathis, who has worked most of the ancient Indian sites in the region. Whoever found the remains may have thought they belonged to a more recent grave site, wrapped the bones and replaced them, Mathis said. About five years ago, the dock area of the creek

*Please see **Bones**, Page Y2*

Bones: Local tribes account for finds

Continued from Page Y1

was dredged, but no sighting of bones was reported, Currituck investigators said.

Old bones are often mingled with modern debris, Mathis said. An ancient ossuary in Knotts Island uncovered by developers was found mixed with foam cups, a sign that amateur archaeologists had been there before looking for artifacts, Mathis said. Two methods help archaeologists distinguish new skeletons from old ones, Mathis said. Incisors on ancient skulls are flat in the center, then curl at the edges on the back of the teeth. The shape is similar to a flat-edged shovel, he said. Artifacts also tell the story of which tribe and how old.

Algonquin tribes that settled in northeastern North Carolina followed the custom of stacking their dead in towers until the flesh rotted or was eaten away, said Don Pendergraft, curator for the Museum of the Albemarle. The skeletons were buried in a mass grave. Only a few individuals were buried in



DREW WILSON/THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

Darrell Merrell holds American Indian artifacts found near his home in Currituck. Ancient artifacts are a common find in the area.

separate graves, Pendergraft said.

Approval to excavate and study a burial site has to come through the North Carolina Commission of Indian Affairs.

"Even if they're a thousand years old . . . we don't want to disrespect anybody in this job," Pendergraft said.

One of the best known and largest sites in Currituck is

known as the Baum site in Poplar Branch, found by Darrell Merrell in the early 1970s when he was still in high school.

"I was out there soft crabbing and found a skull," Merrell said Thursday.

He thought at first it might have been recent remains. He sent the skull to East Carolina University through a relative

attending school there. Experts there discovered the skull was ancient.

Merrell, aspiring to be an archaeologist at the time, helped state experts exhume some of the approximately 200 individuals in five different ossuaries. The bones ranged from thousands of years to a few hundred years old. During the dig, a woman cremated and placed on a grass mat was found alone.

American Indian groups through the centuries often chose the same high ground near water for home sites because they were the best place to live, Mathis said. The predominant Algonquin tribe in Currituck is Poteskeet, he said.

Merrell still finds artifacts on walks through the small farm field that sits along the shoreline of the Currituck Sound. Last winter a jogger found an exposed skeleton in the same area and reported it to local authorities, believing it to be the body of someone who had died recently, Merrell said. State archaeologists determined it was ancient.