

New Evidence for the Paleoindian Occupation of the Narragansett Basin, Rhode Island and Massachusetts, USA

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The Paleoindian occupation of the Narragansett Basin in Rhode Island and adjacent Massachusetts is poorly known. The Wapanucket 8 site produced a small suite of early-Paleoindian diagnostics in mixed context (Robbins and Agogino 1964, Bradley and Boudreau 2006a) and several points have been identified in Massachusetts collections (Bradley and Boudreau 2006b, 2008), but only three diagnostic Paleoindian points are known from Rhode Island (Rhode Island Historical Preservation and Historical Commission 2002).

In the early 20th century, Rudolf Haffenreffer purchased nearly 40,000 archaeological stone tools from Rhode Island and adjacent Massachusetts. His collection became part of Brown University's Haffenreffer Museum of Anthropology in 1955, but was never typologically evaluated until this year. In this assessment we identified thirteen diagnostic Paleoindian points, nine Paleoindian tools, and four fluted point preforms from locations across the Narragansett Basin. Three additional points and a trianguloid scraper-graver identified only as coming from Massachusetts are most likely from the Narragansett Basin. Typological assignments (following Bradley et al. 2008) indicate both early- and late-Paleoindian activity in the region.

Evidence for early-Paleoindian activity includes two complete Bull Brook-West Athens Hill points from southwestern RI, one manufactured from Eastern Onondaga chert, the other visually identified as black Normanskill/Mount Merino chert (Funk 2004). A yellow jasper channel flake from Diamond Hill, RI, conforms to the Kings Road-Whipple reduction sequence (Bradley et al. 2008: 127), while a black Normanskill chert combination graver-endscraper, also from Diamond Hill, suggests an early-Paleoindian site in this region. A gray chert endscraper manufactured on a fractured fluted point base from Attleboro, MA, a green Normanskill chert combination end/side scraper with graver spurs from the Palmer River drainage (Barrington, RI), and a composite scraper-graver from North Rehoboth, MA, complete the early-Paleoindian inventory.

During the Younger Dryas, currently inundated portions of Narragansett Bay were deep valleys coursed by rivers that discharged into estuarine embayments 25-30 km south of

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the present shoreline and 35-37 m below current sea level (McMullen et al. 2007, 2008, 2009). The scattered distribution of early-Paleoindian materials within the basin (Figure 1a) is consistent with extensive rather than intensive use of the upland headwaters of these now-drowned valley systems, while the apparent reliance on exotic lithic raw materials, some originating in formations 150-250 kms distant, finds parallels with assemblages from Bull Brook (Robinson et al. 2009) and Wapanucket 8 (Bradley and Boudreau 2006a).

In contrast (Figure 1b), late-Paleoindian specimens cluster in two geographically restricted regions within the basin. One—from the upland, morainic divide between the Narragansett and Boston Basins—includes four Cormier-Nicholas points from the Norton Reservoir [2], Chartley [1], and North Rehoboth [1], MA, as well as two roughly made points, similar to Hi-Lo points, and a finely serrated quartz lanceolate point with basal thinning, all from the Attleboro, MA, area. The second cluster includes two Cormier-Nicholas points from South Swansea, MA, two from Barrington, RI, and an assemblage of five late-Paleoindian points, three trianguloid endscrapers (one fluted and one on a jasper channel flake), one composite scraper/graver and two fluted preforms from Riverside, RI. The Riverside assemblage suggests recurrent use of this location overlooking the now-drowned confluence of the Pawtuxet and Blackstone Rivers by early- and late-Paleoindian groups.

These two clusters, each roughly 15 km in diameter, are separated by a zone of nearly equal distance within which no late-Paleoindian materials are known, despite comparable attention by the collectors from whom Haffenreffer purchased artifacts. Although no other parts of the Narragansett Basin have produced similar late-Paleoindian diagnostics, three additional Cormier-Nicholas points in Massachusetts collections were found within these same cluster boundaries (Bradley and Boudreau 2006: 36-37). Tentatively, we suggest that they represent focal areas of relatively intense and/or enduring late-Paleoindian activity within the interfluvial uplands and headwaters of the basin's primary Late Pleistocene river tributary streams.

Most late-Paleoindian tools identified within the Haffenreffer collections were made from rhyolites and other fine-grained igneous rocks available within 75-100 kms of the locations where they were found, further reinforcing a sense of settling into the Narragansett drainage basin. One point, possibly manufactured from rhyolite acquired from the Mount Jasper or Jefferson (New Hampshire) sources, nearly 270 km to the north (Pollock et al. 2008), suggests the maintenance of long-distance interaction.

These new data from long-ignored collections dramatically expand the number of Paleoindian tools known from the Narragansett Basin, provide intriguing suggestions of changes from extensive to intensive and regionally focused land-use patterns, and document shifting raw material preferences at the end of the Pleistocene. These initial findings not only provide strong bases for future research but also reaffirm the value of curated collections for contemporary research.

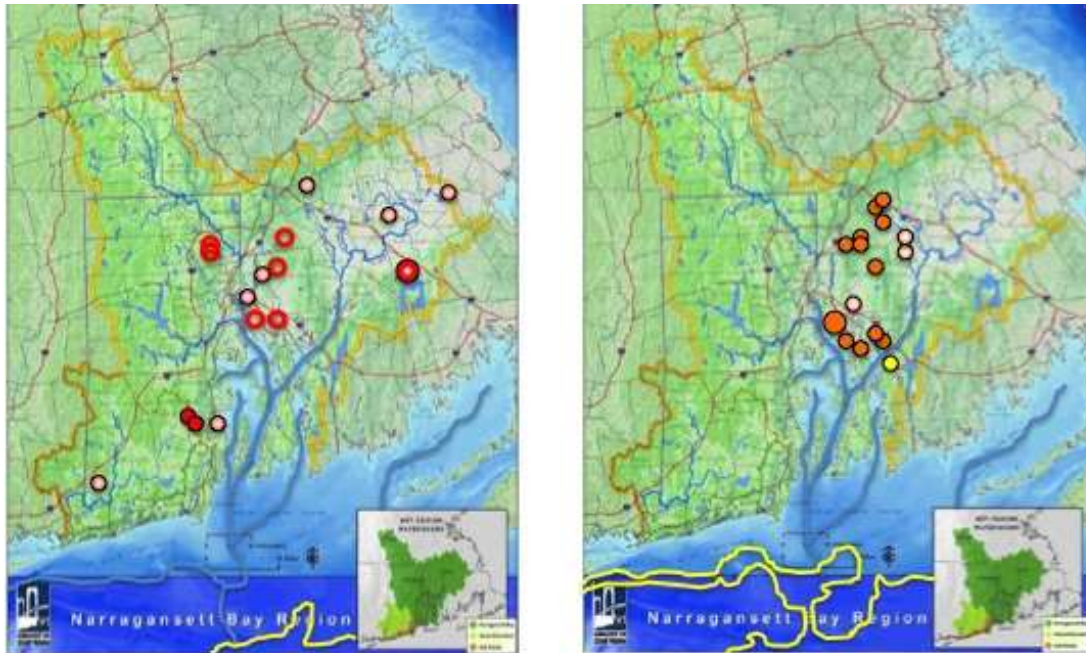


Figure 1: Early-Paleoindian (left, 1a) and late-Paleoindian (right, 1b) artifact distributions in the Narragansett Basin. Lightly filled circles represent previously known sites and find-spots; solid-colored circles and open circles locate diagnostic projectile points and Paleoindian tools (respectively) from the Haffenreffer collections. Larger circles indicate the early-Paleoindian Wapanucket 8 site (1a) and late-Paleoindian Riverside assemblage (1b). Yellow and blue lines approximate contemporary Late Pleistocene shorelines and river courses, respectively.

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