

An aerial photograph of a lush, green forested escarpment. A dirt road winds through the trees, leading to a small settlement with several buildings. The background shows rolling hills with patches of forest and open fields under a clear sky. The title 'QUEST FOR QUARTZITE: Aboriginal' is overlaid in white text on a dark blue banner at the top.

QUEST FOR QUARTZITE: **Aboriginal**

WRITTEN BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT

THE NIAGARA ESCARPMENT AREA has several sites that reveal some of the history of indigenous North Americans. They may have been attracted to certain qualities of the Escarpment, or it may simply be that relatively recent protection of the areas from development has also preserved the sites. Manitoulin Island's village of Sheguiandah is near a site so significant that it was designated a National Historic Site of Canada.

Ancestors at Sheguiandah

▲ Aerial view of the archaeological site near Sheguiandah, Manitoulin Island. The site covers a broad area above the wing and includes the bare bedrock visible among the trees.

PHOTO BY PETER L. STORCK, ©ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM.



ACCORDING TO HISTORIC SITES AND MONUMENTS BOARD OF CANADA,

“Sheguiandah was designated a national historic site of Canada in 1954 because through more than 9,000 years...Aboriginal peoples came to quarry the local outcrops of quartzite, leaving an integrated cultural and environmental record.

“The main features of the site are the local outcrops of

quartzite, from which early Aboriginal peoples could make tools and weapons. Large stone hammers were used to strike off pieces of the bedrock, and from the finer fragments the settlers chipped out great numbers of knives, scrapers, and other tools for use in hunting, fishing, and food-gathering.”

Regarded as “the richest Stone Age find ever recorded for Canada,” the archaeological

site at Sheguiandah was studied by Thomas E. Lee in the 1950s. Based on artifacts he found, such as scrapers and knives, some of which are displayed in Centennial Museum of Sheguiandah, Lee estimated the earliest date of occupation at the site to be about 30,000 years ago. This date was an astonishingly early estimate of human occupation in North America.

Controversy over the

date increased because of complexities involving glacial ice, whether the Sheguiandah artifacts could be found in glacial deposits, and the age of ice advancements and retreats. Research done since the 1950s on glacier ages has suggested that the ice age relevant to Manitoulin Island and therefore to any artifacts found in its deposits, could be as much as 135,000 years ago.



◀ Studying stone debris left from tool making 10,000 years ago. Dense surface scatter of broken tools and debris can be destroyed by walking on it, which is why the site is so vulnerable.

PHOTO BY PETER L. STORCK,
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Sheguiandah Reexamined

Further research was done at Sheguiandah in 1991 by a team that included Dr. Peter L. Storck, archaeologist and curator at the Royal Ontario Museum. Findings at that time revealed that the date of the site is closer to 9,500 years ago. It is still “very early, one of the earliest in northern Ontario, occupied shortly after de-glaciation,” Peter says now. “The site is also unusual in the

large amount of archaeological material visible on the surface, debris from tool making, some of it little disturbed since the time it was deposited.”

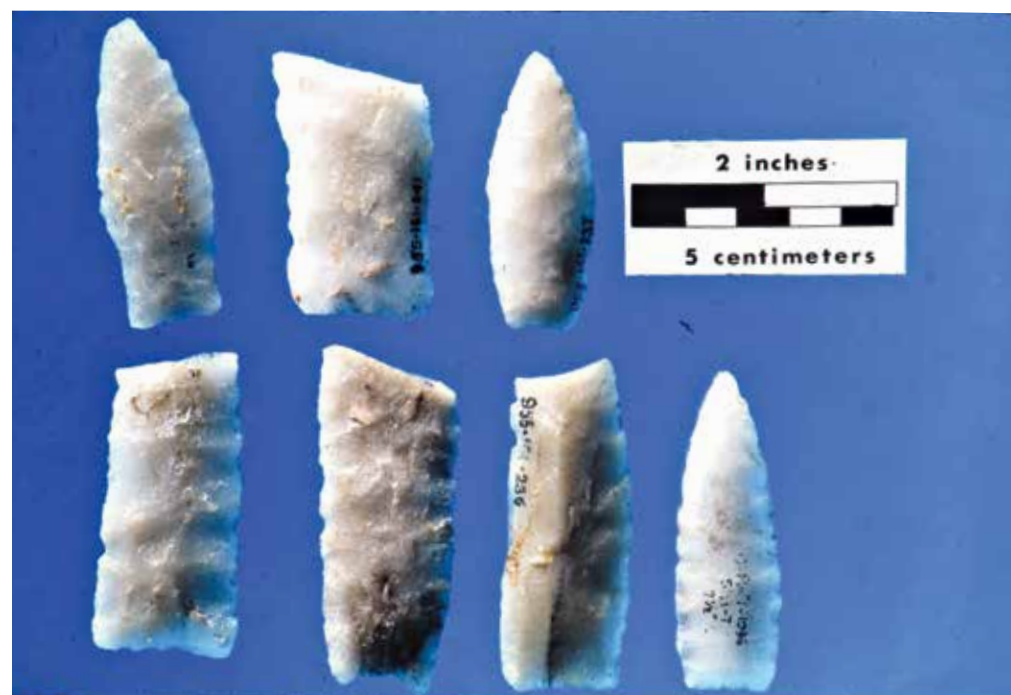
Peter was a speaker at the Sources of Knowledge Forum in Tobermory last spring, and new interest was sparked in his 2004 book *Journey to the Ice Age*, which chronicles his career and details the history and mystery of the Sheguiandah site.

Wanting to learn more about the story of Sheguiandah, the author of this article, with its photographer, joined other people in researching the site. The small Centennial Museum of Sheguiandah houses some of Lee’s found artifacts, photographs, drawings and maps, which we were invited to photograph.

Next, we tried to find the site. We ended up on top of a



▶ Ancient scrapers discovered by Thomas E. Lee in the 1950s on display at Centennial Museum of Sheguiandah.
PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS, COURTESY OF CENTENNIAL MUSEUM OF SHEGUIANDAH.



▲ Spear points made of quartzite, found at Sheguiandah by Peter Storck’s team. “The lanceolate (leaf-shaped) style and method of manufacture indicate that these artifacts were made by Late Paleo-Indian people around 10,000 years ago, supported by the geological age of the deposits (as interpreted by us in 1991) and paleoenvironmental evidence (we also obtained in 1991) elsewhere on the site,” explains Peter.

PHOTO BY PETER L. STORCK,
©ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM.



A detailed map of the Sheguiandah National Historic Site, on display in the museum.
PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS, COURTESY OF CENTENNIAL MUSEUM OF SHEGUIANDAH.

hill that may or may not have been the actual site, although it somewhat resembles this description in Peter's book: "The site is truly impressive. It covers a large white quartzite hill that juts high above the surrounding fields and glistens brilliantly when sunlight passes through the sparse oaks on its upper ridges and crests. On the north and west faces of the hill the slopes are steep, in places nearly vertical,

while the slopes to the east and south are much more gradual, falling gently toward the waters of Sheguiandah Bay on the coastline of Georgian Bay."

Sensitive Issues

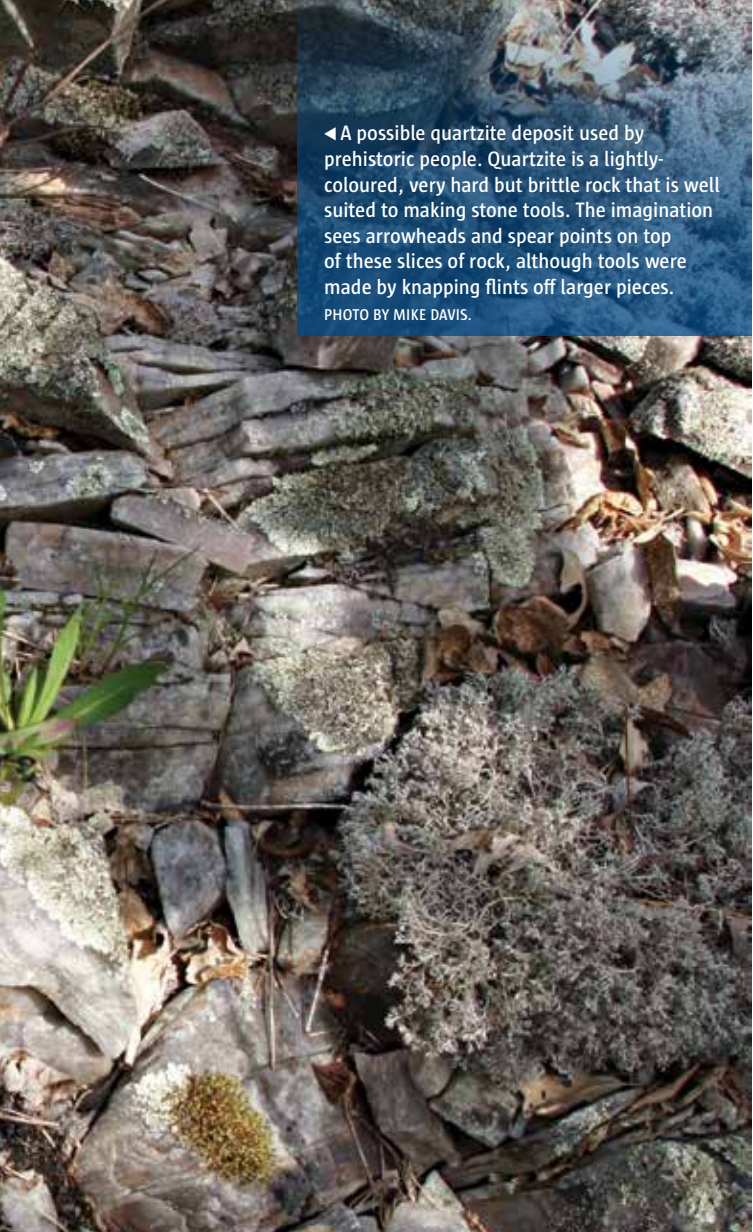
Not having completely read the book at the time, I hadn't yet come to the warning at the very end: "The archaeological site is located on the northern edge of the village. Please do not attempt to walk onto the

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► A trench beginning to be excavated by Peter Storck's team in 1991. Thomas E. Lee's 1950s excavations were re-examined in order to confirm or re-interpret his estimated age of occupation as 30,000 years ago.

PHOTO BY PETER L. STORCK,
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◀ A possible quartzite deposit used by prehistoric people. Quartzite is a lightly-coloured, very hard but brittle rock that is well suited to making stone tools. The imagination sees arrowheads and spear points on top of these slices of rock, although tools were made by knapping flints off larger pieces.
PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

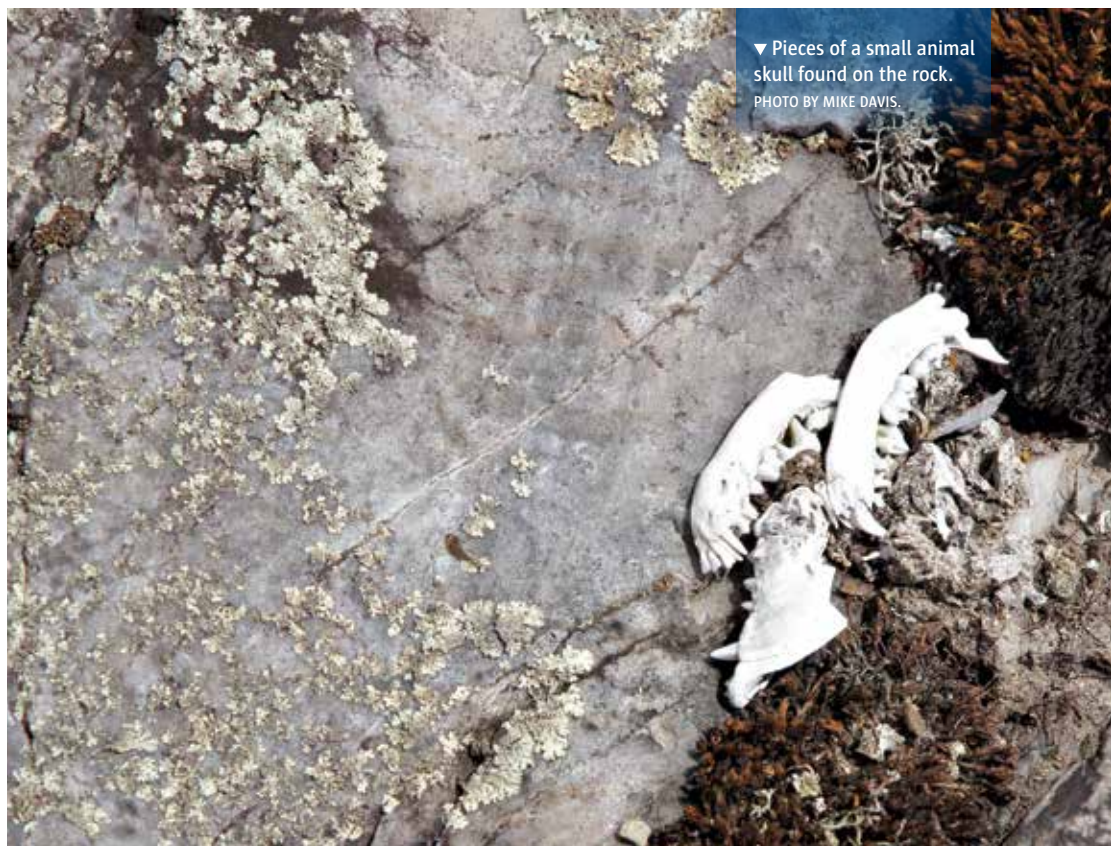


site because it is extremely vulnerable to disturbance, the land is all privately owned, and no formal trails exist. Remember that it is not only illegal to pick up or remove objects from any archaeological site in Ontario without a licence but to do so is roughly equivalent to tearing a page out of a one-of-a-kind history book owned by a public library. The missing page not only mutilates the book but changes forever what we and future generations might otherwise have learned from the past.”

A later statement from the Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport makes the point even more strongly: “We recognize and respect Indigenous peoples’ significant contribution to Ontario’s cultural heritage and their interest in archaeology. The Ontario Heritage Act makes it illegal for anyone but a licensed archaeologist to knowingly disturb an archaeological site. This means that unless you are a licensed archaeologist, it is illegal for you to dig an archaeological site to record its condition or remove and keep artifacts. Visitation to a designated archaeological site should only be undertaken with a licensed archaeologist and with the permission of the landowner.”

First Nations’ people also have interests in the ancient Sheguiandah site. Some Elders use the place for meditation and ceremonies. There can be friction between commemoration and interpretative uses. Sheguiandah First Nation did not respond to our requests for information.

Dr. Ron Williamson of Archaeological & Cultural Heritage Services, who was involved in the 1991 work on the site, notes “The site



locale was seen by many in the community as a sacred place. Not only is this a place in which one can see the inextricable links between natural and cultural heritage but also the importance of intangible heritage in the form

of oral history. The conclusion that Indigenous culture is present and vital in an ancient sacred place is inescapable.”

What Visitors Can Do

Dr. Patrick Julig of Laurentian University in Sudbury, also

a 1991 team member, agrees that the site may be sacred to some First Nations’ people, but he believes that multiple uses may be possible, and that a culturally sensitive development could happen, as long as the more sensitive

◀ A brilliant white stripe of possible quartzite running through the rock glistens in the sunlight.

PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.



▲ Interesting stone fragments on the surface among moss and lichen.

PHOTO BY MIKE DAVIS.

areas are protected.

“We think that visitor access may soon be possible,” he explains. “The Town of NEMI and Centennial Museum are well along toward developing educational interactive displays, signage, and historical tour of the Sheg site and new museum displays. They have raised most of the funding, I believe, and signage is being made for the important locations along the trail. So likely by late summer or fall, guided tours may be possible.”

David Williamson, chief administrative officer of Town of Northeastern Manitoulin and the Islands, confirms “The municipality will be developing the trail system

and fencing in the site this year. We will be placing interpretive/educational trail signage at designated points on the site. Guided tours will be provided through the Centennial Museum. No one will be permitted on the trail otherwise in the interest of preserving the site. For those unable to traverse the trail, we will have interpretive signs and displays at the Centennial Museum in Sheguiandah.” **NEV**

Gloria Hildebrandt and **Mike Davis** are co-founders and co-publishers of Niagara Escarpment Views.