The Deisher Site (36BK450): Reconciling and Reconstructing the Evidence for the Location and Date of a Probable Lenape Cemetery Site Identified by 1847

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THE DEISHER SITE (36BK450): RECONCILING AND RECONSTRUCTING THE EVIDENCE FOR THE LOCATION AND DATE OF A PROBABLE LENAPE CEMETARY SITE IDENTIFIED BY 1847

MARBALL JOSEPH BECKER

ABSTRACT

Archived documents as well as records from local oral traditions abound within each of the American colonies. Gathering the accounts relevant to a specific Native American site reveals the extent of such information and how it can help us to reconstruct culture histories for the numerous tribal entities for whom detailed histories are often wanting. The period from 1700 to 1750 in Pennsylvania saw a wide assortment of complex responses of a number of local and immigrant tribal entities as each sought a mechanism by which to maintain their cultural heritage. The Deisher site (36Bk450) has long been known, but how it fits into Lenape tribal history is only now being addressed. Fitting this site into recently discovered data sets regarding the Lenape has been attempted, but final resolution remains elusive.

INTRODUCTION

Recent research on Native American cultures in Pennsylvania during the first half of the 1700s has revealed the effectiveness of tribal strategies in maintaining lasting socio-economic mechanisms for survival (Becker nd). Far from merging and forming culturally blurred tribal entities, Native peoples along the lower Susquehanna River developed hunting strategies that permitted integration into the wider colonial economy. The documentary record provides excellent evidence for cultural continuities during the first half of the century as well as clues for following these distinct tribal units up to and through the War for American Independence. Research regarding these matters allows us to look more closely at evidence that has been dispersed over the years and to reassemble the remaining pieces of these complex puzzles. One of these puzzles relates to a Native American burial ground near Kutztown, Pennsylvania, for which various bits of evidence have been elusive.

On my arrival in Chester County in 1968, I encountered a boom in reports of Native cemeteries in Chester County, probably associated with a real estate boom in the region. Realtors found that the supposed value of a property was enhanced by claims that a genuine Indian burial ground was located on the back 40, or just beyond that grove of trees! New buyers commonly telephoned me to confirm that their property indeed had such an “Indian” site. I soon learned to ask these callers if they had recently purchased this land.

Similar reports in the Kutztown area led me, ca. 1977 - 1978, to meet with Peter Miller, then a faculty member in Anthropology at what now is Kutztown University. Miller was not forthcoming regarding his local excavations in what I believed to have been a Contact period (Lenape) cemetery in the area of the University. I later learned that about around that same period, Miller had excavated a late Colonial period Iroquoian site near Watertown, New York (skeletal remains returned after 2002: James Delle, Associate Provost, Millersville University, personal communication 6 January 2020). No field notes or other records on any of Miller’s excavations are known. Gathering data regarding a possible site in the Kutztown area became of interest to me after I discovered the very close relationship between the Lenape who had become part of the Susquehannock-Conestoga confederacy around 1660 (Becker 2011, nd) and their kin in the nearby Delaware Valley.
THE SEARCH

Peter Miller may have worked for the PMHC in the late 1960s when the Kutztown Bypass was being built to take traffic north of the town, passing by the area known as Brooklyn, along Pennsylvania Route 737. Several sites, some said to include “bundle” (flexed?) burials, had been among the many sites “investigated” by Henry K. Deisher, a Kutztown resident and longtime collector of artifacts that had been surface collected and dug from a wide range of Native American sites (Montgomery 1909; Custer 1994). Deisher had first sold artifacts from his huge collection to the William Penn Memorial Museum (now the State Museum of Pennsylvania) in 1909, and in 1917 his entire collection was purchased by the Museum (Smith 2005:8, notes 60-61). Deisher was later hired to register this enormous collection at the State Museum. Many sites from which he had collected, and certainly others, were among those being recorded by the Pennsylvania site survey in the 1960s and 1970s. Brendan Strasser (personal communication 4 Jan 2020) reports that some of these Native American sites were in the vicinity of Sharadin Road, a now abandoned dirt road that extended northeast to the Feick Farm on Saucony Road; in proximity to what in 2020 is the Pennsylvania German Cultural Heritage Center at Kutztown University.

In the Kutztown area, Mill Creek and Sacoony Creek generally flow southwest to Malden Creek and ultimately join with the Schuylkill River just south of where Tulpehocken Creek meets the Schuylkill from the west. While the Schuylkill River band of Lenape appears to have been resident along Tulpehocken Creek in the period 1720 - 1740, there is no clear evidence that a Lenape band then had a fishing station in the Kutztown area. At some point the Schuylkill River band of Lenape that had moved to the Tulpehocken area by 1720 may have split into two groups, or their movements among the lesser streams may have taken place over the decades. Alternately, a group of Shawnee from the Susquehannock-Conestoga Confederacy may have moved into the upper Schuylkill region in tandem with some Lenape from that same confederacy (Becker nd). At that period after 1720, and until ca 1740, members from the Schuylkill River band are often recorded in documents as being from Tulpehocken. Most of these people at Tulpehocken moved up to and beyond Shamokin by 1750, or had joined other Lenape kinfolk who were then shifting their hunting activities to the Allegheny drainage and into Ohio territory. Some residual Lenape may have been resident in or around Kutztown as late as 1750, or even after (Becker nd). I suspect that small numbers of Lenape were, ca 1740 - 1750, shifting their economies to become even more integrated with the colonists who were settling along the Tulpehocken soon after 1730 (Becker 2014a, 2014b).

About 2015 I renewed efforts to trace the modern history of “excavations” of a supposedly Lenape site located immediate to the northwest of the Borough of Kutztown. I was fortunate to find the impressively successful work undertaken by Dr. Brendan D. Strasser (2003) regarding Native history in this area. By 2003 Strasser had collected the basic records of the early excavations at this historic period Native site as well as a number of related documents that provided variations on the original reports. The primary document, as Strasser indicates, is D. B. Brunner’s (1881) history of “The Indians of Berks County.” Brunner’s search for information had elicited a letter reporting on an excavation that had taken place more than 30 years earlier. Brunner published a letter from A.B. Wanner, dated 11 April 1881 under the title “Indian Burying Ground at Kutztown.” Later excavations by Henry K. Deisher added to information from this cemetery, but Wanner led the way.

Mr. A.B. Wanner’s letter states that his mother had been born about 1790 on her father’s farm, a property that in 1881 was owned by the heirs of David Sharadin. The farm, or the burial ground itself, was said to be located one half mile north-west of the borough of Kutztown. In the wooded area on the Sharadin farm there were seen the mounds of many graves, visible “on rising ground, and a short distance therefrom was a ravine … dry for at least 60 years” or since perhaps 1820. Wanner recalled that about 1848 he went out to dig in the suspected cemetery; no other participants are mentioned. At about three feet below the surface he found a “full set of bones of a human person, but nothing else.” Two weeks later he returned, probably not alone, and dug nearby, finding another full set of bones together with:

- a small copper-kettle holding about 2 quarts; lock and barrel of a pistol about a foot in length; a bullet-mould; a number of bullets; a pocket knife; another knife about 9 inches long, resembling the point of a German scythe, with an iron handle; a certain kind of a
shell, and over a pint of glass beads, ranging from a small blue glass bead, \( \frac{1}{4} \) of an inch long and 1-16 of an inch thick, and white ones from the size of a cherry stone to an ordinary shell-bark [?]. The bones were generally well preserved. The day following this discovery, a party from Kutztown went to the same place and opened a grave, not 2 feet … another body … a squaw. They took out of the grave 18 brass finger rings, and about a quart of spotted glass beads ranging in size the same as above (Brunner 1881:108).

Wanner clearly states that this was the only search of this cemetery known, and that the three graves that they uncovered all were found “with the feet almost due west.” As an afterthought Wanner added that “The kettle, pistol lock and barrel are in [1881] the possession of Dr. C. Wanner, of Kutztown, and a number of beads are in Mr. E. J. Sharadin’s collection” (Brunner 1881:108-109). We do not know if any of these items were later acquired by Henry Deisher, who conducted his own explorations in 1901 (see below).

None of the artifacts from the Wanner excavations are illustrated by Brunner (1881); all those figures accompanying Brunner’s volume are of stone tools, including several bannerstones but no birdstones. The Wanner letter of 1881 is replicated by Brunner, and together with other documents also appears in Strasser’s (2003) unparalleled collection of historical essays and records. In Brunner’s “Second and Revised Edition” (1897:108-112), he states that large concentrations of stone tools mark the locations of Indian “villages.” Brunner, as many contemporary observers does not understand that these vast accumulations of artifacts are the result of small groups repeatedly, but only intermittently, using these locations as encampment sites over the course of thousands of years. Only one of the many collectors of these tools reported to Brunner that those tool-rich sites at which quartz examples predominated often appeared at higher elevations, while jasper, “basanite”, and chalcedony artifacts appeared at lower areas along the Maidencreek.

Some 18 years following the first edition of his work Brunner (1897:117-119) still could identify only two “Burying Grounds” within “the county that can be approximately located.” One was identified during excavations for the Schuylkill Canal, at a point where the Lewis and Dick farms join, “a short distance below Neversink or Big Dam.” Mr. William Lewis reported to Brunner that when he was young, and the canal was dug, several skulls were brought home [calottes?], and later they were used to feed the cats. The Schuylkill River Canal was opened in 1825, after seven years of construction. The skulls reported by William Lewis may have been unearthed around 1820, almost a century after colonists were first entering this area. I am certain that had any trade goods been recovered, their discovery would have been part of the Lewis tale. Thus I suggest that the Lewis graves were those of early colonists, buried in simple graves and without grave goods about 1720 - 1740. Such unmarked and “lost” graveyards of colonists abound in Chester (Becker 2009) and Berks County and beyond to the Susquehanna River.

Brunner’s revised edition (1897:112-113) reprints the Wanner letter of 1881, and also goes on to report on a “reputed burying-ground a few hundred yards west of the Blue Rocks, in Windsor Township, about four or five miles east of Hamburg.” Brunner and others dug at this Windsor Township site in 1875, and another three more times over the years; finding nothing.

In 1965, with the aid of documents for which we have no record, or perhaps from oral tradition, Ruth Bonner put into print some rare information about the cemetery that A.B. Wanner had dug some 118 years earlier. Bonner (1965:7-8) relates information regarding the Wanner excavations as follow: “On Whit-Monday, 1847, a group of men from town opened Indian graves in the woods on the Biehl farm west of town.” Whit-Monday in 1847 fell on 24 May. When the Biehl family owned the property is not yet certain. The record placing the Wanner activities so precisely appears to have been related to activities at the burial site reported for 23 May 1901, more than 50 years after the earlier opening of three graves. Bonner locates the site as some 500 yards north of the De Turk School (in 1965?), within sight of the college; now Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, in Berks County (Bonner 1965:7-8). Information regarding the De Turk School places its location at a bend in Sharadin Road. Bonner states that in 1901 a total of five graves were opened, all apparently below the plow zone. Her observation suggests that all of the trees had been removed by 1901 and the graves were then in the area of an open field. In these five
identified in 1901 were found bead necklaces, clay [kaolin?] pipes and a small iron cup, but no specifics were provided with Bonner’s report.

As Dr. Brendan Strasser confirms (personal communication 24 Jan 2020), “Bonner does not cite her sources consistently in the 1965 history, so most of them are now lost to history.” Dr. Strasser reports that Bonner was born and raised in Kutztown, and almost certainly had at least a passing acquaintance with Henry K. Deisher (1867 – 1951). Strasser believes that Ms. Bonner would have been a near contemporary of Henry Deisher’s daughter, Dorothy Deisher. Strasser had always assumed that much of the information in Bonner’s book had come directly from Deisher himself. Deisher, who was a curator at the State Museum from 1928 - 1940, had “lived in Kutztown through his retirement years and apparently loved nothing more than chatting with interested visitors about his artifact gathering” (Strasser personal communication 24 Jan 2020). Deisher, who had conducted the 1901 exhumations, would likely have heard from old-timers about the 1847 investigations; diggings that took place quite near to the Deisher ancestral homestead along Saucony Road northwest of the borough. Strasser points out that the southern boundary of the ancestral Deisher tract, where Henry’s grandparents lived, directly abutted the Biehl farm on which three graves had been unearthed in 1847. Henry Deisher himself was raised on another farm, perhaps a mile or so southeast of the borough, but he spent much of his time in childhood and early adulthood on his grandparents' homestead farm, for which the original patent remains to be located. Ermentrout (1876:5) indicates that this area was settled soon after 1732, but lists no Deishers among those who “owned land and paid quit-rents” in the Maxatawny area prior to 1734. When the Deisher family made their purchase is not known, but they continued to occupy a large tract at least through Henry Deisher’s youth. Ermentrout (1876:5) mentions the local tradition that “in the woods just back of David Sharadin’s farm in Maxatawny, there was an Indian burial place.” David Sharadin may have been the successor to the tract that earlier had belonged to the Biehl family.

Alliene S. DeChant reports the following narrative; one that appears to have been told to her by Deisher himself as it appears as a section of her small volume on the local “Dutch.” DeChant (1951:78) recorded the “tradition that the children of his ancestors played with Indian children on the Sharadin farm, west of town.” She also records that the “Museum at the University of Pennsylvania has his collection of Indian baskets, a total of 330; and some of his specimens are in the Heye Museum of the American Museum, New York City” (1951:78). Regarding one expedition in 1901 to examine a site in:

the woods on the Biehl farm, west of town, he said, ‘We dug for three hours, and being about ready to abandon the project, I concluded to make observations by circling the place, set my eyes on a spot, and walking up to it and making a scratch, called Frank Rahn to start a ditch. Several shovelfuls of earth removed, revealed that I had scratched on the exact spot of a grave... [sic] The bones indicated that they were of full-grown persons, and the fact that the graves were only three feet long, 18 inches wide, and about 30 inches deep, indicated that these were ‘bundle burials,’ that is, buried on top of the ground under cover until the bodies decayed, and later interred the bones which was their custom (DeChant 1951:78-79; Strasser 2003:40).

Note that the graves identified during this 1901 activity also are described by Bonner in 1965 as being three feet long, 18 inches wide, and 30 inches deep! This suggests that Bonner may have used DeChant’s work for this information, along with other details regarding this 1901 outing. Bonner also accepted DeChant’s identification of these as what DeChant had called a ‘bundle burial’. Of course, we should consider that Deisher’s repeated telling of this tale may have formalized his narration into a set speech. Most probably Deisher and the other 1901 excavators had mistaken the flexed burials that were used among Lenape traditionalists and others for the true bundle burials that involve defleshing and reburial; a mortuary rite practiced by the Piscataway-Ganawese and the Nanticoke peoples from the south. These five graves identified as west of town in 1901 brings to eight the total number of graves found at that site and noted anywhere in print.

Barry Kent (1970:192) was aware of the site now identified as 36Bk450 before 1970. The State Museum's "Archaeological Site Survey" form, submitted on 20 January 1977, identifies 36Bk450 as the
"Ingefeld Site (Indian Field)" and the property owner's name as "Schaffer." Following this name is an indication that it was "owned by Kutztown State College."

In his important 1984 book on the Susquehannock, Barry Kent identified what appears to be this site just west of Kutztown with the number 36Bk450, and also identified several artifacts in the Deisher Collection at the State Museum of Pennsylvania as having been found there (Cat. Nos. D.843 – D.857; see below). Kent obviously had inspected these artifacts as he states that they include wire wound beads, four kaolin pipes (all marked “E.R.”), brass thimbles, a flintlock cock, “and a few other odds and ends” (Kent 1984:99). These are now, in 2020, among approximately 8 million artifacts at the State Museum of Pennsylvania. Kent says that Deisher’s notes identify the four kaolin pipes as found in a child’s grave. This attribution is extremely unlikely. Kent also refers to six graves for which contents have been described, but fails to offer further information or explain how his “six” relate to the 8 graves listed above. Kent also claims (1984:270, 297) that a small silver spoon in the collections of the State Museum is claimed to derive from an eighteenth-century cemetery near Kutztown, but offers no catalog data and it is not among the artifacts within the Deisher collection (Strasser 2003:52-58). Kent says that a maker’s mark at the base of the stem on the back is “I B” and that an “L” is engraved at the top of the back of the stem. I believe that this spoon is unlikely to have been associated with the Native burials. The E. R. marked pipes may have been made by or for Edward Randal who was an exporter in London in 1719 (Oswald 1975:143). More likely they were made by Edward Reed of Bristol who made pipes between 1706 and 1723 (Oswald 1975:157).

Among the millions of artifacts at the State Museum of Pennsylvania are the 24,126 items sold to them by Deisher. Among these artifacts were some 330 Indian baskets collected on trips west and to Alaska (Strasser 2003:40; cf. Montgomery 1909:247). Strasser believes that other items from the Deisher collection were sold to the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation (now National Museum of the American Indian). The Deisher objects are grouped together by county and by artifact type, and bear the Catalog Numbers D. 1 through D. 914. The vast majority are stone tools, but D. 15 is listed as “Tomahawk, iron, (trader)” (see also D. 134 and D.348 for others), and also include a charcoal sample from a Native pit that Deisher excavated in Kutztown (D.867).

Kent identifies objects D.843 – D.857 as derived from site 36Bk450, but fails to note that D. 870 and D.871 also may derive from the same Native cemetery. Two other sets of entries in the Deisher catalog are almost certainly referent to materials that were recovered from post 1600 CE Native burials, but for which further information is lacking. Deisher collected widely, but focused on the artifacts without gathering or including their contextual data. Of interest here is that Deisher’s group from 36Bk450 as noted by Kent is placed under the heading “Sacony Creek, Berks Co.” while another two trade items, not listed by Kent (but see below), appear under Deisher’s heading “Sacony Creek, Kutztown, Berks Co.” These two later items may have been later additions to the collections. The catalog listing, as carefully transcribed by Brendan Strasser from the Deisher inventory in the Archives of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, locates the graves to the “northeast” of Kutztown, whereas all the other evidence places them west or northwest of the borough. Strasser (personal communication 28 Jan. 2020) notes that none of Deisher’s documents or photographs disclose precise locations of sites. This effort to conceal the locations of sites conforms to my own experiences with amateurs (Becker 2019).

Deisher’s inventory, as transcribed by Strasser (2003:58), is as follows:

D. 843. Flintlock hammer, from grave ½ mile northeast of Kutztown, Berks Co.
D. 844. Ramrod ferrule, from grave ½ mile northeast of Kutztown, Berks Co.
D. 845. Bark, from grave ½ mile northeast of Kutztown, Berks Co.
D. 846. Iron vessel, taken from a child’s grave ½ mile northeast of Kutztown, Berks Co.
D. 847. Spoon, brass, (small), from a child’s grave ½ mile northeast of Kutztown, Berks Co.
D. 848. Beads, glass, and brass thimbles, taken from a child’s grave ½ mile northeast of Kutztown, Berks Co.
D. 849. Beads, glass, blue and white tubular, taken from a child’s grave ½ mile northeast of Kutztown, Berks Co.
D. 850. Bead, shell, fragmentary, taken from a child’s grave ½ mile northeast of Kutztown, Berks Co.
D. 851. Bones, human, from a grave ½ mile northeast of Kutztown, Berks Co.
D. 852. Beads, glass, white seed, from a grave ½ mile northeast of Kutztown, Berks Co.
D. 853. Antler point, from a grave ½ mile northeast of Kutztown, Berks Co.
D. 854. Cloth fragments, from a grave ½ mile northeast of Kutztown, Berks Co.
D. 855. Pipe bowls [stone?], fragmentary. (2) From a grave ½ mile northeast of Kutztown, Berks Co.
D. 856. Rawhide thongs, brass bell, and human teeth from a grave ½ mile northeast of Kutztown, Berks Co.
D. 857. Pipes, clay, trader. (4) From a child’s grave ½ mile northeast of Kutztown, Berks Co.

The number of different graves from which the above array of artifacts were recovered, and how these individual or collective items relate to the total of eight burials supposedly identified by excavators in 1847 and 1901, remains unknown. Although the graves of Native children in this and other contexts seem to have been particularly well provisioned with trade goods, the high numbers of children’s graves in Native cemeteries also reflects a high rate of mortality among sub-adults (cf. 36Ch60). In short, we have no way of associating any specific one of the eight individual graves from site 36Bk450 with any of the artifacts that relate to any of the 15 clusters of items that appear on Deisher’s inventory.

Further note should be made that Deisher’s catalog (Strasser 2003:52-58) also includes, elsewhere, two separate “groupings” of trade goods from Native burials that are not from the Kutztown area. The first grouping, all under one number, is as follows:

All these specimens (below) were found between Mauchchunk and Easton in the Counties of Carbon, Northampton, and Lehigh, on the Lehigh River, unless otherwise stated in the catalog.


The second grouping of historic trade goods from Indian burials that appear in the Deisher listing that is not from Kutztown derives from Conestoga Town or one of the many contemporary historic Indian sites along the lower Susquehanna (Becker nd). Deisher has only 15 entries under “Conestoga Creek, Lancaster Co.” of which three groups appear to be trade goods. Deisher’s presence at, or participation in Donald Cadzow’s excavations is referred to in Deisher’s (1939:12) mention that at the “Safe Harbor Expedition in 1930, we” found a prehistoric Indian burial. I suspect that D. 601 - 603 were surfaced collected in Lancaster County from one or more sites from which grave goods were revealed by plowing, or otherwise exposed to collectors.

D. 602. Beads, glass, red, blue, tubular, 3” long.
D. 603. Wampum, shell, (purple).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

A study of the individual items recovered from site 36Bk450 should generate a more specific range of dates that would be of importance in placing it into perspective. While the very location of 36Bk450 suggests that it might be Lenape, we know that by 1730 groups of Lenape were often found in relatively close proximity to bands of Shawnee as well as Ganawese then resident in the lower Susquehanna River valley, and that the Tulpehocken band of Lenape were at times closely linked with these various people of the Conestoga Confederacy (Becker nd). The 1881 Wanner letter, transcribed above, notes that the three burials found in 1847 at what now is identified as 36Bk450 were found “with the feet almost due west.”
The burials at 36Ch60 have their feet pointing west by northwest. This is certainly a direction roughly in accord with that noted by Wanner in Kutztown. The artifact assemblages from the Lenape graves at both the Montgomery site (36Ch60) and the Lancaster County Park site (36La96), both believed to date from the period 1720 - 1730, when compared with those of site 36Bk450, roughly dating from the same decade reveal considerable differences. The wide variations in the materials interred, however, support the thesis that hunting-gathering mortuary programs are not highly standardized, as would be found among village dwelling populations with clearly ranked social groups.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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