

III. HISTORY OF THE AREA AND HAMLET HISTORIC RESOURCES

The 1999 Comprehensive Plan contained a brief historic profile for the Village of Westhampton Beach and surrounding communities, but did not contain a detailed inventory of the historic resources of the respective hamlet areas of Eastport, Speonk-Remsenburg, and Westhampton. Therefore, local historians Ron Michne Sr. and Ron Michne Jr., were hired by the Town Board in October 2003 to assist the Town's Department of Land Management and its Area Study Planning Consultants with the task of completing an inventory of hamlet heritage resources, drafting historic profiles for the hamlets comprising the Study Area, and producing a report incorporated herein in Appendix B entitled "Historic Profiles of Eastport, Speonk-Remsenburg, Westhampton."¹

The importance of the Historic Profiles report is that it recognizes the historical make up of each community and identifies hamlet heritage resources that have, and continue to play a role in defining the character of selected hamlet areas. As the various communities evaluate future proposals, the Historic Profiles Report can provide a meaningful resource upon which to draw historical design precedence.

FROM THE PLEISTOCENE PERIOD TO THE TIME OF EUROPEAN COLONIZATION

The Study Area covers over 14 square miles and includes over 4,900 acres of land considered part of the Central Pine Barrens Region. As required under New York State's Environmental Conservation Law Article 57, the Central Pine Barrens Plan was completed by the Central Pine Barrens Joint Planning and Policy Commission in 1995 and contained

¹See Appendix B for the "Historic Profiles of Eastport, Speonk-Remsenburg, Westhampton," dated January 2004.

a detailed evolution and history of the Pine Barrens region. The following paragraphs have been excerpted from this state-approved planning document.

The Pleistocene Period began about 1.8 million years ago and ended 12,000 years ago. Long Island was formed by morainal deposits and outwash materials deposited by the last two major ice advances. Climatic changes associated with glaciation displaced plant and animal populations to the south of the glacial sheet. As the glaciers retreated and the climate warmed, plants and animals migrated northward following the melting ices. Migration of species was not hindered by artificial barriers or human destruction of habitats. Pine Barren plant communities may have first developed during the warm, dry period between 5,000 and 2,500 years ago. Natural succession, competition and evolutionary adaptation would have favored Pine Barrens type vegetation on coarse, sandy, infertile soil similar to those found in southern New Jersey and central Long Island today. Wetlands in these areas would have been vegetated by aquatic species adapted to acidic, low-nutrient waters.²

Paleo-Indians appear to have been present in the northeast for approximately 12,000 years, essentially since the end of the glacial period. There is strong evidence that these widely dispersed populations of hunter-gatherers purposely burned large areas of the forested northeastern United States frequently. The role of fire in shaping the evolution of Pine Barrens communities over the millennia is complex and not entirely clear.³

²Central Pine Barrens Plan, dated 1995.

³*Ibid.*

About 3,000 years ago, at the start of the “Early Horticulture” (or Woodland) Period, changes in settlement and subsistence patterns resulted in a shift to increased utilization of coastal habitats by Native Americans. Horticulture (the maintenance of garden plots) developed into agriculture (cultivation of fields) during the last 1,000 years.⁴

Although Native Americans moved their villages seasonally, they reoccupied the same fixed sites for many years. Thus the area around the villages and planting sites would have been heavily impacted by intensive food gathering and cultivation, garbage accumulation and cutting of firewood for campfires and to clear fields and travel routes, to improve the growth of grasses and berries, and to drive game or attract game to specific areas for hunting purposes.⁵

Three hundred and fifty years ago, Native Americans still inhabited the lands referred to as the “Topping Purchase” in early maps showing “the Division of the Town of Southampton among the Proprietors” and depicting the area south of the Peconic River, east of the Town of Brookhaven line through Seatuck Creek and west of the area defined as the “Quogue Purchase.” The Native Americans had named the area, along with the rest of Southampton Town, with names that had meaning in their culture – such as Seatuck, Speonk, and Ketchaboneck (or Catchaponack).⁶

At the time of European settlement (“Contact Period,” 17th Century), the Study Area and surrounding territory appeared to be occupied by the Massapotaug people which were probably a sub-tribe or village of the large Shinnecock tribe. An Indian foot trail was recorded very close to Montauk

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶“Historic Profiles of Eastport, Speonk-Remsenburg, Westhampton,” dated January 2004.

Highway and / or South Country Road, connecting the various south shore inlets. The native inhabitants were seasonally migratory maritime hunter/gatherers. Summer villages were usually located along the south shore where fish and shellfish were exploited along the ocean, bays and inlets. Shore whaling was also an important of the local economy. Winter camps were usually located along the more protected fresh water streams which drained into the bays. Hunting deer and other forest game was important during this season.⁷

In the 1992 Hamlet Study for Speonk-Remsenburg, a “Historical Sketch” provided by former Town Historian Robert Keene indicated that “the name ‘Speonk’ came from the Algonquin, and meant loosely ‘a neck of land.’” It was Mr. Keene’s opinion, as Southampton Town Historian for over three decades, that “although there were a few Indians west of Canoe Place (Hampton Bays) to the Brookhaven line ... there were no large, or even medium, encampments in the (Speonk) area. In such locations as Speonk, with its shorefront on Moriches Bay, it can be assumed that it was ideal for summer encampments. Nevertheless, the major communities of Shinnecock Indians were in the area east of Canoe Place, at such locations as Cold Spring, Sebonac, Noyack and Mecox.”⁸

The 1992 Speonk-Remsenburg Hamlet Study also noted the following comments of the Speonk-Remsenburg Civic Association: “The recommendation that additional archeological studies should be considered is well proven by

⁷Adapted from “Readings in Long Island Archeology and Ethnohistory, the Shinnecock Indians – A Cultural History,” Gaynell Stone, Suffolk County Archaeological Association, 1983 and *Newsday* “History of Long Island: Our Story, Our Towns,” Tom Morris, 1998.

⁸Adapted from 1992 Speonk-Remsenburg Hamlet Study, “Historic Profile.”

the fact that about 1,000 Indian artifacts have been excavated and authenticated from three locations in the community. One of these locations is Clay Pit Road. Additional evidence of Indian life is to be found in the writing of the late W.B. Tuthill. Remnants of an Indian Village existed on his grandmother's farm located on the west side of Fish Creek. Another encampment existed at the head of Fish Creek. All three of these areas are topographically related as Clay Pit Road follows a swale which becomes Fish Creek."⁹

Other archeological findings have been made in the Study Area as well. In the greenbelt area of the Speonk River, a prior Native American encampment is identified in the archeological report compiled into the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) associated with the approved Planned Development District (PDD) at the former Westhampton Dragstrip site permitting construction of a senior housing complex.¹⁰

In the archeological report compiled in the record for the change-of-zone petition for a retirement townhouse community entitled "Seabreeze Commons," the consulting cultural resource specialist indicated that a review of the available literature "had revealed that the study area was situated in a location that evidenced a higher than average potential for the recovery of prehistoric and historic Indian archaeological sites." For example, an 18th century wigwam site was recorded in the vicinity on the west bank of Beaverdam Creek in the 1740s.¹¹

Throughout the Study Area, human activity has greatly altered the Pine Barrens and adjacent land tracts over the last

300 years, through land clearing, timbering, fire, agriculture, introduction of exotic (non-native) species, mining, draining of wetlands, construction of railroads and highways and residential development.¹²

FROM EUROPEAN COLONIZATION TO THE PRESENT

The 1992 Speonk-Remsenburg Hamlet Study's "Historical Sketch" noted that "Speonk and Remsenburg located in the western extremity of Southampton Town, were not originally a part of the settlement that began in 1640." The western part of the Town (from the canal at Canoe Place) was purchased and settled much later, from 1712 to 1782.¹³

In "The History of Eastport," written by Eastport resident Leroy Wilcox in 1975, it was noted that "At the time of settlement, this area was largely an expanse of virgin forest inhabited by Indians and animals such as bears, wolves, beavers, wildcats, deer, etc. Roads at first were primitive as communication was mainly by water ... The first mention of a house in the Speonk-Eastport area was when William Smith of the Manor of St. George confirmed to the Trustees of Southampton Town in 1693 'all that piece of meadow that lieth on the north side of South Beach being on the east side of a certain house which Steven Boyer and Company built when they made a whaling company near to a place called Cupsoge' (the boundary between Brookhaven and Southampton Townships at the beach opposite Eastport.)"¹⁴

"Before the white men arrived, they sent their cows. As early as 1712, the meadows along the South Shore in what was "then" Speonk were leased to cattle owners from Southampton. Eventually, the cattlemen found it easier to build small houses near the meadows to tend the herds.

⁹1992 Speonk-Remsenburg Hamlet Study, "Historic Profile," p. 13.

¹⁰Stage 1A Cultural Resources Report – Westhampton Dragstrip PDD DEIS, dated 2002.

¹¹Stage 1A Cultural Resources Report – Seabreeze Commons PDD, dated 2003.

¹²Central Pine Barrens Plan, dated 1995.

¹³1992 Speonk-Remsenburg Hamlet Study, "Historical Profile," pp. 10-15.

¹⁴Adapted from "History of Eastport", Leroy Wilcox, 1975.