

Exhibit Offers a Reminder: History Didn't Begin in 1640

Historical Museum tells story of Shinnecock Nation

By Mary Cummings

The European-born settlers who stepped ashore at Conscience Point in 1640 were, of course, not the first to arrive in this place that we now call Southampton. The people of the Shinnecock Nation had preceded them by several thousand years.

But even though the three and a half centuries of coexistence are dwarfed by the many years during which the Shinnecock lived according to their own rhythms, harvesting the land and the waters and leaving little imprint on the environment, much more attention and ink have been devoted to exploring the period following colonization.

Now the Southampton Historical Museum, in consultation with the Shinnecock Nation Cultural Center and Museum, is about to open a new exhibit designed to help correct that imbalance. The opening of "We're Still Here!: The Evolution of the Shinnecock Nation, Past and Present" at the Thomas Halsey Homestead on South Main Street will be celebrated this Saturday from 10 a.m. to noon with a "Community Festival" out on the lawn.

The event, to which admission is free, was made possible by a grant from the New York Council for the Humanities. There will be sump for tasting and Native American music will fill the air.

The exhibit, which has support from the Town of Southampton, Riverhead Building Supply Corporation and the Tomorrow Foundation, was designed by Gaynell Stone, museum director of the Suffolk County Archaeological Association since 1985 and the author of numerous scholarly works on Long Island subjects. Mounted in a wing of the c. 1680 Halsey house—the oldest woodframe house on its original site in New York State—the exhibit uses artifacts from the Southampton museum's collection to illustrate Shinnecock life and culture as it developed during those many centuries before the settlers arrived.

With the historic Halsey house as backdrop, the exhibit will also invite consideration of the many ways in which the Shinnecoeks' way of life was altered after Thomas Halsey and his party put down roots in their midst.

A few days before the opening, Dr. Stone, who was aided in laying out the exhibit by artist David Bunn Martine, director/curator of the Shinnecock Nation Cultural Center and Museum, spoke of the impression she hopes the exhibit will make on viewers. She envisioned "a visitor stepping from the Halsey house kitchen into a sheltered woodland environment." On the wall opposite the entrance the visitor will see a large mural painted by Mr. Martine, in which hale young Shinnecock are portrayed in a lush woodland landscape.

This was the long-ago landscape of Long Island, when wickiups like the one represented in the exhibit barely left a trace on the land when a family moved on. This was how it looked to the hunter for whom the forest was a source for food and for the materials out of which clothing and most other necessities were fashioned.

Animal pelts, bones and stones are on display—all from the museum's collection, selected with help from Mr. Martine by guest curator John Strong, who has written extensively on Native American history and Long Island tribes. Dr. Stone noted that, among several topical panels, one presents archaeological evidence of the Native American belief system, while another addresses medical practices and includes illustrations of the Shinnecoeks' use of herbs for healing.

To help visitors come to terms with an almost incomprehensible time span—the thousands of years by which Shinnecock life on Long Island is measured—Dr. Stone has included what she calls “a stratigraphic column composed of thousands of stone projectile points collected by local farmers through the centuries and donated to the Southampton Historical Museum.” Indeed, she added, “many items in the museum’s collection that have never been seen before will be used in the exhibit.”

In a second room, Dr. Stone has chosen to display artifacts that illustrate Shinnecock participation in the labor needs of the Colonial—and subsequent—economies. In enumerating their contributions, Dr. Stone led off with Shinnecock involvement in 17th- to -19th-century whaling and other maritime activities. In addition, their help was crucial, she said, in harvesting, dairying and in the service they provided as nurses, midwives, laundresses, spinners and more. Here, too, the illustrative artifacts are from the Southampton museum’s collection while the photographs come to the exhibit courtesy of the Shinnecock Museum and Cultural Center.

The exhibit, which will remain on view through mid-October, can be seen at the Halsey house, 249 South Main Street, Friday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is \$4 for adults, free for museum members and children 17 or younger.



A 17th century Dutch woodcut shows the contact between Dutch traders and Northeast coast native people.



Margurite Lee Kellis of the noted Kellis basket making family holding a scrub used for cleaning.