FEATURE —

Digging deep to unearth Wilmot's forgotten Indigenous history

North America's biggest Indigenous longhouse was discovered in New Dundee in 1902 and excavated in the 1980s, but since then, it's been largely overlooked

By Nigel Gordijk

At the entrance to Recreation Park in New Dundee stands an Ontario Heritage Trust plaque that celebrates the life of William J. Wintemberg, one of the province's first archaeologists.

Wintemberg was born in New Dundee in 1876, and he was internationally recognized as an authority in Iroquoian history. He rode his bike around local farms and walked the fields to find artifacts, eventually building a substantial collection. Some of those pieces are currently stored in the Ken Seiling Waterloo Region Museum.

While there is a significant marker to acknowledge Wintemberg's accomplishments, there are no plaques nor reminders of his discoveries in Wilmot, and no mention of the people whose possessions he dug up.

One of those neglected sites is Wintemberg's most significant find on a New Dundee farm in 1902 – the largest longhouse in North America.

The 123.75-metre-long Neutral Iroquoian longhouse was home to up to 120 people that were related through female lineage. Dating back to between 1400 and 1450 A.D., it was originally 60 metres long, with several extensions added over time.

There's also evidence of three smaller longhouses at the same site. At its peak, the population of the entire community is estimated to have reached 600.

Prof. Robert MacDonald is currently an Adjunct Assistant Professor at the University of Waterloo and a former Wilmot resident. In May 1983, he supervised the Foundation for Public Archaeology team that led a one-acre excavation at the farm on Bethel Road, dubbed the Coleman Site after a former owner.

The existence of these structures marks a significant point in the evolution of Indigenous, late-Woodland culture, said MacDonald.

"1,000 years before that, they were all hunter-gatherers; they weren't farmers. They gradually adopted agriculture and developed it. That allowed their populations to grow, and then they started living in these permanent villages."

Digs at other Ontario sites show the transformation of Indigenous settlement patterns into small towns, he said. "The houses actually shrunk, but there'd be more of them, and they'd be organized differently."

The lack of local knowledge and recognition of pre-settlement Indigenous communities surprises MacDonald.

For three years, he ran an archaeology program called the Dundee Experience in New Dundee, where school groups from across the region would visit the site and dig. There were workshops about Indigenous pottery, flintknapping (making stone tools), and archaeology.

In 2008, Castle Kilbride hosted an archaeological retrospective exhibition, featuring some of the artifacts that were discovered in New Dundee. MacDonald was shocked that no visitors remembered the Coleman Site from just 25 years earlier.

"It was on T.V.; it was in the paper. It was a big thing back in the Eighties, but nobody in Wilmot who came to that exhibition had any recollection at all. It was so interesting to see how little time it takes for people to forget about something that was a big thing at one point."

MacDonald is working to ensure that Indigenous history

An Ontario Heritage Trust plaque in New Dundee's Recreation Park celebrates the life of local archaeologist William J. Wintemberg. It doesn't mention the largest Indigenous longhouse in North America, which he discovered nearby in 1902.

is more widely acknowledged. In addition to his position at the University of Waterloo, he's an archaeological anthropologist and managing partner at consulting firm Archaeological Services Inc. (ASI), which is experimenting with various educational methods.

"In our company, one of our core values is that we share knowledge of what we find. We've been publishing in academic journals for years, but nobody reads those except other academics. In the last decade or so, we've started getting into things like documentary film and docudramas, which gives us a much broader scope of engagement with the public."

When the Waterloo Region Museum was building its new facility, MacDonald was consulted after focus groups revealed that the top subjects the public wanted to learn about were Indigenous culture and history in Waterloo Region. "This was both a surprise and a problem, because no one had any expertise in that area."

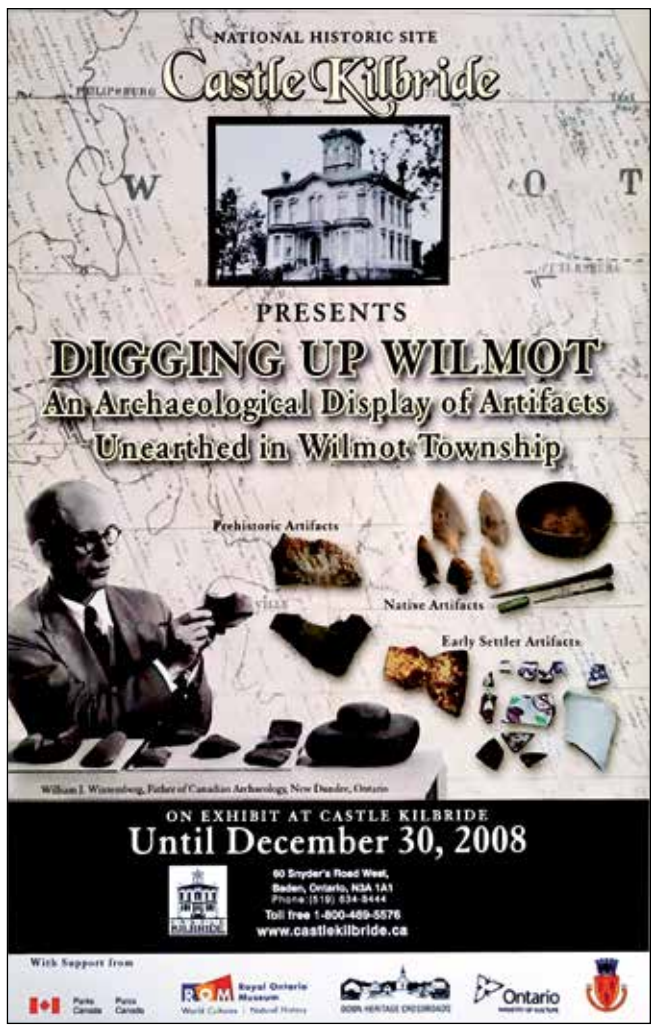
He helped the museum form an Indigenous advisory panel. "That's how you do things right these days. You don't take the lead; you facilitate the nations to tell their own story, and provide the knowledge and information you have from archaeology and other sources to go along with oral history."

The permanent Indigenous display now occupies the most real estate of any theme in the museum.

There are other significant local sites, such as the massive Late Woodland village on the side of Baden Hills. "There are Iroquoian villages like the Coleman Site all over Wilmot township, but nobody knows about them," said MacDonald. These are recorded, along with other registered sites, in the Ontario Ministry of Heritage's database.

Wilmot has the oldest radiocarbon-dated archaeological site in southern Ontario, dating to approximately 8,300 years ago. It was a small hunter-gatherer campsite from the Early Archaic Period, which was uncovered when the Ministry of Transportation widened Highway 8.

Earlier artifacts found in Wilmot are thought to be 13,000



This 2008 poster advertises an exhibition at Castle Kilbride with some Iroquoian artifacts that were discovered at an archaeological dig on Bethel Road, New Dundee 25 years earlier.

years old, although none of them have been radiocarbon dated. Their ages were determined by comparing them with similar pieces from elsewhere in North America that have been accurately radiocarbon dated.

ASI has been engaging with First Nations since the 1980s, and much of MacDonald's work involves Indigenous consultation.

Two years ago, the Huron-Wendat Nation formed a partnership with ASI – called Yändata' – to develop its own archeological consulting company with trained Indigenous archaeologists.

The Supreme Court's "Haida Decision" in 2004 declared that the Crown has a duty to consult and accommodate First Nations whenever any decision is being made that could affect treaty or Aboriginal rights. This applies to both federal and provincial levels of government.

MacDonald said that municipal consultation is a "gray area."

"Municipalities are technically not the Crown, but they are a creation of the Crown. Because provinces downloaded certain responsibilities to municipalities, particularly through the Planning Act, they're making decisions now that used to be provincial decisions."

"Municipalities have been on a learning curve for quite some time, and there's still a lot of learning to be done. But they're getting there."