

## An archaeologist's view of False Bay

by Dana Lepofsky

We now know enough about the archaeology of Lasqueti to say confidently that our island, like most Gulf Islands, once supported a large, permanent First Nation population. Based on a few ancient spear points found inland and on high ground, people first visited Lasqueti some 8000 years ago, when Lasqueti was first emerging from the receding post-glacial seas. The diverse types of projectile points found in people's gardens and on beaches tell us that subsequent use of the island was widespread. A variety of artifacts as well as archaeological sites further indicate that sometime after 2-3000 years ago, large permanent settlements as well as smaller short-term camps were established. Many of these sites were probably occupied until the first small pox epidemic spread throughout the Gulf of Georgia in the late 1780's when local First Nations populations were decimated.

There is little doubt the settlement in False Bay was one of the largest and most important of the ancient settlements on Lasqueti. Given the huge sheltered bay, the once rich intertidal and marine life, and access to fresh water, this should come as no surprise. Remnants of this once vibrant community are visible throughout the bay from the at least the Blue Roof around to Cocktail Cove and all the way to the Finnerty Islands. Modern houses, workshops, commercial developments and roads have destroyed a large portion of the archaeological remains associated with this large community, but there are still enough remnants to give us a glimpse at this once flourishing settlement.

Walking along the shore of the bay, even where there has been considerable recent moving of rocks and earth, you'll notice shells and dark earth eroding from the land. While some are the remains of isolated meals of shellfish, the bulk of the shell is probably very old "construction fill". That is, the ancient Lasquetians used discarded shells to create flat surfaces on which to build their homes. As we all know, "The Rock" isn't known for either having flat or easily worked terrain. Basket load upon basket load of shell, however, provided a workable, well-drained platform on which large shed roof homes could be built.

The best example of these "house platforms" is on the spit located on the outside of Mud Bay, where it backs onto False Bay (at the end of Pemberton Road). If you go down to the water's edge, you'll see that the shell midden on land is a series of flat stepped surfaces. Each one of these large platforms – all created by ancient peoples, once held an ancient house.

I suspect that much of the False Bay midden used to be sculptured in the same way as that at Mud Bay. So, if you're imagining how False Bay looked in the past, picture the bay ringed by 1 – 3 rows of longhouses oriented parallel to the beach. Also, imagine a much denser settlement than today. Imagine canoes on the beach, smoke from the longhouses, and lots of people working and playing on the beach and on land.

Another indication that False Bay was important to many people is that it appears to have been well defended. Again, if you walk to the end of Pemberton Road, you'll notice not only the large shell midden below at the beach, but also a midden way above the beach on the point overlooking the bay. Based on the extent and location of this midden, I believe it's a lookout or a fortification/refuge site where people went during attacks. Such sites are not uncommon in this region. They are located on points of land with good visibility, have the remains of shell that people had to haul a considerable distance up hill, and are often associated with large, permanent settlements that are located in easier to access, but also more vulnerable locations.

An even more impressive fortification site associated with False Bay is one my daughter, Gavia, discovered this summer while we were camping on the Finnerty Islands. The site is located on a small island that is surrounded by about 30m high perpendicular rock faces. On top of the entire island, however, is relatively thick shell midden. The island has no drinking water, and only a very small beach that is exposed only at low tides. A small portion of the beach may have been cleared of its rocks to increase clam habitat, but in general, it's not an hospitable place to either collect clams or to live. What the island does have, however, is a superb view to the east to the Strait and to Vancouver Island, and a relatively calm and easy route to and from False Bay to the west. The thickness of the midden so high up on this island – thicker than I've seen at other fortification sites in this region – suggests that either many people used this site and/or it was used many times over a long period. Regardless, it indicates the importance of the False Bay settlement in the ancient past.

Finally, the extent of the ancient False Bay community is indicated by the extensive evidence of management and use of marine resources. The intensity of use is indicated, of course, by the huge amounts of shell and sea mammal and fish bone that make up the middens of False Bay. The clearing of beaches of rocks, presumably to increase clam productivity, is another indication. And, there is at least one large fish trap on the Finnerty Islands that is, like the defensive site, most likely associated with the ancient False Bay community. The trap is a complex design that incorporates both the natural configuration of the islets, the flow of water, and human-made walls and dams. At one time, there was considerable activity on the now deserted Finnerty Islands.

Beyond these tantalizing and general facts, we know few details about the lives lived in False Bay. A stunning jade (nephrite) chisel found in the bay indicates that at least some of the residents were probably wealthy and well connected to long-distance trade networks (the Fraser Valley). The usual array of projectile points, fish weights, and hide and fiber scrapers has also been found by the current False Bay residents. However, there were isolated artifacts not found within the layers of an archaeological site, so these artifacts can only provide limited information.

Some of the ancient stories of False Bay are still there for the telling. The stories are hidden in those undisturbed layers of shell middens that still exist on the bay. These layers of history contain artifacts, house floors, cooking hearths, and storage pits that collectively are the legacies of thousands of ancient people. Once removed from these layers of history, the isolated artifacts found on the beach or in dirt piles can only tell a small part of these ancient stories.

There is much that we can do to preserve the ancient history of False Bay and the rest of Lasqueti. Here are some things we all can do to protect the very old and rich heritage of our island:

- If you are unsure if you have an archaeological site on your property, give me a call and we can walk your property together. Most (all?) of the archaeological sites around False Bay are already recorded in a Provincial database, but that database won't give you the details on site extent that you need to be a responsible steward of Lasqueti's past.
- Don't worry that your land can be "taken away" in First Nations land claims. As I've written in the *Isle & Times* before, private land is not part of land claims packages. I have a wonderful archaeological site on my property as well and have no concerns about ownership.
- If you're about to build on your property, think about placing the construction in a place that will have the least impact on those layers of midden.
- Consider building structures on pilings that have minimal impact on those layers.
- If you have to dig, let's talk first about how we can salvage some of the information held in those layers of the past.
- If you find an artifact in your garden, on the beach, while digging your outhouse – whatever, put it in a plastic bag with a label saying where it was found. It's heartbreaking how many artifacts have been collected from Lasqueti (100s and 100s that I'm aware of) that are now lost to Lasqueti's history because they were not labeled and were removed from the island or discarded.
- Remember that the archaeological record, and the history that it holds, is a non-renewable resource. Once destroyed, it's destroyed forever.

As always, I'd love to talk to any islanders about the ancient heritage of Lasqueti. Please contact me at [dlepofsk@sfu.ca](mailto:dlepofsk@sfu.ca) or #8600. Also, stay tuned for the launching of the archaeology web pages on our Lasqueti web site.