

## ANCIENT PEMAQUD AND THE SKELETON IN ARMOR

W. MEAD STAPLER

Pemaquid is on one of the many peninsulas and fingers of land which thrust out into the cold Atlantic, north of Portland, which give Maine its rugged coast line with a multitude of most attractive harbors, bays and inlets. Just as many of us find this coast so attractive today, so did others in earlier times. It would have been natural for any early adventurers from Europe, Scandinavia or the Mediterranean, following the prevailing winds and ocean currents, to have found their way to these attractive shores and settled. They certainly did, and this is no longer arguable. But the finding of the evidence south of this area is only a rare possibility due to the ravages of development. We are fortunate, with less development here in Maine, to still have some short time left to collect the precious evidence of early contacts, and thus ancient Pemaquid deserves our immediate attention.

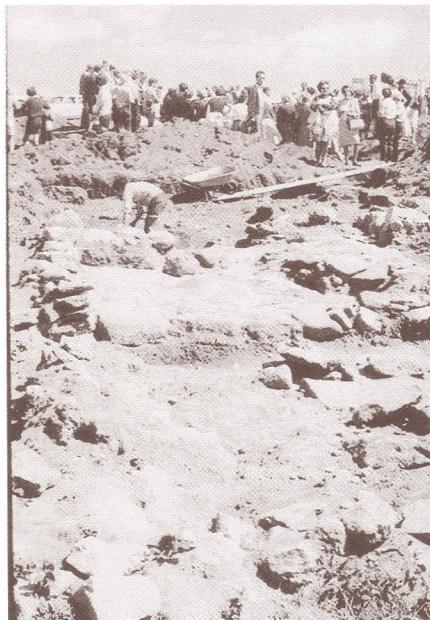
Pemaquid was first recorded during an ambitious voyage of discovery by the French Captain Jean Alfonse of Santonge, who charted the entire coast between the St. Lawrence and Florida for Jaques Cartier and Jean Francois Roberval, Lord Of Norumbega, in 1541-42. But the French did not have the support or manpower to follow through on their discoveries until two generations later when they were finally able to set up their most southern outpost against their traditional enemy, the English, at Castine in 1613.

Just prior to this, 1607, the same year as Jamestown, George Popham of the Virginia Company had tried to establish a settlement in his own name on the Kennebec. They were nearly wiped out by the first winter, but indications are that a few hardy survivors settled a trading post at Pemaquid the following year.

By 1630 a crude Fort Pemaquid was built to protect this exposed outpost from the French inspired Indian raids and even roving pirates. Over time a total of four forts were built, each more sturdy than the last and each in turn destroyed by the persistent enemy. The worst was a disastrous Indian attack in 1689 when those persons that survived escaped to the offshore islands.

In 1664 when the Dutch capitulated their New Netherland to the overwhelming force of the English, King Charles II gave his brother James, the Duke Of York, all of the former Dutch territory. This included what is now New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Delaware and the unclaimed coastal islands of Nantucket, Martha's Vinyard, Monhegan and all of Maine east of the Kennebec. This sprawling area was designated the County Of Cornwall under the authority of the colonial Governor of New York.

In June 1677 Gov. Edmund Andros of New York resolved "to take possession and assert the Duke's interest at Pemaquid and parts adjacent eastward".



*Left – Helen Camp directing the Pemaquid excavation of the "skeleton in armor".*

*Right – Crowd of sightseers at the site August 21, 1965.*

He ordered Lt. Gov. Anthony Brockholst to Pemaquid with four sloops, 100 English soldiers and a prefabricated redoubt. The redoubt was set in place, framed out, mounted with seven cannon, and named Fort Charles, with a garrison of 50 men. Pemaquid was designated the seat of the County Of Cornwall and port of entry for all of New England, with all incoming trade and commerce to be conducted through the governor's agent at the fort and customs house. This gave Pemaquid even greater prominence than Boston. The village had about 30 houses, a tavern, blacksmith, customs house, as well as the fort and many outbuildings. There were also two impressive cobble stone streets which bisected the village. These labor-intensive constructions have been a puzzle to many historians but the answer is in the New York Colonial Archives. Gov. Andros decreed, "fish might be cured upon the islands but not upon the maine (land), except at Pemaquid, near the fort". Thus, as some suspected, the cobble stone streets were really drying beds for sun curing the salted fish.

The Massachusetts Colony was infuriated by this imposition of New York into what they considered their rightful territory. Massachusetts finally prevailed with the crown and the County Of Cornwall reverted to Massachusetts in 1692.

The last fort, Fort Frederick, was built in 1729 but ceased to have importance after the defeat and destruction of the great French fortress at Louisbourg in Nova Scotia, by New Englanders, in 1745. But there was still no peace until the final complete defeat of the French and their ambitious plans for New France at the Battle of Quebec in 1763. After this, Pemaquid was virtually forgotten and occupied only by a few fishermen. Pemaquid's last vestige of power, the decaying Fort Frederic, was finally destroyed by the citizens of Bristol in 1775 to prevent the harbor from being used as a British naval base in another time of troubles, our War For Independence.

My interest in Pemaquid was first aroused during our family's first vacation in Maine. We had just settled into our cottage at Lilly Pond in North Edgecomb when I visited the local Chamber of Commerce Information center on Route #1 to inquire of any interesting historic sites. My visit could not have been more opportune. The lady in attendance stated that if I was interested in archaeology I should visit Pemaquid as they had just discovered a cache of 108 cannon balls in a dig at an old cellar hole there. Needless to say, I was off and running. I had spent my spare time during the prior five years deeply involved in historical archaeology at several north Jersey colonial ironworks. So, my appetite for discoveries in the dirt had already been whetted.

It was a beautiful Saturday afternoon and I had no trouble in finding the site because of the crowd of visitors. This weekend project had been underway since the middle of May and was under the able leadership of Mrs. Helen Camp, an amateur archaeologist and also a refugee from New Jersey. By this day, August 21, 1965, the enthusiastic diggers had already dug six building sites, including the first Fort Pemaquid of 1630. They had also dug a forge which was an accessory to the fort, the tavern, the customs house and several small out buildings. This town site was a time capsule of the late 16<sup>th</sup> to late 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and was ultimately to produce over 25,000 artifacts. But the most exciting discovery had been made the very day I arrived.



*Indian brave wearing copper and brass sheet and tube as described by Gosnold in 1602 and Pring in 1603 as living near Cape Cod Bay and Buzzard's Bay.*

Just southwest of the foundation wall of the tavern, and at a level below the sill stones, were discovered two burials. The level indicated that they had been interred before the tavern was built. The first was the typical Indian flex burial with the body in the fetal position, with the head to the north and facing east. The remains were so decomposed that the surrounding earth had later to be solidified with a resin and removed as a block. The adjacent burial was in a much better state of preservation. It was at about the same level but lying straight out on its back with the head to the north in a Christian type burial. The head, face up, was resting on a sheet of copper which in turn appeared to be resting on a pillow of decomposed fur. Another copper sheet, which had originally been approximately 12 inches wide by 18 inches long and apparently lined with fur, extended from the shoulder to the groin. Just beneath the chin were five rolled copper tubes, neatly stacked, and strung on a continuous strip of braided leather. Each tube was approximately 10 inches long and 3/8 inch in diameter. This was apparently worn

as one long continuous necklace of copper tubes, end to end. A small piece of leather, about 5 by 8 inches, was found on the left side of the body, partially beneath the breast sheet of copper, beneath which in turn were many small disintegrated bones.

The complete burial crypt appeared to have been lined with sheets of tree bark, which is common for many eastern Indian burials. This complete metal clad skeleton was shipped to the American Museum of Natural History in New York for evaluation by the professionals. After an unusually long time, their brief reply was not completely satisfying. All that they had determined was that the burial was that of a woman under forty years old with a young infant at her side. It had not been determined how she died, but childbirth is assumed. Her race was not determined, although a tuft of black hair indicated Indian. The mode of burial indicated to me a prominent person and Christian influence. A carbon 14 dating of one of the bones gave a median date of 1585 AD and an analysis of the metal sheets proved them to be an alloy of 66% copper and 27% zinc with only traces of tin and lead. This alloy is sometimes called yellow brass.

Some fine research by one of our earlier members, Horace F. Silliman, a retired metallurgist of Waterbury, Connecticut, and published by NEARA in 1967, gave us important background information on the production of copper. He found that an Austrian concern, Haug & Company, in association with British interests, flooded the market with copper and brass products between 1560 and 1590. This date coincides neatly with our burial date of 1585. So obviously much of this metal found its way into the North American Indian trade, where it became highly prized by the coastal tribes. The research

indicates the traders were English. So, who was this woman who was buried with such prized metal adornments? Only a novelist can complete this story.

A few other "Skeletons In Armor" have been found, two in Maine and one at Fall River, Massachusetts. The Fall River burial created quite a stir back in 1831. It had a large oval brass shield as a breastplate, a belt of brass tubes and a quiver of arrows tipped with brass points. Imagination went wild with suggestions of everything from the burial of a Biblical personage to a Norse king, and all immortalized in a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. The remains were placed in a museum which burned in the 1840s. More valid accounts are documented in historical journals of living persons and their trade copper usage.

John Brereton recorded the voyage of Bartholomew Gosnold to the coast of New England in the spring of 1602 to evaluate the region for profitable trade. After some interesting adventures, they landed on Cuttyhunk Island at the mouth of Buzzards Bay. Here they met a tribe of very friendly Indians who helped them harvest a cargo of sassafras, which was in great demand back in England for its medicinal value. They note that the natives had a large quantity of copper with which they decorate themselves and tip their arrows. They had cups, earrings and breastplates of red and yellow copper sheet and bandoleers and belts composed of copper tubes, all of dimensions similar to that of the Pemaquid burial. When asked where they obtained the copper, they would push a finger into the ground then point to the mainland.

The following year, 1603, another Englishman, Martin Pring, sailed into Cape Cod Bay on a trading

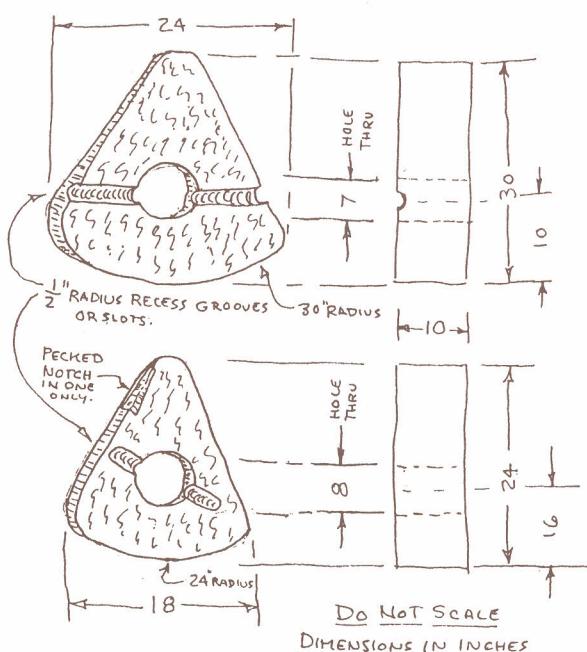


Figure 1

Typical stones from  
Pemaquid Harbor

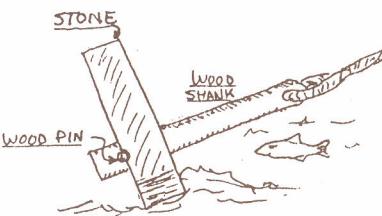


Figure 3  
Suggested anchor assembly

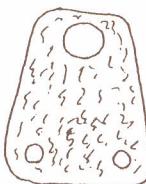


Figure 4  
Phoenician  
Stone anchor

venture. He also reported that the natives wore large copper breast-plates. All of which is proof of a large trade in copper sheet and tube in the latter half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century as detailed by Horace Silliman. It is a wonder that many more "Skeletons In Armor" have not been found.

Finally, since Pemaquid had such importance in colonial times, even if it was of short duration, we should see what evidence exists for prehistoric times.

On the west side of the bay, opposite the present state historic site and Museum of Colonial Pemaquid, is a large cleared and unoccupied area sloping down to the bay. This land is presently in private hands and unavailable for any archaeological exploration. But those familiar with the area claim that the site has evidence of many old cellar holes and constructions of a much earlier time that bear investigation.

Also, out in the mouth of the bay, a scuba diver searching the rocks for lobster, discovered a stack of eight similar but not identical triangular shaped stones. All precisely cut of local granite, each had an arc shape to one of the edges and a hole in the middle. They are 10 inches thick and 24 to 30 inches on the longest dimension. With the aid of tow truck, three specimens were hauled home and are now in the diver's flower garden. The remaining stones were covered during the next storm by the shifting sand and have never been seen since. The size and shape suggests a modification of a Phoenician stone anchor and no one yet has suggested anything else. So, Pemaquid may be older than we think!

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#### POST SCRIPT

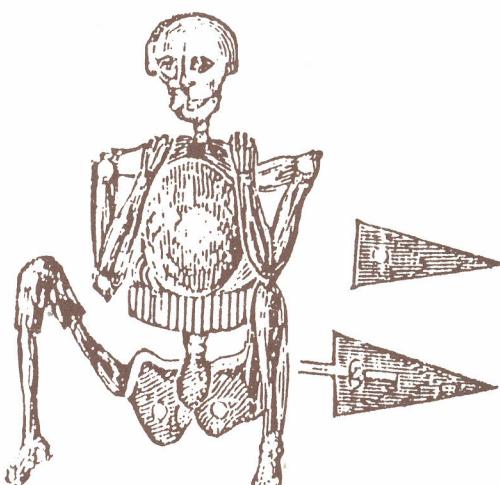
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#### THE FAMOUS "SKELETON IN ARMOR"

Almost every book or article relating to pre-Columbian contacts with New England makes reference to the "Skeleton in Armor" found near Fall River, Massachusetts, in the early 1830's. While there is little or no evidence to support any assertion that the "armor" was anything else but late 16th century or early 17th century brass plates and tubes for personal adornment, supplied to the Indians by Elizabethan-era traders, NEARA readers will doubtless welcome having available for their files the following complete text of the first published account of the discovery. It appeared in Vol. III of the "American Magazine", Boston, 1837, and was written by John Stark of Galena, Illinois, who was interested in the Indian mounds and other American antiquities. Two years later, in 1839, the account was reprinted in John Warner Barber's "Historical Collections of Massachusetts" (Dorr, Howland & Co., Worcester) from which we have retyped it:

ANDREW E. ROTHOVITUS

"These remains were found in the town of Fall River, in Bristol county, Massachusetts, about three years since. In digging down a hill near the village a large mass of earth slid off leaving in the bank, and partially uncovered, a human skull, which on examination was found to belong to a body buried in a sitting posture; the head being about one foot below what had been for many years the surface of the ground. The surrounding earth was carefully removed, and the body found to be enveloped in a covering of coarse bark of a dark color. Within



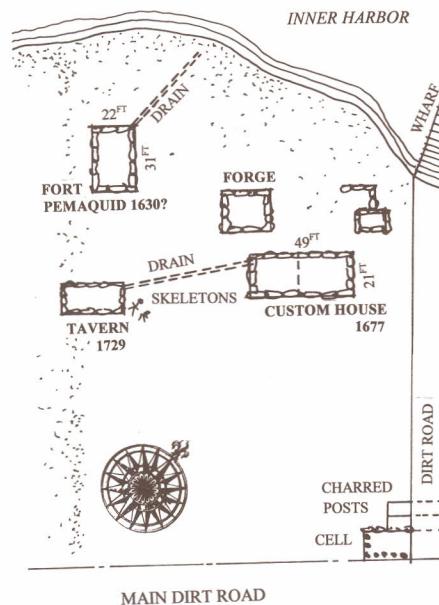
Sketch of 1831 "Skeleton in Armor"  
Found at Fall River, Massachusetts

this envelope were found the remains of another of coarse cloth made of fine bark, and about the texture of a Manilla coffee bag. On the breast was a plate of brass, thirteen inches long, six broad at the upper end and five at the lower. This plate appears to have been cast, and is from one eighth to three thirty-seconds of an inch in thickness. It is so much corroded, that whether or not anything was engraved upon it has not yet been ascertained. It is oval in form, the edges being irregular, apparently made so by corrosion.

"Below the breastplate, and entirely encircling the body, was a belt composed of brass tubes, each four and a half inches in length, and three sixteenths of an inch in diameter arranged longitudinally and close together: the length of a tube being the width of the belt. The tubes are of thin brass, cast upon hollow reeds, and were fastened together by pieces of sinew. This belt was so placed as to protect the lower parts of the body below the breastplate. The arrows are of brass, thin, flat and triangular in shape, with a round hole cut through near the base. The shaft was fastened to the head by inserting the latter in an opening at the end of the wood, and then tying it with sinew through the round hole – a mode of constructing the weapon never practiced by the Indians, not even their arrows of thin shell. Parts of the shaft remain on some of them. When first discovered, the arrows were in a sort of a quiver of bark, which fell in pieces when exposed to the air.

"The annexed cut will give the readers an idea of the posture of the figure and the position of the armor. When the remains were discovered the arms were brought farther closer to the body than in the engraving. The arrows were near the right knee.

"The skull is much decayed, but the teeth are sound, and apparently those of a young man. The pelvis is much decayed, and the smaller bones of the lower extremities are gone. The integuments of the right knee, for four or five inches above and

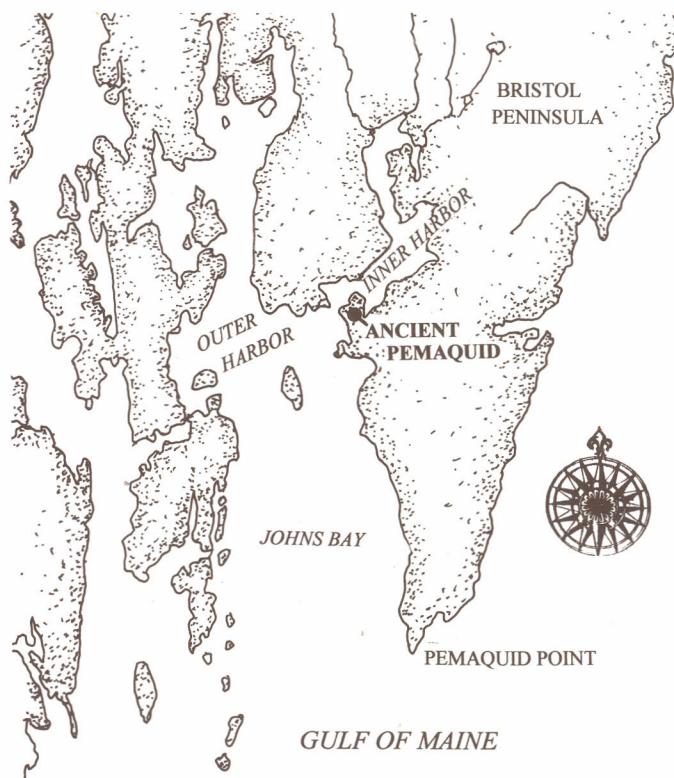


*Plan of the excavations,  
based on sketch by Arthur H. Young*

below, are in good preservation, apparently the size and shape of life, although quite black. Considerable flesh is still preserved in the hands and arms, but none on the shoulders and elbows. On the back, under the belt, and for two inches above and below, the skin and flesh are in good preservation, and have the appearance of being tanned. The chest is much compressed, but the upper viscera are probably entire. The arms are bent up, not crossed; so that the hands turned inwards touch the shoulders. The stature is about five and a half feet. Much of the exterior envelope was decayed, and the inner one appeared to be preserved only where it had been in contact with the brass.

"The preservation of this body may be the result of some embalming process; and this hypothesis is strengthened by the fact that the skin has the appearance of having been tanned; or it may be the result of the action of the salts of the brass during oxidation, and this latter hypothesis is supported by the fact, that the skin and flesh have been preserved only where they have been in contact with or quite near the brass; or we may account for the preservation of the whole by supposing the presence of saltpeter in the soil at the time of the deposit. In either case, the preservation of the remains is fully accounted for, and upon known chemical principles.

"That the body was not one of the Indians, we think needs no argument. We have seen some of the drawings taken from the sculptures found at Palenque, and in those the figures are represented with breast-plates, although smaller than the plate found at Fall River. On the figures at Palenque the bracelets and anklets appear to be of a manufacture precisely similar to the belt of tubes just described. These figures also have helmets precisely answering the description of the helmet of Hector in Homer."



*Plan of Pemaquid*