

Fight Is On to Save an Old Indian Fort: Fort Corchaug, near ...

By LINDA SASLOW

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AFTER centuries of relative obscurity, the site of a 17th-century Indian fort in Cutchogue has suddenly gained attention as a result of a modern-day struggle between forces that want to preserve it as a historical site and those favoring development.

Efforts to preserve Fort Corchaug, which lies on the west bank of Down's Creek one mile south of the hamlet of Cutchogue, have touched off an announced plan to sell the 104½-acre site on which the fort is situated, as well as several proposals to subdivide the land for development.

When the Dutch and English explorers arrived on Long Island in the mid-17th century, the fort was a gathering place for the Corchaug Indians, who lived in the area of the hamlet that was later named after them. It was one of four Indian forts on the East End of Long Island that were controlled by brothers who each presided over his own fort. The other forts were on Shelter Island and in Montauk and Southampton. Of the four, Fort Corchaug is the only one that has not been built on or destroyed.

The site is "without peer on the whole Atlantic Seaboard," said Ralph S. Solecki, a professor emeritus at Columbia University who has gathered most of the information about the fort. Professor Solecki expressed the hope that the site "will one day be protected as part of Long Island's cultural heritage."

For the last 30 years the area of woodland and farmland has remained untouched under the owner-

ship of the family of William Baxter Jr. But recently the site was put on the real estate market for an asking price of \$3.9 million. Since then, several ideas have been proposed for preservation of the fort and development of the site.

The Town of Southold has expressed interest in buying the land, possibly in conjunction with New York State or Suffolk County, said Town Supervisor, Francis Murphy. One possibility being considered is to use 25 acres for a cluster of affordable housing on half-acre lots and to preserve the majority of the land as historic site and tourist attraction, he said.

"Everybody is in favor of preserving the land, and everybody is interested in affordable housing," Supervisor Murphy said. "Maybe this is one way we can accomplish a little of everything."

But according to the Southold town planner, Valerie Scopaz, there is no

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public water or water main near the property, and it is uncertain if the land can support the increased density that would be necessary for affordable housing to be built. All residential land in the town is zoned for a minimum of two acres per lot, and a zoning change would be needed to increase the density, she said.

"To consider that property for affordable housing is a far-fetched proposition," she said. "In a historic site like Fort Corchaug, we'd want to think twice before increasing the density."

There are many other available tracts of primary land on Long Island that would be more appropriate for affordable housing, said William Baxter Jr., the owner of the property. He said it did not make economic sense to acquire such high-priced waterfront land for affordable housing.

"There are many environmentally sensitive issues that have to be dealt with," he said, "and many more ap-

propriate uses for the property, like preserving the woodlands as parklands or walking woods, and as a historic site."

The Town of Southold is now studying the best possible uses for the site, Supervisor Murphy said. Before the Planning Board can review any proposal, an environmental study is required.

"Fort Corchaug is important to help us understand more about the Native Americans," said Frank Turano, an anthropology instructor at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. "Modern archeological study and excavation of the site could give us insight into that period of history. By examining the remains, we can begin to piece together and understand the Corchaugs before active European settlement, and the European influence on the Native Americans."

"Our suspicion is that the prospect of trade with Europeans may have altered the organization and behavior of the Native Americans," said Mr. Turano. "We know very little about this period of history. The area has never been completely surveyed, and very little is known about what is around the fort."

There was a great deal of flux and a major smallpox epidemic in 1616, Mr. Turano said. Some groups were dissolved and absorbed into other groups. Each Indian group may have had unique characteristics.

Professor Solecki, who has gathered so much of the information about the fort, is a former summer resident of Cutchogue. He visited the site 67 times over 12 summers and in 1949 published his master's thesis on

Fort Corchaug, near Cutchogue, sought as part of development site.

Fort Corchaug, said Antonia Booth, the Southold Town historian. He staked out where the fort was, found remnants of the Corchaug Indians, which included nails, bolts, pieces of sword and armor, flat knife blades and jew's-harps that were trade

items for the Indians.

Professor Solecki believes that the remnants are evidence of trade between Europeans and the Indians from before the establishment of the Town of Southold, which is the oldest English town in the state of New

York.

In recognition of the historic importance of Fort Corchaug, the site was placed several years ago in the National Register of Historic Places, Ms. Booth said.

The location of Fort Corchaug has been kept quiet over the years because of concern that the public would destroy what has yet to be studied, said Mr. Turano. It is vital to protect the land from souvenir hunters and amateur collectors, he said. Up to now the land has been protected because most people did not know about it. ■
