Archaeologist seeks to uncover rich Sto:lo history on island

For three months, a team of archaeologists have been conducting an investigation on Greenwood Island, merely 200 meters off the river bank of Hope.

The archaeological research project on Greenwood Island is designed to generate new data on the daily activities, interactions, and organization of Sto:lo (First Nations, Coast Salish) households and community at the time that a Hudson’s Bay Company Fort Hope was constructed in the mid-1800s, says Graesch.

“While Greenwood Island is often remembered for a cemetery that was exhumed and relocated downstream during the flood of 1894, it was also home to a large and vibrant Sto:lo community that preceded the arrival of European settlers on the Fraser River.”

A rich oral history passed down through many generations of Sto:lo descendants suggests that the village (or the island) was associated with the placename Welqämex (wel-kah-meth) by Sto:lo speakers of the Halq’eméylem (halq-e-may-lem) language.

The village featured as many as 12 sqémél (ske-mel), or semi-subterranean dwellings. Reflecting extraordinary architectural expertise, Sqémél were designed to insulate extended family households from harsh winters on this part of the Fraser River. The island village also featured a longhouse situated along the river’s edge and overlooking an expansive bay since destroyed by the construction of the CNR railroad and Highway 1.

Analyses of the journals documenting Simon Fraser’s expedition in 1808 suggest that Fraser briefly visited this island community and was greeted by as many as 125 inhabitants who treated him and his companions to generous allotments of salmon, berries, fish oil, and dancing,” added Graesch.

Today, Greenwood Island is First Nations’ Reserve Land (IR3) and thus protected from modern-day private and commercial development that has otherwise resulted in the loss of important Sto:lo villages. The Welqämex village represents one of the few remaining and intact archaeological sites dating to the early historic period on this part of the Fraser River. The current investigation is focused on reconstructing daily household and community life through the careful excavation and documentation of Sto:lo sqémél at this important village site.