



# QIKIQTARUK



*Inuvialuit Archaeology on Herschel Island*

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*An early photograph of Pauline Cove, taken in 1913. The community on the sandspit contains a number of frame structures erected by Eurocanadian whalers, as well as many canvas tents occupied by Inuvialuit. In the background are the British Mountains on the Yukon North Slope. National Museums of Canada Neg. No. 51358. Photographer: G.H. Wilkins.*





Written by:

T. Max Friesen, University of Toronto

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Avadlek Spit on Herschel Island showing location of archaeological excavations.

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*Avumnuk and his wife stand in front of a canvas tent on Herschel Island  
in the 1890s. Avumnuk is wearing labrets made of bone and large blue  
glass beads - a sign of high status.*

*AC, Stringer Col.*

*P7517-163*





*“Herschel Island is a land where it is good to live”*

- Nuligak, an Inuvialuit hunter who lived on Herschel Island seasonally from 1903 to the 1950s.



*This book is dedicated to all Inuvialuit who  
fish, hunt, and live on Herschel Island:  
past, present, and future.*



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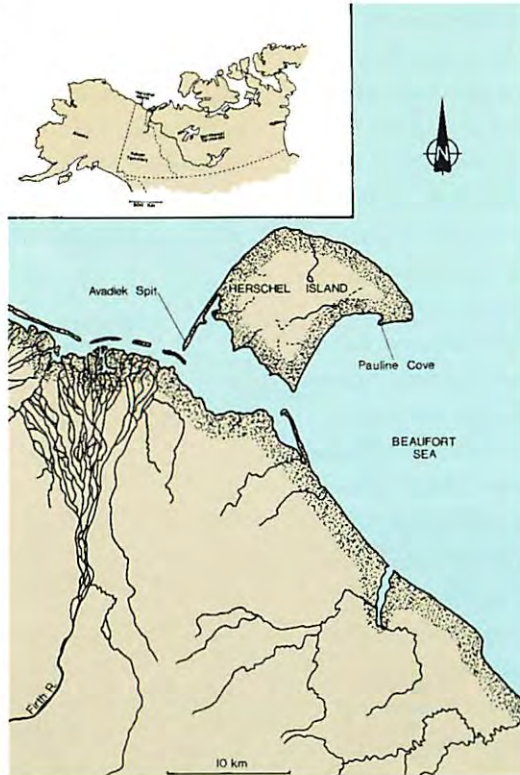
Territories. The efforts and knowledge of Jeff Hunston, director of the Heritage Branch, were particularly important to the success of the project. Also at the Heritage Branch, Ruth Gotthardt, Greg Hare, and



*The 1991 Qikiqtaruk Archaeology Project crew. Seated, left to right: Richard Tardiff, Nancy Saxberg, Doris Zibauer, Mervin Joe; Standing, left to right: Max Friesen, Ron Frost, Peter Dawson.*

Brent Riley helped out enormously. Finally, I thank all of the Herschel Island park rangers for their help and friendship: Victor Allen, Graham Baird, Frank Elanik, Colin Gordon, Lee John Meyook, and Andy Tardiff.

*Map of Herschel Island, showing the two most important Inuvialuit sites of Pauline Cove and Avadlek Spit.*



*Work in progress on recent Inuvialuit house, Pauline Cove. Left to right: Naudia Lennie, Danny Gordon Jr., Doris Zibauer, Frankie Paul.*





*Atoomachina and his wife at Herschel Island in the 1890s. Anglican Church of Canada Archives. Stringer Collection.*

Herschel Island, or Qikiqtaruk as it is known in the Inuvialuit language, played a central role in the lives of Inuvialuit of the Yukon North Slope: it was one of the first places settled by the ancestors of the Inuvialuit, it was a rich hunting and fishing area for many centuries, and much later it was the place where Inuvialuit met and interacted with newcomers from the south, notably explorers, whalers, missionaries, and traders from southern Canada, Europe, and the United States. Today, Herschel Island remains important to Inuvialuit as an area to hunt, fish, and travel. Most of the information in this book results from archaeology which occurred on Herschel Island between 1990 and 1992, as part of the Qikiqtaruk Archaeology Project. This project was organized as a cooperative venture between the Yukon Government Heritage Branch, the Government of

Canada, and Inuvialuit organizations including the community of Aklavik. All of these organizations saw a need to collect information from Herschel Island relating to the earliest Inuvialuit history in the region, and generously provided funding and/or advice and logistical help.

## WHAT CAN ARCHAEOLOGY TELL US ABOUT THE PAST?



*Elders from the Inuvialuit Social Development Program oral history project visiting archaeological excavations on Herschel Island. Left to right: David Roland (holding a stone knife blade) and Sarah Meyook (elders); Renie Arey (Inuvialuit researcher).*

There are a number of different ways to gain an understanding of the past. History is the study of written records, such as explorers' journals or Hudson's Bay Company reports. In the case of the Inuvialuit area, these written records are limited, and can only tell us about a narrow range of Inuvialuit activities. Oral histories and traditional knowledge consist of information which is gained from living people, usually elders, who have a deep personal understanding and knowledge of the past of their people. In the case of the Inuvialuit, oral histories are the most important source of information on the past: Inuvialuit elders have already participated in a number of projects sponsored by the Inuvialuit Social Development Program, which have recorded detailed accounts of the traditional way of life in the Mackenzie

Delta and along the Yukon North Slope. However, there is a third type of research which can yield additional information, especially about much earlier times, many generations ago. This is archaeology, which uses the actual physical objects left behind by people in order to reconstruct past activities. In the case of Herschel Island, Inuvialuit left behind a wide range of tools and other artifacts which were either broken or lost. They also left behind the remains of their meals, especially the bones of the many mammals, birds, and fish which were hunted in the area. Perhaps most importantly, they left traces in the form of the winter houses in which they lived. These houses were built by digging a square foundation into the tundra, and then building a framework of driftwood logs, which was covered with sod (layers of vegetation) which insulated the houses against the cold. After the inhabitants of a



*Beginning excavations on an Inuvialuit house at Pauline Cove. Left to right: Naudia Lennie, Doris Zibauer, Jerome Gordon.*

house moved on, the house would collapse, sealing all of the discarded tools, animal bones, and other materials inside. All of these objects are perfectly preserved, because they are permanently frozen in the

Arctic soils on Herschel Island. Therefore, when the houses are excavated by archaeologists hundreds of years later, all of these materials can be used to reconstruct early Inuvialuit lifeways.

## HERSCHEL ISLAND - ON THE YUKON'S ARCTIC COAST

**H**erschel Island is small by Arctic standards, measuring only about 12 by 15 kilometres. Despite this small size, the island looms large in Inuvialuit and Yukon history. Why is this? Herschel Island is the only Island of any size at all on the Yukon's north coast. Therefore, it holds a special place in the local environment. In the summer, caribou herds often roam the Island, especially during calving season. Fish are plentiful at the mouth of the Firth River, which is located on the mainland just opposite the island. A large, sheltered bay south of the island provides a calm expanse of ocean where migratory waterfowl gather before flying south. Most importantly, because Herschel Island extends far out into the Beaufort Sea, marine mammals such as bowhead whales, beluga whales, and ringed seals must swim around it, and close to shore, when they migrate along the Yukon



north coast. This makes Herschel an excellent place to hunt these animals. Herschel Island contains two sites which were especially well suited for hunting and

*Avadlek Spit, a 5 kilometre strip of sand stretching south from Herschel Island. An early Inuvialuit site is located near the tip of the Spit, in the foreground.*

fishing, and which therefore saw intensive use by Inuvialuit in the past. At the southwest corner of the island is Avadlek Spit, a long, narrow spit of sand which stretches over five kilometres south of the Island toward the mainland. In the summer, beluga whales congregate around the spit, caribou and muskox travel along it, very large flocks of ducks can be found in the surrounding calm waters, and fish are plentiful as well. The other important area is Pauline Cove, near the east end of the Island. Pauline Cove is closer to the open Beaufort Sea, and is well suited for hunting ringed seals, bearded seals, and probably bowhead whales as well. In addition, Pauline Cove formed a sheltered harbour which has been used by Inuvialuit for hundreds of years, and which has been used by Eurocanadians (a general term for newcomers from the United States, Canada, or elsewhere), ranging from whaling



*Pauline Cove, site of the largest Inuvialuit settlement on Herschel Island. In the lower right can be seen excavation in progress of an Inuvialuit house, and in the upper left are standing frame structures, most of which date to the Whaling Era of 1890-1910.*

captains to oil companies, over the past hundred years. Today, Herschel Island is a Yukon Territorial park, which is administered jointly by the Yukon

government and Inuvialuit organizations. It still holds an important place in Inuvialuit life, and is used for hunting, fishing, as a travel stop, and as a summer residence.

## THE THULE PEOPLE: THE FIRST INUVIALUIT ON HERSCHEL ISLAND

Before 1,000 years ago, the Yukon North Slope was inhabited by small groups of hunting peoples, called Paleo-Eskimo, who came and went with the seasons. They were attracted by rich game resources, especially the many caribou which were available each summer. None of these peoples, however, left behind much more than a few stone tools or animal bones, and we don't have any record of them living on Herschel Island. To the west, in northern Alaska, ancestral Inuit cultures were developing advanced technology such as elaborate skin boats (umiaks and kayaks) and harpoons, as well as improved ways of hunting many types of animal. These new people, known as the "Thule" (pronounced Too-lee), were highly skilled hunters of the large bowhead whales which migrate around Alaska and into the Beaufort Sea each summer. Around



1,000 years ago, the Thule people began to migrate out of Alaska eastward across the Canadian Arctic. One of the first places they stopped was on Herschel Island. There, they lived near Pauline Cove at a place

*Washout site excavations. Waves batter the retaining wall in front of excavations at the Washout Site. Within a few years of this excavation, all remaining parts of the site had been washed out to sea. Photo: Jeff Hunston.*

which has become known as the “Washout Site”, because the waves from the Beaufort Sea were actively washing the site out to sea. Archaeologists excavated at Washout in the 1970s and 1980s, in order to save what they could of the site, and today nothing at all is left behind, due to the continued high rate of erosion. At the Washout Site, archaeologists found three houses where Thule Inuit had lived. These small rectangular houses contained many tools and hunting weapons, as well as bones from many animals, especially ringed seals. The oldest house at Washout is 1,000 years old, and probably represents the first migration of Thule Inuit into the area. The large quantities of baleen (large, flexible plates from whale mouths) from bowhead whales indicate that these large whales were probably an important source of food and materials in this early period.



*Hunting gear recovered from the early Inuvialuit Washout Site: harpoon heads (a-f); harpoon endblade (g); inflation nozzles for sealskin floats (h-i); line toggle (j); harpoon foreshaft (k); harpoon socket piece (l); ice picks (m-n); arrowhead (o); and tool for attaching feathers to arrow shaft (p).*

## AN ABUNDANCE OF SUMMER GAME ON AVADLEK SPIT

The next site to be occupied after Washout was located on the tip of Avadlek Spit. Here, two houses dating to around 500 years ago were excavated. These houses resembled those at Washout, in that they were small and rectangular, with a single sleeping

platform at the rear. However, the bones recovered from the houses were very different; almost no seal bones were found, but thousands of fish, duck, beluga whale, and caribou bones have been recovered from the site. One of the houses had a deep entrance tunnel leading from the house



*Peter Dawson records an excavated house at Avadlek Spit. Notice the carefully laid floor logs, and the remains of standing wall logs surrounding the house.*



*Nancy Saxberg and Mervin Joe excavate a log-lined storage structure at Avadlek Spit, probably used to store bowhead whale meat and maktak.*

interior to the outside. The sunken entrance tunnel was an extremely important invention of the Inuit. It allowed houses to be kept at a comfortable temperature, because the cold winter air was trapped in the tunnel, while the interior of the house remained warm from the seal-oil lamps inside. Although

lamps were not found in the houses, their existence is indicated by the presence of dark, oil-soaked patches near the front of the sleeping platforms. Interestingly, the second house did not have an entrance tunnel, which might indicate that it was only used during the warmer months. One of the



*Artifacts from Avadlek Spit used in hunting.*



*Arrowhead used for hunting caribou.*



*Harpoon head used for hunting seals.*

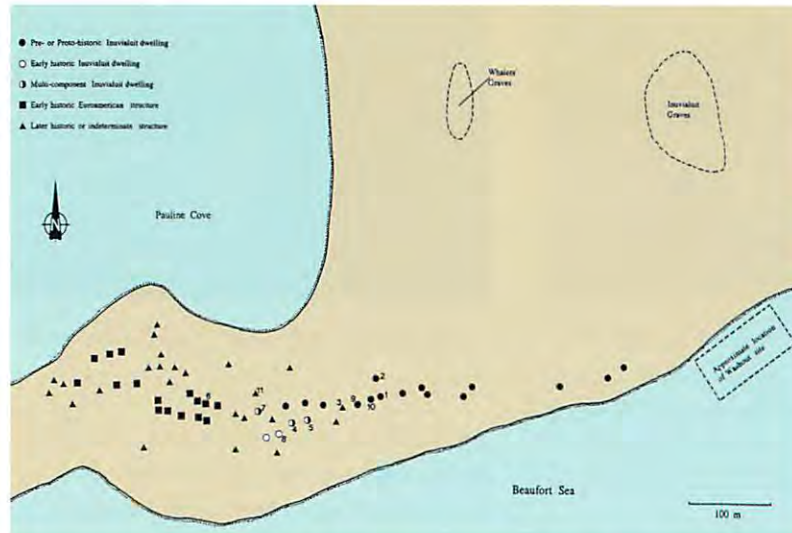
most interesting aspects of the site on Avadlek Spit was the presence of special-purpose structures outside of the houses. In front of the larger house, there were three special areas. First was a large garbage heap, or midden, containing many food bones and broken artifacts. Although many people avoid garbage piles, archaeologists actively search for them because they often contain large numbers of broken and discarded artifacts which can help the archaeologist to reconstruct the lifestyle of the site's occupants. Second was the collapsed remains of a carefully constructed wooden rack, with the remains of many bowhead whale bones scattered around it. This probably was a place where bowhead meat or maktak (skin plus blubber) was prepared for storage. Third was a square, wood-lined cache pit, measuring approximately one metre on each side and

one metre deep. This cache pit could have held a great amount of meat, probably from bowhead whales based on its position next to the collapsed drying rack. Together, these houses and special structures indicate that Inuvialuit on Avadlek Spit harvested the plentiful resources available in the summer, such as beluga whales, caribou, and birds. Probably these Inuvialuit stored a great deal of food to last them through the winters, for there were very few winter-hunted seal bones at Avadlek Spit.



## BEFORE THE COMING OF THE EUROPEANS

By three hundred years ago, Inuvialuit had moved down the beach from the Washout Site to Pauline Cove, a distance of about one kilometre. By this time, the Inuvialuit way of life had developed into a rich and complex culture which was very distinctive to the Mackenzie Delta region and the Yukon North Slope. One of the characteristics which set the Inuvialuit apart from their earlier Thule ancestors was the building of larger, more complex houses. In the Mackenzie Delta (east of Herschel Island), these houses contained a shared central room with three separate sleeping platforms. Each of these sleeping platforms held one or two families. However, before archaeology occurred on Herschel Island, the types of houses in use at Pauline Cove were unknown. At Pauline Cove, three houses which dated to approximately 300 years ago were excavated.



*Map of the large sites at Pauline Cove and Washout. The symbols indicate different types and periods of structures. Circles are Inuvialuit structures dating from centuries ago to recent times; squares are Eurocanadian structures dating after 1890; and triangles represent structures of unknown function.*

During this period, Inuvialuit had become intimately familiar with every aspect of the environment on the Yukon North Slope, but had not yet begun to interact intensively with Europeans. The houses at Pauline Cove are similar to the Inuvialuit houses in the

Mackenzie Delta, except that the Pauline Cove houses have a central shared room plus two sleeping platforms, instead of three. One platform was located at the rear of the house, and the other was positioned on either the left or right side. A short, deep entrance



*Early Inuvialuit house at Pauline Cove. Note the carefully laid central floor area, with a burnt hearth area near its centre. Behind and to the left of this central floor are the remains of two sleeping platforms; in the foreground is a deep entrance tunnel.*

tunnel led from the house interior to the outside. These houses were probably designed so that two related families could live together. One family would sleep on each platform, and the central room was a common area used for a wide range of activities. Here, people would sit and talk,



*A finely crafted toggle carved in the shape of a seal head.*

mend clothing, make tools, cook, and eat during the long winter months. Much of the food was probably stored from summer, with items such as fish, beluga whale, bowhead whale, and caribou seeing the people through the winter. In addition, men probably took trips to cracks in the sea ice during winter to hunt for ringed seals and bearded seals, which provided fresh meat as well as fat for eating and to burn in the lamps which



*A harpoon head made of caribou antler, with the bone endblade still in place.*

provided heat and light. The archaeology does not tell us what people did in summer. This was likely a time of travel, when people visited their neighbours, or journeyed to distant regions to trade, to obtain slate for making tools such as ulus (women's knives), or to hunt animals not available on Herschel Island. This summer lifestyle meant that people usually lived in tents, which leave very few traces for archaeologists to uncover.

## INUVIALUIT ENCOUNTER NEWCOMERS AT PAULINE COVE



*Inuvialuit hunter at Herschel Island - 1909. R.C.M.P.-GRC - Herschel Island 1909 (5).*

**F**or about 800 years after the first Thule occupation, Inuvialuit of Herschel Island lived a life which was based almost completely on resources which could be found on the land, near to their camps.

Food was hunted, fished, or gathered on Herschel Island, or on the nearby mainland. Houses were made of locally available materials, such as driftwood which floated down the Mackenzie River every summer and was deposited on Herschel Island's shores. Tools and hunting gear were made from driftwood, as well as the bone, antler, and teeth of the many animals which had been hunted. Probably the most important category of technology consisted of skin clothing, which was skilfully made by women from caribou skins and the furs of other animals. Very little was wasted, and almost all needs were met locally. However, even from the time of the first Thule

people, some tools and other objects were traded in from outside of the Inuvialuit area. Copper tools and soapstone lamps and pots came from Inuit in the Coppermine area to the east, and there was also active trade to the west, with Alaskan Inupiat. The Alaskans traded iron objects, such as knives, which had come from far away in Asia via the Bering Strait. They also traded tools made from exotic stone types such as green jade. Around 200 years ago, the amount of trade began to increase. At this time, a major trade fair at Barter Island (Kaktovik) began to increase in volume. At Barter Island many Inuvialuit, including those from Herschel Island, travelled west to trade with Alaskan Inupiat, who had access to trade goods from Russia and the United States. Slightly later, in 1840 AD, the Hudson's Bay Company built a trading post at Fort McPherson in the Mackenzie Delta area. Due to these developments, more



*Excavation progresses on Inuvialuit house at Pauline Cove, dating to around 1880. Entrance tunnel at lower right. Left to right: Eugene Alfred, Alvie Josie, Dean Arey, Nancy Saxberg.*

foreign goods became available, many of which were greatly desired by Inuvialuit. In particular, iron knives, glass beads to be sewn onto parkas, and tobacco were valued highly. These trade goods were traded through traditional Inuvialuit trading routes, between different villages and families.

One house from this period, dating to about 1880 AD., was excavated at Pauline Cove. This house was a traditional Inuvialuit dwelling in terms of its structure. It was dug into the earth like earlier houses, and it contained a central room as well as two sleeping platforms, one at the rear, and



*Traditional artifacts from 1880 house at Pauline Cove. Left to right: woman's comb, ivory clothing ornament, small ivory men's labret.*

one at the side. However, the artifacts from this period are quite different from those of earlier periods.

There are still many traditional artifacts used in hunting (an antler arrowhead, a bone harpoon foreshaft), fishing (a bone fish hook, antler net gauges used to manufacture fish nets), manufacturing (stone skin scrapers, a



*Imported trade goods from 1880 house at Pauline Cove. Left to right: top row - pipe lid, thimble fragment, glass bottle fragment, blue glass beads; bottom row - Rifle cartridge cases and one bullet.*

handle of an engraving tool), and for personal adornment (a labret, a comb). These artifacts indicate that most traditional activities remained unchanged in this period. This impression is reinforced by the animal bones from the site, which indicate that Inuvialuit of this period continued to rely on locally available food

sources, with ringed seals being by far the most important hunted animal.

However, a major change had clearly occurred in access to Eurocanadian trade goods, as indicated by the 870 trade goods from this house. There were two main categories of imported trade goods, indicating that Inuvialuit of this period were highly selective, trading only for those materials which could enhance their already successful lifestyle. The first category consisted of over 800 glass beads, which would have been used for a variety of decorative functions. The second category consisted of trade goods related to firearms, including rifle cartridge cases (.44 and .45 calibre) as well as gunpowder flask fragments. Also of interest was the presence of a tobacco pipe lid, as well as a pipe stem fragment which had been manufactured of caribou antler by Inuvialuit.

## CULTURE CHANGE ON HERSCHEL ISLAND

After 1889, a new set of circumstances had an enormous impact on Inuvialuit life. In that year, the Eurocanadian whalers who had decimated whale stocks in Alaskan waters discovered that the last remaining large population of bowhead whales was concentrated in the Beaufort Sea. It quickly became clear that the best harbour for over-wintering was located at Pauline Cove on Herschel Island, and beginning in 1890, several large sailing ships spent nine to ten months frozen into Pauline Cove each year. After this time, there was constant contact between Inuvialuit and these newcomers from the south, which would bring a number of important consequences. On the positive side, there were now increased opportunities to trade, and there was access to many novel ideas from the outside world.



*The many Inuvialuit graves on Herschel Island tell a sad tale of diseases brought by Eurocanadians a century ago.*

However, these advantages were overshadowed by the devastating effects of diseases such as influenza and smallpox, which caused many deaths among the

Inuvialuit.

Also, the presence of hundreds of whalers rapidly depleted locally available resources such as bowhead whales, caribou,

and driftwood. The oral histories of elders are the most important source of information on this recent period of Inuvialuit history on Herschel Island. Elders' knowledge has painted a detailed portrait of everything from camp life to hunting methods to interaction between Inuvialuit and Eurocanadians. However, archaeology can still contribute to this portrait by providing some background details, for example by indicating details of the types of house which were lived in, or the types of tools which were used. This is especially true because of the devastating epidemics which in some cases caused the death of entire families, thus extinguishing large parts of the complex story of Inuvialuit life on Herschel Island.

At Pauline Cove, two structures dating to the 1890s or early 1900s were excavated by archaeologists. Interestingly, neither



*Excavation of a tent floor dating to the 1890s or early 1900s. A low rim of sod surrounds the structure, which has a log floor in its front half (centre of photo).*





*Naudia Lennie holds a small bone carving of a whale, recovered from a recent Inuvialuit structure.*

structure was a deep driftwood-framed house such as those used by earlier Inuvialuit. Instead, both probably represent the remains of summer tents on the ground surface. Artifacts and animal bones are scattered in a thin layer near the present ground surface, although a layer of vegetation has grown over them. One of these tents has a low rim of sod around it, which may be the remains of an insulating layer of vegetation stacked against



*Two playing cards excavated from a recent Inuvialuit structure.*

the walls of a tent, to keep it warm. The ground surface within this same tent was floored with driftwood logs in its front half, and beneath these logs was a cache containing many food bones and artifacts.

These two structures contained a greatly reduced number of locally-made artifacts, although Inuvialuit of the early Twentieth Century still produced a small number of items such as harpoon heads, fish

net sinkers, skin scrapers, and even a small carving of a whale. However, they now used a much broader range of imported items - not surprising given the presence of whaling vessels at the site, loaded with trade goods. Trade goods are dominated by firearm-related artifacts, which include 11 different calibres of rifle cartridge as well as 10-gauge shotgun shells.

Also present were hundreds of other imported artifacts, ranging from glass beads, to playing cards, to rubber boots, to an accordion. Clearly, Inuvialuit were actively incorporating many aspects of imported technology into their culture at this point. However, the Inuvialuit lifestyle continued to be based on a close connection to the land. Although there were the remains of a few cans of food, and a few seeds from imported fruits such as cherries and prunes, the great majority of food remains still consisted of the bones of locally hunted and fished animal species.

## FROM THE PAST TO THE FUTURE

**T**hrough most of the Twentieth Century, Inuvialuit lived year-round or seasonally on the Yukon North Slope, trapping foxes for trade, as well as hunting, fishing, and occasionally gathering plant foods. Until 1938, the Hudson's Bay Company maintained a trading post and store on Herschel Island, and there was an RCMP detachment on the Island until 1964. Over the years, the population gradually moved to the Mackenzie Delta region, with many people from the Yukon North Slope settling in the permanent communities of Aklavik and Inuvik.

As local people resettled into new communities, large movements of people, especially Inupiat from Alaska, arrived on the Yukon North Slope and in the Mackenzie Delta. Although Inuvialuit of the Mackenzie Delta had always interacted



*Excavating a house built by whalers, and later occupied by Inuvialuit in the 1910s. The floor and walls are constructed of milled lumber. Left to right: Doris Zibauer, Frankie Paul, Naudia Lennie.*



*Connecting the past to the present: Naudia Lennie studies early Inuvialuit artifacts.*

with their Alaskan neighbours, in the Twentieth Century the two groups came together in a new and dynamic fashion to form the Inuvialuit culture of today. In 1987, Herschel Island was declared the first Yukon Territorial park, jointly administered by Inuvialuit organizations and the Government of Yukon. Beyond its status as a park, however, Herschel Island continues to be used for hunting, fishing, as a camp during travel, and as a summer residence. The history of the island, both Inuvialuit and Eurocanadian, has been preserved, and park rangers from the community of Aklavik are available to interpret the island's heritage to visitors.

This book indicates how archaeology can help to preserve and interpret this heritage, by offering us glimpses of Inuvialuit culture during the past 1,000 years on Herschel Island.

Each house, with its contents of artifacts and animal bones, tells us about the lives of one or two Inuvialuit families at a specific period in the past. When this archaeological knowledge is combined with the even richer information told to us by Inuvialuit elders, a detailed history of the changing nature of Inuvialuit culture can be assembled. A major theme which emerges from this history is that Herschel Island has always been a place of central importance in Inuvialuit culture. Without a doubt, it will remain this way well into the future.



*Park Rangers and archaeological crew taking a tea break on Avadlek Spit. Left to right: Peter Dawson, Nancy Saxberg, Ranger Frank Elanik, Eugene Alfred, Ranger Victor Allen.*



*Clearing a heavy snowfall from a partially completed excavation, Pauline Cove.*



*Naudia Lennie and Danny Gordon Jr. excavating a recent Inuvialuit house at Pauline Cove.*



*Screening fine sediments to obtain even the smallest artifacts, Pauline Cove.*





**Yukon**

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