

# Native American Fishweirs Along The Yadkin River



# Yadkin River Fishweirs

Flowing stream fishweirs (fish dam, fish trap) consist of an obstruction across all or part of a river, creek or stream to trap fish in quantities. Weirs are constructed of cobble, rocks and/or small boulders and often use existing or naturally occurring rocks protruding from the river bed.

Fishweirs are generally "V" or "W"-shaped, with an apex aligned downstream directing fish towards traps, usually nets or baskets. They also can be a diagonal dam across the stream. The actual width of the wing and dam walls, and the size and V-shape can greatly vary.

Very little is written, studied or recorded about fishweirs on the Yadkin River. However, Native American fishweirs are numerous along the Yadkin. Most of these fishweirs are estimated to be from the late Woodland period, and approximately 500-800 years old. There are four fishweirs in the Shoals to Donaha stretch that collectively are known as "The Great Bend Fishweirs."

It is important to note that originally the Yadkin river was comparatively shallow. Today, with seven dams, the normal flow level has been raised, making it often difficult to see fishweirs, old mill dams and other historic sites.

In addition, many fishweirs in the Yadkin and other North Carolina rivers have been damaged or destroyed by early European settlers, hydroelectric dams, bridges or other developments.

# Yadkin River Fishweirs

In some cases, Native Americans would enter the weir and use their hands or sticks to splash the water thereby scaring fish towards the apex of the weir and into the trap. In other instances it is believed they would place their nets at the apex and wait for the fish to be driven into the trap by the river current.

Using fishweirs is an efficient means of catching fish both in terms of the amount of energy expended and the potential return. Culturally, the fishweirs demonstrate a prudent use of the river as a food source and an astute means for obtaining it.

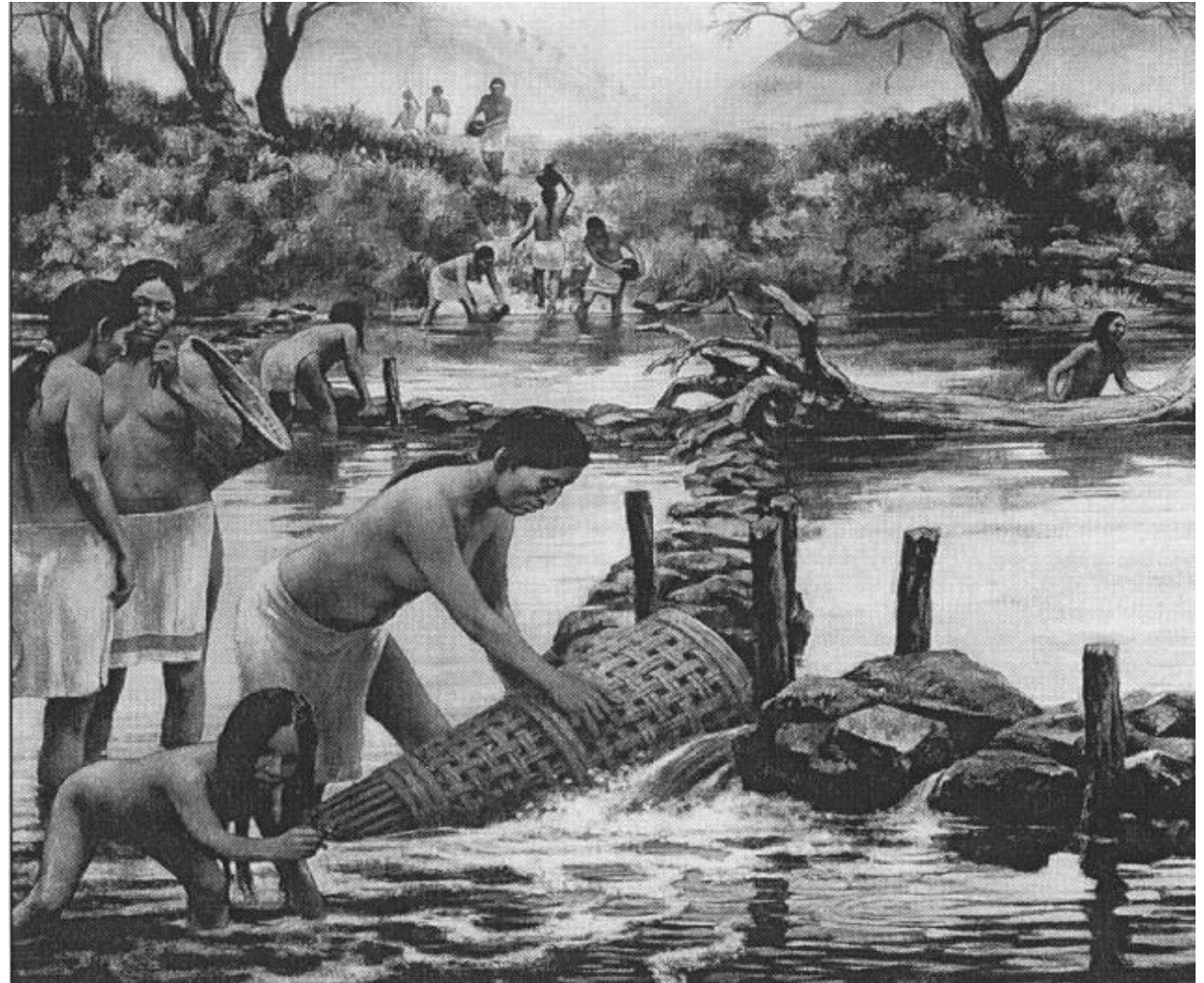
The presence of these fishweirs implies not only a means of subsistence for the occupants of this region, but settlement patterns as well. Fishweirs in general suggest that at least a portion of a community were in the vicinity of the structure to build the weir, provide structural maintenance, and process the fish.

Research indicates that as the settlements moved from seasonal to year round, so too did the use of fishweirs. In this regard the weirs were a component of a settlement system.

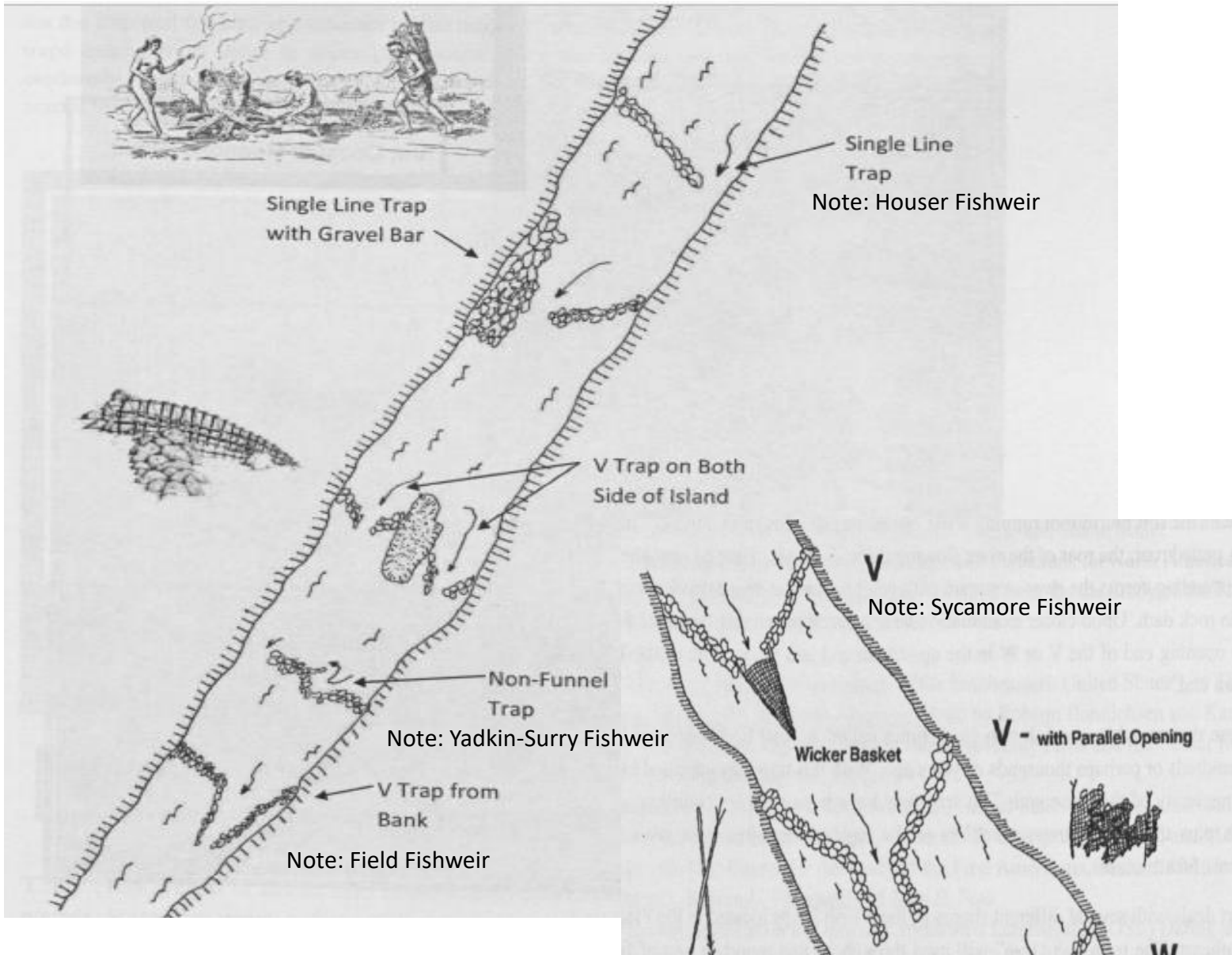
# Artist depiction of fishweir in use

## Once Considered A “Nuisance”

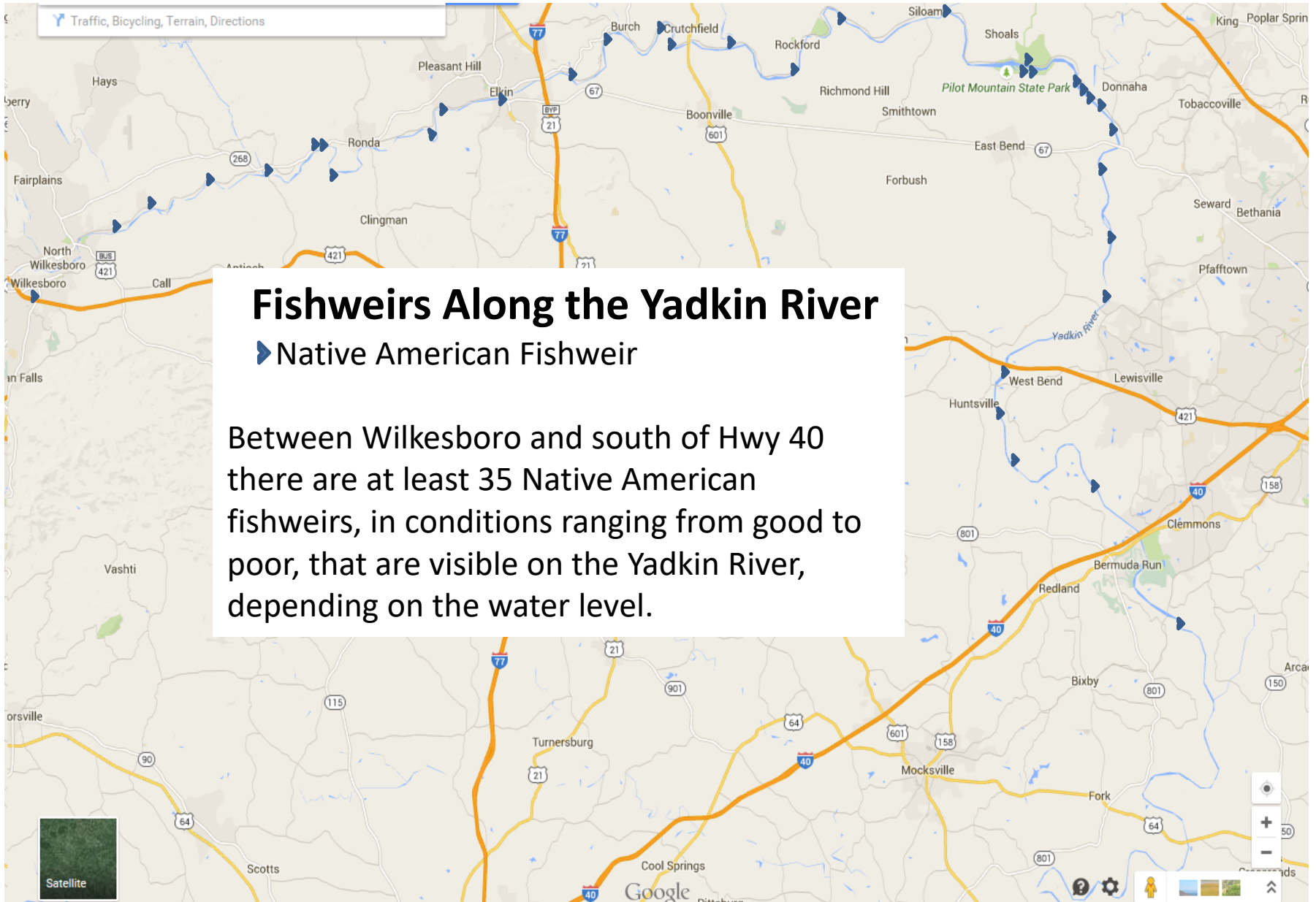
Fishweirs in the Yadkin River were not always appreciated. In the “1879 Annual Report of the Chief Engineer to the Secretary of War,” a detailed examination of the Yadkin River was presented to determine the river’s navigation potential. In it, they cite “old fish dams” that “need to be removed” and “landowners along the river have asked to have the fish dams removed.”



# Types of Fishweirs







# Fishweirs Along the Yadkin River

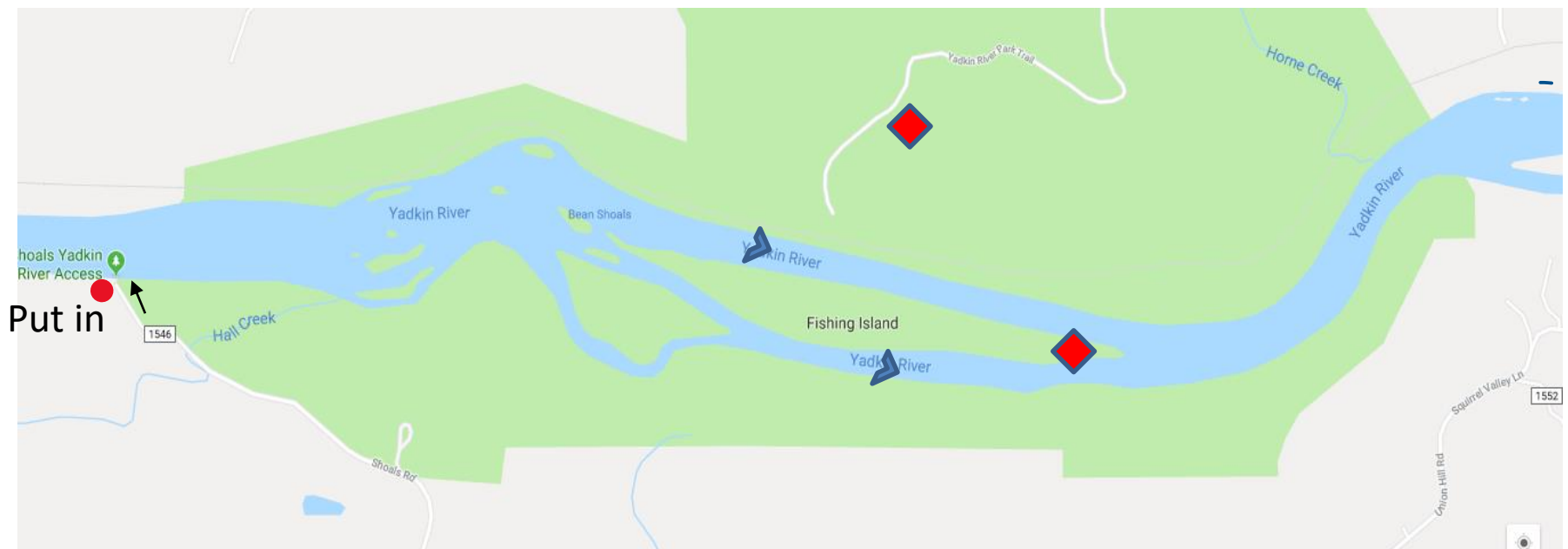
## ▶ Native American Fishweir

Between Wilkesboro and south of Hwy 40 there are at least 35 Native American fishweirs, in conditions ranging from good to poor, that are visible on the Yadkin River, depending on the water level.

# Shoals to Donnaha – The Great Bend Fishweirs

◆ Excavated Native American Site  
(These sites were excavated years ago and now are covered and primarily agricultural fields.)

▼ Native American Fishweir

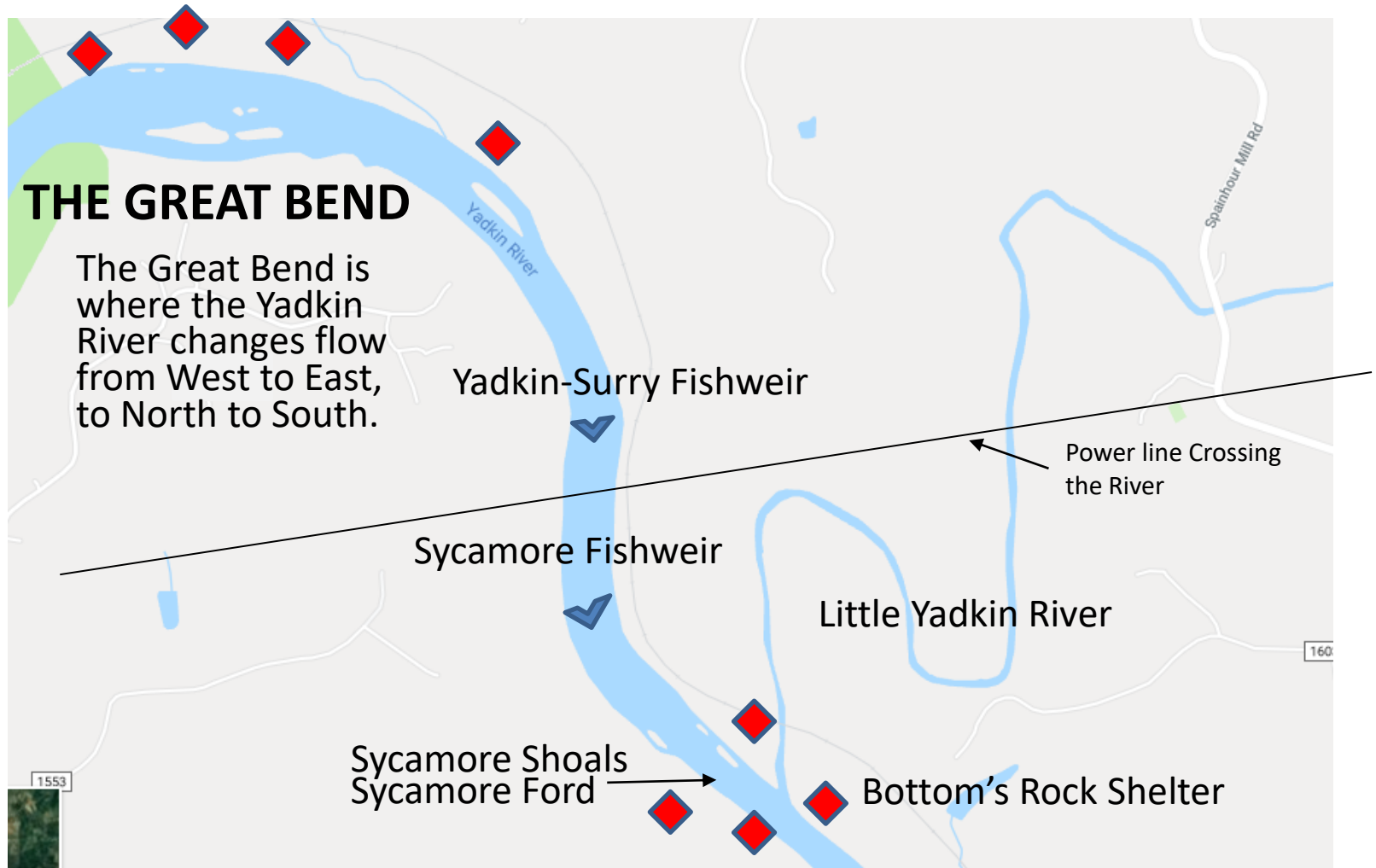


In the seven mile stretch on the Yadkin from the Shoals put in to the Donnaha Bridge there are four, well-defined fishweirs: the Yadkin-Surry, Sycamore, Fields and Hauser Fishweirs. They are best seen at a river level 3 feet and lower. Their locations are in a 2.7 mile area of the Yadkin running in a south or southeasterly direction after the Great Bend. The excavation locations (◆) provides a sense of how many Native American sites were along this section of the river.

# Shoals to Donnaha – The Great Bend Fishweirs

◆ Excavated Native American Site  
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▽ Native American Fishweir

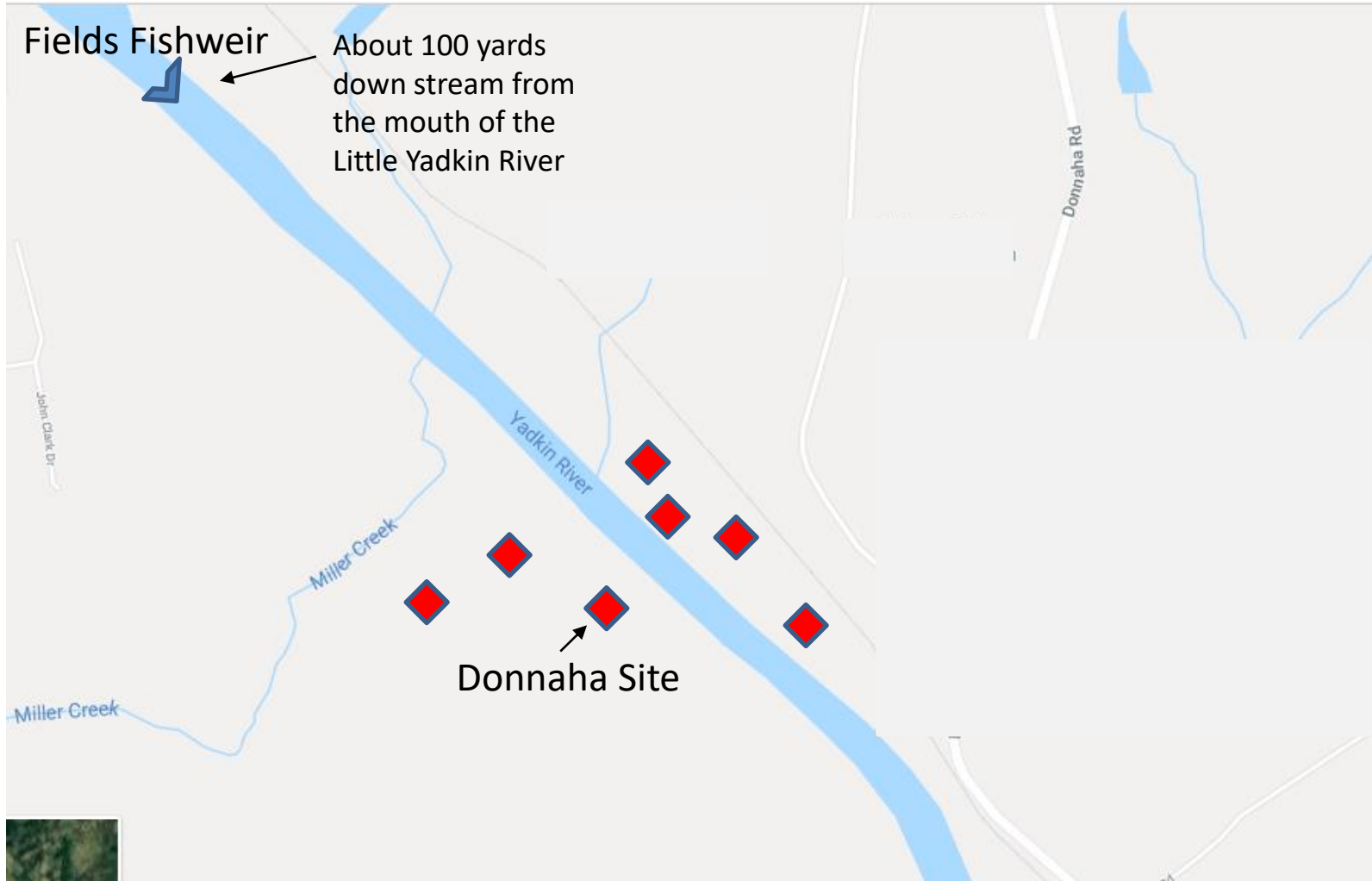




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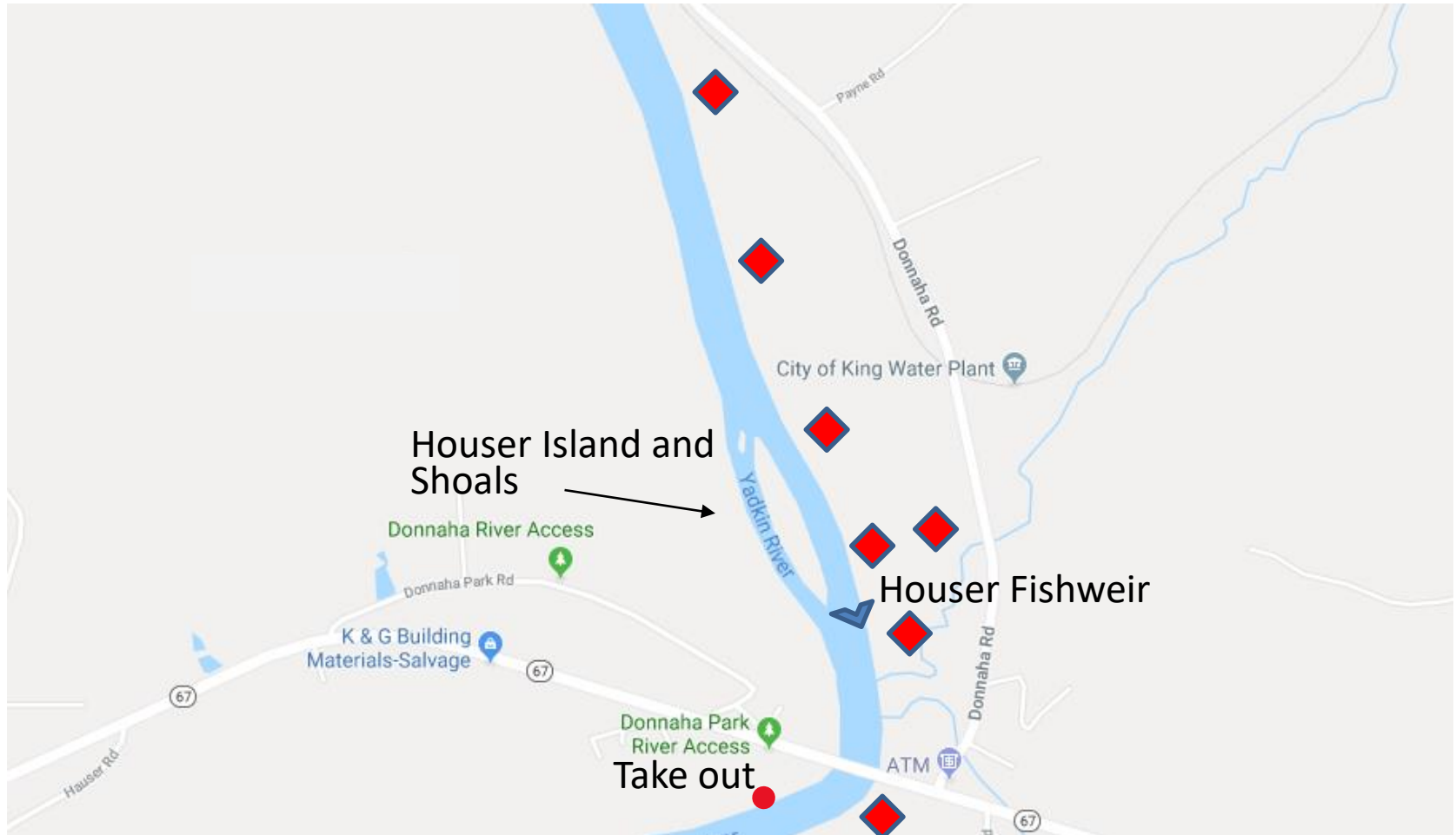
▼ Native American Fishweir



# Shoals to Donnaha – The Great Bend Fishweirs

◆ Excavated Native American Site  
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▼ Native American Fishweir



# The Great Bend Fishweirs



Low level water view of the **Yadkin-Surry Fishweir**. This fishweir takes advantage of existing rock formations on the river bed. The condition of this weir is fair and the poorest of the four. It is located approximately 500 feet north of a powerline crossing the Yadkin. The river measures approximately 450 feet from bank to bank which is the widest of the four weirs.



Google Maps view of the **Yadkin-Surry Fishweir**. The apex is almost set in the exact middle of the river. From this view, it appears the Yadkin-Surry Fishweir is an example of a “non-funnel” trap.



# The Great Bend Fishweirs



Low level water view of the **Sycamore Fishweir**, an example of a classic "V" fishweir and located about a mile downstream from the Yadkin-Surry fishweir. The weir is almost centered in the middle of the river. The river measures approximately 400 feet across.



Google Maps view of the **Sycamore Fishweir**. This is a beautiful, almost perfect "V" with the apex in the middle of the river.

# The Great Bend Fishweirs



Low level water view of the **Fields Fishweir** a good example of a “dam and V” fishweir. Of the four Great Bend fishweirs, this one is in the best condition. Rather than a complete “V” from bank to bank, it has a small dam on its west side that extends to the actual “V” of the weir.



Google Maps view of the **Fields Fishweir**. This is an example of a “dam and V” fishweir with the apex at the strongest point of the river current towards the east bank. The river is approximately 235 feet wide at this point.



# The Great Bend Fishweirs



Low level water view of the **Houser Fishweir**, a “single line” fishweir. The apex has been severely compromised over the years most likely to allow boats to go through. Of special note, an approximate 40 foot section of the west wing is reinforced with a wooden crib measuring 6 feet across, made with square beams (similar to railroad ties) and filled with rocks. Presumably this was constructed by Europeans at some point.



Google Maps view of the **Houser Fishweir**. From bank to bank the river is approximately 457 feet, but since this weir is built against the island the width measure approximately 173 feet. This fishweir was used commercially until 1897.

# Fish Species in the Yadkin River Then and Now



Shad



Sturgeon



Alewife

During the time of occupation by Native Americans, fish in the Yadkin River included shad, herring, alewife and sturgeon.

Prior to the arrival of European settlers shad runs along the Yadkin were a plentiful source of food for the Native Americans, and they counted on fish feasts during the spring spawning season. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, North Carolinians celebrated the shad runs with festivals.

For the most part, these species no longer exist in the Great Bend region. Damming, over fishing, pollution and stream channelization has depleted the anadromous fish species on the upper Yadkin. Today, it is mostly populated by catfish, large and smallmouth bass and sunfish.



Catfish



Largemouth Bass



Smallmouth Bass

# Native American Settlements Along The Yadkin River

The Yadkin River Valley encompasses Native American settlements from the Archaic Period (8000 B.C.E.- 300 B.C.E.) through the Woodland period (300 B.C.E. to 1600 C.E.).

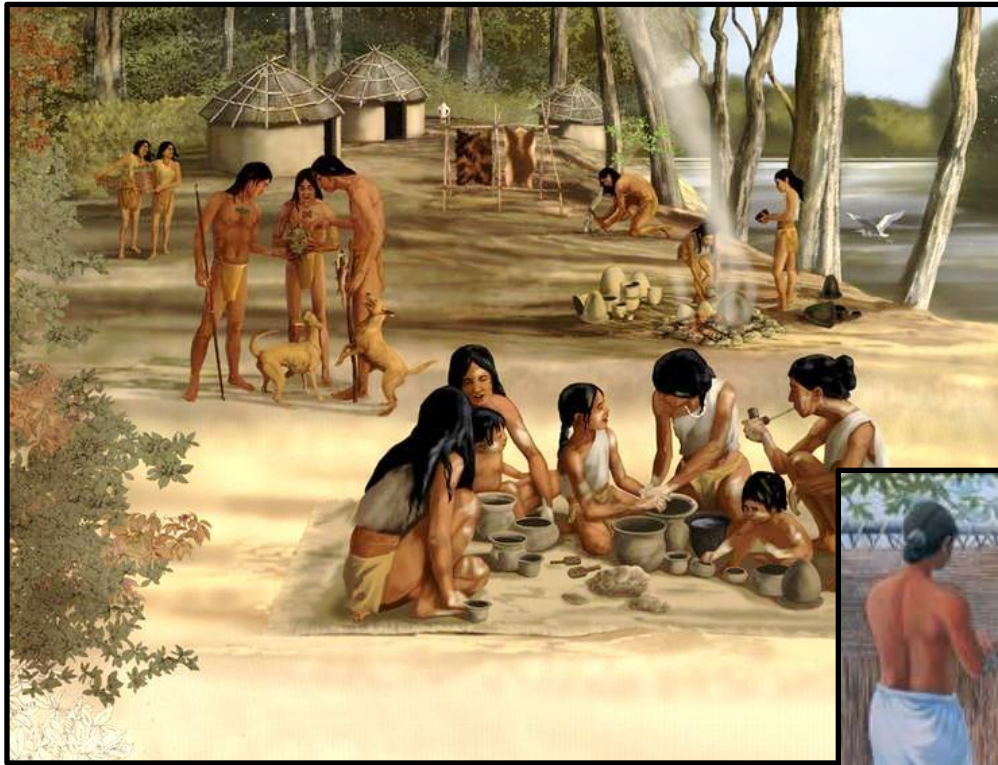
The Upper and Lower Great Bend area of the Yadkin contained numerous pre-tribal settlements from the Late Woodland Period (800 to 1600 C.E.). These were primarily small extended family groups of 30-70 and lived in what is referred to as the Piedmont Valley Tradition (PVT).

PVT is characterized by small villages composed of circular houses with a mixed substance of agriculture and foraging/hunting, pottery making and settlements located primarily in the river's floodplains. There is no evidence of warfare.

In many ways, the Great Bend villagers can be considered a conservative lot. They produced no earthen temple mounds as seen at the Town Creek site; did not participate in the trade or production of exotic commodities to mark the superior status of certain social ranks; and did not create social systems with a class of privileged persons to administer a specialized economy.



# Artist Depictions Piedmont Valley Tradition Settlements Late Woodland Period 800 -1600 C.E.



**For more information contact:  
Yadkin Riverkeeper  
336-722-4949**

For an infographic on Southeastern Fishweirs click [here](#)

To view a 10 minute video on the Great Bend Fishweirs click [here](#)

