

GEOGRAPHICAL DATA:

Acreage: 0.7 (note that this includes disturbed slopes with artifacts and interior portions of site, which have only produced surface artifacts, all of which provide essential horizontal, chronological and functional contexts for the undisturbed, stratified deposits)

SUMMARY: The Taft Archeological site (44FX544) is a multi-component, stratified, upland, prehistoric and possibly proto-historic (Dogue), American Indian camp covering a 50x80-meter area and dating to between ca. 2000 B.C. (based on Savannah River point) and A.D. 1560. The undisturbed part of the site appears to encompass 10x20 meters. This well-preserved component is located on a dissected, Coastal Plain plateau "finger" on the south side of the confluence of the tidal Kanawha Creek Estuary and Belmont Bay on Mason Neck in southern Fairfax County, Virginia. The site contains an intensive occupation midden on top of the plateau with eroded feature and artifact material exposed on the plateau edges. The midden includes mussel and oyster shell midden piles and pits, hearths and individual pottery clusters in a shallow stratified context. The artifacts include stone, ceramic, shell, bone, and ethno-botanical items. Ornamental items include a gorget and five different kinds of beads. The following background discussion is derived largely from Norton and Baird (1994).

BACKGROUND: Excavations in 1987 at the Taft site were designed to recover features most immediately threatened by estuarine encroachment along the site's northern edge. The site was initially recognized from eroding shell features on the northward facing bank of the dissected plateau remnant, end of the finger ridge. Additionally, soil ph transect, from the excavated portions of the site along its northern boundary, southward along the spine of the ridge, indicated additional discrete shell concentrations extending beyond 25 meters south of the site's northern edge.

The site was excavated in three stages in May through August 1987. Initially, a crew under contract to the Commonwealth of Virginia excavated a shallow bank cut and began the initial excavation. Due to the site's richness, the Archeological Society of Virginia's field school was held at the site. It continued the excavation. Finally, volunteers from the Northern Virginia Chapter - Archeological Society of Virginia under direction of a staff archeologist from Fairfax County completed excavations, taking the open squares down into sterile sub-soil.

Method: Twenty-one 2x2-meter squares were laid out contiguously on the northern edge to ensure all portions of slump and at least one-meter of undisturbed site were covered. Six complete and six fragmentary squares, encompassing only the first two meters of site south of the southern-most erosion were excavated. This was done in anticipation of future erosional destruction due to sea level rise.

Because of slumping, not all of the squares along the northern edge encompasses a full two meters of area. Squares were further sub-divided into 1x1-meter sub-squares to improve the quality of recovery. Squares were hand excavated in 5 centimeter arbitrary levels. Functional and chronological artifacts were mapped along with features. Soil was

sifted through 1/4-inch hardware cloth and 25x25x5-centimeter soil flotation and soil samples were recovered from each 1x1-foot sub-square.

The finished bank cut provided the methodological base and parameters for the rest of the excavation. It revealed both fire cracked rock and shell features. Interestingly, the numerous, small, mussel shell middens at the top of the profile were not in pits but piles, thus changing the excavation approach.

All 1/4-inch dry screen residue was taken back to the lab to be water screened through 1/16-inch window screen to increase the small artifact recovery. This did result in recovery of one small shell bead. All bulk shell was retained. Shell hinges were counted and all shell weighed. All artifacts were catalogued in the Fairfax County Archeological system, labeled, bagged and boxed for storage.

Data: A total of 47,937 artifacts were catalogued from the excavation. That included 19,680 stone, 3,679 prehistoric ceramic, 7,132 faunal, 17,147 shell hinges, 3 floral and 296 historic artifacts.

Diagnostic artifacts included Late Archaic Holmes and Calvert points, Early-Middle Woodland Vernon points, Middle Woodland Selby Bay, Piscataway and Potts points, and one Late Woodland triangular point. Pottery included Early Woodland Marcey Creek and one possible Selden island sherds, Middle Woodland Popes Creek and Mockley sherds, Late Woodland Rappahannock and Potomac Creek sherds, and one Proto-Historic Colono-ware sherd. Ornamental items included one slate gorget with a zigzag pattern etched into one face, one carnivore canine tooth bead, one circular bone bead, one marginella shell bead, one very small square shell bead, and one large earthenware ceramic bead (Norton and Baird 1994). A small number of refined red earthenware, possible pearlware and glass sherds also were recovered and could explain the Colono-ware sherd.

A total of 6823 vertebrate bones were recovered. As a whole, fish bones were most numerous (33.9%), followed respectively by indeterminable (31.4%), reptile (19.4%) and mammals (9.9%). Bird (0.5%) and amphibian (n=2) were minimally represented. Bone condition ranged between fair to poor (Norton and Baird 1994).

Floral analysis was never fully completed. However, charred black walnut (*Juglans nigra*) and wild cherry/plum (*Prunus sp.*) were identified by an ethno-botanist. Nineteen macro-wood charcoal fragments were also examined. However, they were not identified. To date, none of the flotation has been sorted for analysis.

Thirty-seven prehistoric and one historic features were recovered. This is particularly impressive because of the small area excavated. Prehistoric feature types included: (1) intrusive pits, basins, etc.; (2) extrusive shell piles; (3) hearths with fire cracked rock; (4) greasy stains, and (5) discrete pot breaks. The one historic feature was a large telegraph post hole (telegraph insulators were recovered from around the feature).

Radio-carbon dates included AD 10± 60 (BETA 61317) on a Mockley feature (oldest recorded Mockley date) and AD 1160±50 (BETA 46955), AD 1330±50 (BETA 46954), AD 1560±60 (CAMS 5662) on Potomac Creek features.

Research significance: The presence of oyster shell in a prehistoric context this far up the Potomac River is unusual. The presence of shell (10-20%) in the midden, the darkness of the midden soil, when compared with the surrounding soil, and the presence

of greasy stains demonstrate exceptional organic preservation. The implications are fully demonstrated by faunal results from the data recovery. The floral potential has not been determined but the presence of walnut and cherry/plum charcoal is indicative of a high ethno-botanical potential.

The fact that this is a small stratified site, containing excellent organic preservation from discrete Popes Creek, Mockley and Potomac Creek features, rather than an intense shell midden or village, offers the opportunity to understand the evolution of small, micro-social unit base camps from agricultural (Potomac Creek), transitional (Mockley) and pre-agricultural (Popes Creek) cultures. The presence of oyster shell in the Mockley midden also has implications for the evolution of climate induced adaptation in the upper Potomac Estuary (Johnson 1991:32-33).

This site is not exceeded in its potential for satisfying criterion d of the National Register of Historic Places.

REFERENCES

Johnson, Michael F.

- 1991 Middle and Late Woodland Settlement Systems in the interior Fall Zone of the Potomac Valley: Not a Live Oyster in Sight. North American Archeologist 12:29-60.

Norton, Robert F. and Edith A. Baird

- 1994 The Taft Site: A Middle and Late Woodland Assemblage from the Virginia Coastal Plain. Archeology of Eastern North America 22:89-134.