INTERPRETATION

Prehistoric interpretation

Several writers have suggested that sites like this would have supported seasonal micro-band settlement, at least during the Middle Woodland period (Gardner 1982, p. 20). Evidence of such transient Woodland period use was found in the nearby Mudstone Branch site (Heite 1984).

All the prehistoric remains are consistent with occasional use of the site for seasonal procurement purposes during Archaic and Woodland times. The presence of collection of assorted small flinty flakes along the ridge above the swamp is consistent with a hunting stand, where weapons would have been resharpened but not manufactured.

Historic interpretation

Both documents and archaeological evidence show that the area was occupied with increasing density until the turn of the present century, when the population began to dwindle. The presence of a concentration of early nineteenth century ceramics supports documentary evidence that the east end of the Austin Smith farm was occupied by small holdings during that period. Both visible remains and standing structures near the Fork Branch bridge indicate the existence of a small but identifiable hamlet at the junction of two transportation routes. Also, documents indicate that both Caleb Slash and the ditch near Denney's Road have served as field boundaries and drainage works since the eighteenth century.

From the title traces, in Appendix 6, it is evident that some of the landowning members of the community during the early part of the nineteenth century lived in relatively insubstantial dwellings. Hugh Durham's "old cabin" was in ruins by 1835, soon after his death. Houses were given minimum values in inventory and assessment records.

The community's history during the nineteenth century illustrates the inverse of the period's agricultural prosperity. As well-financed farmers expanded their holdings, another group declined in status and wealth. In the midst of an agricultural boom, poorer landowners left the land of their ancestors.

Discussion relative to research design

The findings at Fork Branch are consistent with the prehistoric models set forth by Custer and others. As predicted, the site represents an occasional procurement area during the prehistoric period.

A small but historically significant community existed here during the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. The community's extent and significance were identified, and it was determined that none of its remains are likely to be impacted by the project.

Limitations or inadequacies of available data

Archaeological evidence of historic-period race and ethnicity remains elusive here as elsewhere. Detailed excavations at a chronological series of toft sites might uncover evidence that would perhaps demonstrate the distinctions. Other methods, including folklore and genealogy, must be employed if the matter is to be fully explicated for the record.

Limited analysis of soil types in connection with toft locations at Fork Branch indicates that soils may be important factors in future historic-period modelling. The more level Sassafras classifications certainly have historical importance here and elsewhere; every eighteenth-century town in Kent County was built on the two most level Sassafras soil classifications. Soil type analysis certainly will become more useful if future researchers pay more attention to it.

While floral evidence was negative here, the cultural implications of domestic plants need further study on a broader scale.