

ABSTRACT

The Puncheon Run Site is located on the St. Jones River just south of Dover, Delaware. The site extends across a peninsula formed by a bend in the river and a small stream (Puncheon Run), which enters the St. Jones from the west. Most of the site was in the path of the Puncheon Run Connector, a new, limited-access highway. The Delaware Department of Transportation sponsored a series of investigations at the site from 1995 to 1998. These excavations revealed evidence of a series of Native American occupations spanning the period from 3000 BC to AD 1500.

The Puncheon Run Site extended over an area of more than 8 hectares (20 acres). Artifacts were widely scattered over this large area, usually in low quantities, but concentrations of artifacts and features were identified at several locations along the peninsula. Given the separation between these concentrations of features and artifacts, the site is more appropriately viewed as a series of separate activity areas within a landscape, rather than what archaeologists designate as a single “site.”

The final program of investigation focused on five areas. The Metate block was a block excavation centered on a large metate or grinding stone and a series of hearths; this area is believed to have been repeatedly used as a fishing camp, and radiocarbon dates from the hearths place the occupations between 2000 and 1000 BC. Excavations in the Feature 30 block focused on a cluster of pit features, two of which were very large and may have been used for storage or some social purpose. The primary occupation of the Feature 30 block is believed to have occurred between AD 600 and 900, although radiocarbon dates from this area varied widely. At the western end of the site, excavations focused on three areas: a cluster of features (the Silo Pit area) interpreted as storage pits, a quarry area (the Cobble Bar area), and an area where historic slope wash had preserved an assemblage of prehistoric ceramics (the Buried Plowzone area). Mechanical removal of the plowzone in the Silo Pit area exposed more than 40 features, including a group of 12 pits that had been used for storage. These storage pits were round, with steeply sloping sides and nearly flat bottoms; radiocarbon dates place most of the pits between AD 100 and 400. Very few artifacts were associated with the storage pits, suggesting that this area was somewhat isolated from a residential area. The artifact assemblage from the Cobble Bar area contained large quantities of cores, tested cobbles, hammerstones, and debitage associated with the early stages of formal tool manufacture or the preparation of informal expedient tools. The Buried Plowzone area contained a broad range of wares manufactured in the period from before 800 BC to after AD 1000, but relatively few vessels of each ware were present. This area seems to represent a campsite used for brief stays, possibly because it was located on a trail, near a canoe landing, or near an extinct spring.

Investigation of the Puncheon Run Site focused on subsistence practices, settlement patterns, technology, site formation processes, and the relationship of the prehistoric occupants to their landscape. A broad range of techniques was applied, and many specialists were engaged for studies such as pedology, flotation recovery, landscape analysis, microscopic edge-wear analysis, phytolith analysis, and the identification of protein residues. The landscape-based approach to the site has stimulated a number of new perspectives on Delaware’s Woodland I period, of which perhaps the most important is the realization that the development of food storage technology does not necessarily imply an increasingly sedentary lifestyle.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors wish to thank all of those who have helped make the Puncheon Run project possible. Bringing this study to fruition was truly a collaborative effort, involving the contributions of many individuals and agencies.

Staff of the Delaware State Historic Preservation Office provided invaluable assistance, especially Daniel R. Griffith, Director and State Historic Preservation Officer; Gwen Davis, Archaeologist; and Joan N. Larrivee, Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer. Charles Fithian, Curator of the Delaware State Museum, also provided invaluable help.

Michael Petraglia, John Rutherford, Dennis Knepper, and Carter Shields of Parsons, Inc., shared their results from the Hickory Bluff Site investigations and welcomed us on their site many times.

Reporters Joanna Wilson of the *Dover Post*, James Merriweather of the *News Journal*, and Andrea Duckworth of WBOC helped us to reach a broad segment of the public.

Several current and former members of the Nanticoke Indian Association participated in the study: Charles Clark IV, Butch Coursey, Avery Harmon, Mike Harmon, Gary Jackson, Toby Jackson, Freddie Miller, and Tran Norwood. Special thanks go to our stalwart volunteer, David Leppo, Sr., who stuck with us through the worst of both winter and summer.

Many people at the Delaware Department of Transportation provided important assistance, including Kevin Cunningham, Archaeologist; Ann Canby, Secretary; Raymond Harbeson, Chief Engineer; Eugene Abbott, Director, Planning; Joseph T. Wutka, Jr., Assistant Director, Planning; Therese M. Fulmer, Manager, Environmental Studies; Loretta Brisbane, Secretary; Anna May Decker, Project Scheduling and Support; Tim O'Brien, DOT Photographer; Dave DuPlessis, Project Engineer; and Danny Skeens and Ira White, Property Management. We also wish to thank Tommy Beatty, Division Administrator, and Robert Kleinburd, Environmental Officer, both of the Federal Highway Administration, and Foster Hoffman of Century Engineering.

Modern archaeology is a team effort, requiring contributions from many disciplines. Among the specialists who have contributed to the Puncheon Run project are Dr. Daniel Wagner of GeoSci Consultants (geomorphology and pedology), Justine Woodard McKnight (ethnobotany, soil flotation, and landscape analysis), Dr. Irwin Rovner of Binary Analytical Consultants (phytolith analysis), Dr. Paul Goldberg and Trina Arpin of Boston University (soil micromorphology), Philip LaPorta (petrography), Cara Blume of Heite Consulting (Ceramic Analysis), and Dr. Linda Scott Cummings of PaleoResearch Laboratories (protein residue analysis).

Many staff of The Louis Berger Group, Inc., assisted in this study (see *The People Who Prepared This Study* at the end of this volume), and the lead authors are most appreciative of the dedication and professionalism they demonstrated over the past few years.