People & Place:

ARCHAEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES IN SOUTHERN OHIO ALONG THE BANKS OF THE ‘GREAT RIVER’

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A sense of place is essential to how many Native Americans view the world. Native American author Gregory Cajete has written that many Native groups perceive their own culture as being rooted within a web of relationships that exists between themselves as a people and the natural features of their homelands. A sense of place as it relates to home is known to be equally important to Euro-American societies. For example, William Faulkner, a Pulitzer Prize-winning American author, realized early in his life that his home, or, as he termed it, his “little postage stamp of native soil,” would provide a well from which endless stories could spring. Even today, farmers in the Midwest and farmers and ranchers throughout the country, demonstrate considerable pride in their family’s ongoing relationship to the land.

This booklet presents a story about how a sense of place progressed on a “little postage stamp of native soil” in southern Adams County, Ohio. This property was the focus of a long-term archaeological field study, which documented a human presence at this location starting some 12,000 years ago. At that time, it is likely that the first Native American people arrived to see the beauty of the Ohio Valley. People continued to gather resources, hunt game, and generally live on this landscape for thousands of years. Archaeological investigations have provided clues on how these people, from the earliest Native Americans to the latest Euro-American farmers, thought about this landscape that they called home.
Uncovering the Archaeological Record and a Sense of Place

Starting in 1991, archaeologists and historians associated with Gray & Pape, Inc. (Gray & Pape), a cultural resources management company, began exploring a large parcel of land called the Greenlee Tract in southern Adams County, Ohio. This parcel rests upon the banks of what the Iroquois tribe once referred to as “the great river” (Ohio River). Located near modern-day Aberdeen, Ohio, the Greenlee Tract currently is owned by the Dayton Power and Light Company (DP&L), which operates a coal-fired power station (J.M. Stuart Generating Station) immediately to the west. In anticipation of a series of planned construction projects and mining operations, DP&L contracted with Gray & Pape to document the history of the Greenlee Tract in accordance with federal preservation laws and regulations (see Protecting the Past through Federal Legislation). Gray & Pape’s work was conducted periodically between 1991 and 2011, and included detailed historical research and archaeological investigations of the property.

Protecting the Past through Federal Legislation

What might the Federal Government and archaeology have in common? Well, as it turns out, quite a lot. The U.S. government has a long history of playing an integral role in how archaeological research is conducted in the United States. In the late nineteenth century, for example, the government sponsored Cyrus Thomas’ landmark 1894 study Report on the Mound Explorations of the Bureau of Ethnology. The study effectively dispelled the myth of a vanished “mound-builders” race, and demonstrated that ancestors of today’s Native Americans were responsible for the thousands of earthen burial mounds and geometric earthworks found in the Midwestern landscape. Today, the government rarely sponsors direct archaeological research, but they continue to be one of the primary stewards of archaeological sites and other historic resources through the implementation of federal legislation. In fact, it was a direct consequence of federal legislation that archaeological investigations were conducted within the Greenlee Tract.

The primary law that guided the Greenlee Tract archaeological work was the National Historic Preservation Act (NHPA). This federal law, which was enacted in 1966, was designed to balance the needs of economic development with historic preservation. As the purpose for the Act, Congress declared that “the spirit and direction of the Nation are founded upon and reflected in its historic heritage.”

A principal goal of the NHPA is to require that any projects with federal involvement (e.g., construction of a new highway) evaluate the potential impacts the project may have on significant historic resources, including archaeological sites. For an archaeological site to be considered “significant” under the NHPA, it needs to be eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP). If any NRHP-eligible site will be impacted or destroyed as a result of the project, several steps must be followed in an attempt to either (1) avoid the site; or (2) document the site prior to its destruction. To ensure that these steps are completed correctly, the government coordinates with several additional parties, including the Advisory Council on Historic Preservation (ACHP), the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO), and other interested public parties.

In Ohio, the SHPO has established a set of phased guidelines that help direct any project that falls under the NHPA. The approach is divided into three phases: (1) Phase I: identify any resources located within a project area; (2) Phase II: determine if a resource is eligible for inclusion in the NRHP; and (3) Phase III: mitigate any adverse impacts the project will have on an NRHP-eligible resource. All three phases were conducted during the Greenlee Tract archaeological investigations.
Archaeological and historic research conducted for the Greenlee Tract found that the site was an ongoing destination for a variety of people, including both Native Americans and Euro-American farmers. Through the years, the tract transformed from a natural wilderness into a “cultural landscape.” A landscape shaped by the collective actions of thousands of people that once hunted white-tailed deer, gathered berries, cleared forests, tilled fields and planted crops, built homes, raised families, buried their dead, and generally lived on this abundant landscape. In this sense, the landscape records these actions and memories and is a canvas upon which segments of past lives are preserved.

Native Americans were the most long-term users of the tract, they first entered the area some 12,000 years ago and continually visited and lived there. (see A timeline for Human Use of the Greenlee Tract). Archaeologists have uncovered an amazing record of these people who visited and occupied the Greenlee Tract. Nearly 200,000 artifacts were collected, including spear points, pottery fragments, remains of ancient meals, and fire-cracked river cobbles used to line cooking pits and warming fires. Evidence of underground storage pits, some filled with edible plant remains such as black walnuts and hickories, were found just below the plowed ground. The remains of post structures that supported lodging, and others that served important civic or ceremonial activity, also were documented.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Archaological Period</th>
<th>Units</th>
<th>Lifestyle and Major Developments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Historical</td>
<td></td>
<td>Adkins County was organized in 1797 and Ohio became a state in 1803. The Greenlee Tract was bought by Abraham Watson in 1804 and a residence was erected in 1819.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A.D. 1800–Present</td>
<td></td>
<td>Much of Ohio is depopulated due to the “Beaver Wars” and used only for hunting. It is eventually repopulated by remnants of displaced tribes (Shawnee, Miami, Delaware, Mingo, etc.). There is only limited use of the Greenlee Tract by Native Americans.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Protophistic AD 1650–1800</td>
<td></td>
<td>Fort Ancient Corn-beans-squash agriculture is practiced by populations living in year-round villages. The Greenlee Tract only is used for hunting and gathering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mississippian AD 1000–1650</td>
<td>Fort Ancient</td>
<td>Corn-beans-squash agriculture is practiced by populations living in year-round villages. The Greenlee Tract only is used for hunting and gathering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Woodland Late AD 800-1000</td>
<td>Intrusive Mound</td>
<td>Populations are living in dispersed camps. The bow and arrow is invented and crop agriculture (corn, beans, squash) grows in importance. The Greenlee Tract only used for hunting and gathering again.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle-Late AD 300-800</td>
<td>Newtown</td>
<td>Year-round, or seasonal, villages with a mixed hunting gathering/ agriculture subsistence base emerge. A large village housing nearly 200 people is established in the Greenlee Tract.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle 100 BC–AD 300</td>
<td>Hopewell</td>
<td>People began to build many more burial mounds and other ceremonial earthworks. Groups are living in dispersed hamlets relying on incipient agriculture and hunting/gathering. A small multi-seasonal hamlet established in the Greenlee Tract.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Early 700-100 BC</td>
<td>Adena</td>
<td>Small dispersed populations are common. Fired-clay pottery use becomes widespread. Elaborate ceremonialism and mortuary behavior initiates, including mound construction. The use of the Greenlee Tract largely was ceremonial with few people living here.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Archaic Late 4000-700 BC</td>
<td></td>
<td>Large population aggregation in seasonal base camps is observed. There is a hunting and gathering lifestyle, but some experimental horticulture does occur. Large base camps were used in the Greenlee Tract, with a focus on bulk-food resource processing (e.g., nuts).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Middle 6500-4000 BC</td>
<td></td>
<td>An unpredictable environment leads to low populations across the state. Hunting and gathering was practiced. The Greenlee Tract was used for small camps.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Early 8000-6500 BC</td>
<td></td>
<td>Small, nomadic populations relying on hunting and gathering are observed. There is limited use of the Greenlee Tract for short-term hunting and gathering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paleoindian 10,000–8000 BC</td>
<td></td>
<td>Small, nomadic hunting/gathering populations occur. There is limited use of the Greenlee Tract for short-term hunting and gathering.</td>
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</tbody>
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An interesting find is that the different groups of people that made use of the Greenlee Tract did not utilize the tract in the same manner through time. For the first 8,000 years, small groups of Native American hunters and gatherers repeatedly visited the property, but only for short periods of time and for a specific purpose. The environment during this time was changing, with the winters growing warmer and the weather becoming drier. By the end of this period, a once-large and plentiful wetland that supported plants, frogs, turtles, geese, ducks, muskrats, etc., had become smaller and lost much of its plant and animal diversity. The landscape at this time was not suitable for long-term occupation and native groups did not call this place home during these early years.

Beginning around 4,000 B.C., and continuing for the next 4,500 years, the environment changed once more. The wetland expanded, the area became moist, and was home to a variety of plant and animals. This environmental change was mirrored by an increase in the intensity of people inhabiting the property. Perhaps for the first time, people stopped looking at the land as merely a source of food, wood, or stone, but instead started to consider this place home. At this point, large base camps that included entire families were established and occupied for many months. As people cleared the property of trees and grasses, erected small houses for shelter, and built cooking pits to roast wild plants, the landscape began to look and feel different to them. The long stays began to promote a sense of connection—a bond—between the people and the land.
As the years went by, the landscape began to change in other ways as well. From thousands of years of people visiting and living in the area, the ground became populated with the remains of past societies—what we call artifacts today. New visitors would have been keenly aware of the previous cultures, as they would have plainly seen or discovered these remains. They likely picked up many of artifacts and wondered how they arrived there. In some instances, they might have collected the most unusual of artifacts and carried them back to camps where they may have served as powerful charms or talismans (see An Ancient Talisman?).

An Ancient Talisman?

Many archaeologists wonder what Native Americans thought, or how they felt, when they encountered ancient artifacts during their daily activities. We know that native groups often reoccupied the same favorable locations for hundreds, or even thousands of years, so, it is likely that they came across evidence of past occupations. For example, the discovery of strange-looking spear points, often made from unique materials, likely would have spurred great curiosity and local debate as to where they came from. Did native groups believe such artifacts were associated with revered ancestors or did they perceive them as modern remains made by some unknown population?

In the Greenlee Tract, archaeologists routinely encountered artifacts from earlier times. Most often, these occurrences appear to have been examples of Native Americans recycling past tools for more modern tasks. In one case, however, evidence suggests that Native Americans recovered a unique, (then) 4,000-year old spear point that they did not recycle into another usable tool. What made this large spear point unique, aside from its age, was the fact that the entire surface had a smooth, glossy look. Such weathering only develops if an artifact is exposed to moving water for a prolonged period, as might be expected if a spear point had been lost in the Ohio River. It is fascinating to observe that no attempts were made to sharpen the artifact’s edge, thus the people that found the spear point never intended to use it as a functioning tool again.

Instead, this glossy artifact was transported back to their settlement where it likely was viewed by camp members as some form of souvenir. Perhaps they felt it to be a “charm stone” or “talisman.” Such items played an integral role in many Native American societies, where it is believed that a shaman (spiritually selected by the tribe) is a messenger between the human world and the spirit world. A talisman might be used for a ceremony, for example, one to bring good luck on a hunt, or to cure an illness.

A possible talisman? This 8,000–10,000 year old spear point was found in a camp site that dated some 4,000 years after this point style ceased to be manufactured by Native Americans. This artifact appears to have been some sort of antique object admired by the Native Americans who found it, and perhaps even honored for its powerful supernatural abilities to aid in hunts.
Around 2,500 years ago, perceptions of the Greenlee Tract again changed. The place that had been home to so many families for so long suddenly was not inhabited at all. Instead, the landscape transitioned from the realm of the domestic to that of the spiritual. For several hundred years, Native Americans largely avoided the property, except to erect a rare, short-lived, circular structure where unknown ceremonies were performed.

Native Americans began living in the area in small groups 500 years later, beginning around 2,000 years ago. The use of the property for ceremonial activity appears to have ended around this time. It is unclear if these new groups were aware of the previous sacred treatment of the land. Did they feel a sense of shared identity with their ancestors, or did they simply view them as archaic events unrelated to their modern life? These questions are difficult to answer, but the archaeological evidence shows that entire families once again started living in the area. It was during this time that pottery first made its appearance in the tract. The ceramic containers found by archaeologists on the Greenlee Tract were used to cook foods in new ways. The rise in the importance of pottery coincides with an increase in the practice of horticulture (plant cultivation for food) and eventually agriculture.

At A.D. 400, dramatic changes in how Native Americans lived occurred in the Ohio Valley. For the first time, people started living in large, circular villages. In the Greenlee Tract, a large village covering almost 5 acres of land was established along the Ohio River. At its peak in population, the village was home to nearly 200 men, women, and children (see Child’s Play). People lived in massive huts that would have provided warmth and protection from the elements throughout the year. At least one large community building or civic center was erected on the edge of the village. An increased reliance on horticulture was documented through the archaeological research, and evidence of hundreds of pits to cook and store food, as well as to dispose of trash, was found.

Sometime after AD 300, Native Americans began to produce a distinctive type of pottery referred to as “check-stamping.” This decoration was made by carving a wooden pattern with a repetitive design shape such as diamonds, squares, or rectangles, and then impressing the paddle upon a still-plastic clay surface to create the geometric design.
Child’s Play

While excavating one of the hundreds of remnant prehistoric pits within the Greenlee Tract, one archaeologist made an unusual discovery. Thrown in the trash pit along with broken fragments of pottery, pieces of broken stone and burnt animal bones, was a tiny, cone-shaped, fired-clay object. Upon close analysis, it was determined that the object was a miniature clay ceramic pot. Referred to as “Annie’s Pot” after the archaeologists who found it, this 1500-year old artifact provided a unique opportunity to study how children may have learned to appreciate and make pottery.

Annie’s pot, which was less than 2 inches in height, was an exact small-scale replica of the type of pots that community members (likely women) were making fabricating during this time. This pot was formed as a simple pinch-pot and contained relatively uneven wall thickness and a dilapidated rim. Several crescent-shaped dimples were observed along portions of the surface, which may represent finger-nail impressions from the maker’s tiny hands.

The transition to a more settled village life was relatively sudden and likely resulted in profound changes and stress not previously experienced by native populations. Where 100 to 200 years ago you had people living in small single-family camps that moved throughout the year, groups were now living in a planned settlement with up to 30 families living side-by-side. We know today that social crowding can lead to instances of stress, conflict, and even physiological changes to the human body.

After 300 years, about AD 700, the well-settled village was abandoned and the Greenlee Tract was now used for hunting and gathering trips by distant native groups. Why the village was abandoned is unclear. Perhaps the requirements of daily life for a large village were too much for the surrounding environment to support. Perhaps people were forced to travel long distances to obtain fire wood for campfires or to repair houses. Perhaps social reasons caused them to abandon the place they had called home for many generations. Was a sense of attachment to the landscape still intact when they left and if so, did they feel sorrow in leaving?

Native groups continued to hunt and gather on this landscape up to the end of the seventeenth century, at which point Native Americans were forced to leave the Ohio Valley. Soon thereafter, they were replaced by a flood of early Euro-American settlers and farmers who eagerly came to start a new life, and develop a new sense of place.