Early Ceramic Occupations along Blackbird Creek: Archaeological Investigations at the Blackbird Creek Site (7NC-J-195D) New Castle County, Delaware

VERSAR, INC.
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ABSTRACT

The archaeological site evaluation and data recovery investigations at the Blackbird Creek site (7NC-J-195D), in southern New Castle County, Delaware, represented a detailed examination of early American Indian occupation of the Delmarva Peninsula. The work was conducted in compliance with federal legislation, employing a work plan designed specifically to mitigate the adverse effects of road construction associated with the upgrading of U.S. Highway 13/State Route 1. Field investigations were conducted in the fall and winter of 1999/2000.

The Blackbird Creek site lay in the Coastal Plain uplands along the southern bank of Blackbird Creek. At the time of the archaeological investigation, the site area consisted of a fallow agricultural field adjacent to a recently demolished historical farmstead (7NC-J-202). Both historical and prehistoric components were present. As a result of site evaluation investigations designed to fully define site boundaries and to identify and characterize artifact concentrations, a group of closely-spaced prehistoric pit features containing Early Woodland ceramic wares were exposed and sampled. Based on these findings, the prehistoric component of the Blackbird Creek site was determined to retain sufficient integrity and information potential to meet eligibility criterion D for listing in the NRHP. The historical component of the site consisted of numerous posthole features and a widespread plow zone artifact scatter. The postholes were not associated with domestic or agricultural structures, but represented fence lines and corrals related to the nearby historical farmstead. The historical component of the site did not exhibit further research value and was found not eligible for the NRHP. Subsequent data recovery investigations thus focused on the prehistoric component, continuing the investigation of the prehistoric pit features, revealing their horizontal patterning, and allowing detailed examination of their contents.

Stratigraphically, deposits at the site consisted of a plow zone overlying culturally sterile subsoil with no intervening cultural deposition. Few diagnostic artifacts were recovered. Projectile points were heavily reworked or damaged, and none could be confidently ascribed to accepted types and used for dating. In contrast, ceramic sherds contained in the pit features, including examples of Marcey Creek and Dames Quarter, along with a series of secure and precise AMS dates with a mathematically derived average of 3002±13 BP, firmly placed the occupation represented by the features at the start of the Early Woodland period.

The pit features exhibited distinctive and consistent shapes: most were round, with straight or steeply sloping sides and flat bottoms. The features were clustered on a terrace overlooking the creek in an area with poorly drained soils, suggesting that they had served a specific purpose. The dates from the features, artifact contents and a regularly spaced, linear distribution, further suggested that they were related temporally and functionally. Possible uses were reviewed in analyses based on the form and contents of the features themselves, comparative studies of similar features in other archaeological contexts, and ethnographic and ethnohistorical descriptions of various activities involving similar excavated pits. While an entirely convincing explanation was not found, evidence suggested that the features were related to the processing of natural resources, in particular the extraction of oils from nuts or fish. Several lines of evidence, including the creek terrace location, the poor drainage characteristics of the soils, and minor but systematic variations in the forms of the pits,
suggested that an organized process of rendering oil from fish harvested seasonally from the creek was a likely interpretation.
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