



The Archeological Campaign of 1937: Cornish Site

(Article begins on page 2 below.)

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Article Summary: This is one of a series of 1937 archeological site reports that can be accessed individually. The series includes: [Ashland Site](#), [Pawnee Creek Site](#), [Cornish Site](#), [Fontenelle Forest Site](#), [North Plattsmouth Site](#), [Majors Site](#), [Williams Site](#), [Heywood Site](#), [Osborne Site](#), [Whitten Site](#), [Morehead Site](#), [Indian Cave](#), [McKissick Site](#), [Conclusion](#).

Cataloging Information:

Photographs / Images: restored pots; ground plan of house 1; incised shell-tempered pottery



PLATE IX

1. Restored pot, Cornish Site. Height, 5 inches; greatest diameter, $5\frac{3}{4}$ inches.
2. Restored pot, Cornish Site. Height, about $10\frac{3}{4}$ inches; greatest diameter, $10\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

CORNISH SITE

Near Louisville the Platte River flows in a general easterly direction between high bluffs, on the tops of some of which are the remains of earth lodges. One of these, evident on the surface by reason of a large depression approximately 60 feet in diameter, was excavated by the Survey. Standing on the point of a ridge projecting toward the river from the general uplands, it commanded a sweeping view of the valley in both directions. The sites of other lodges, no longer marked by depressions, are present on this and adjacent ridges.

The first reference to this site appeared after a visit here in 1921 by A. M. Brooking, Curator of the Hastings Museum, and J. E. Wallace. In reference to the house excavated by the Survey Mr. Brooking says;

On the first ridge west of "Hickory Lodge" is a depression marking a house site at least sixty-five feet in diameter. We dug down in the center of it but were not able to uncover the fireplace in the limited time at our disposal. We found charcoal scattered through the dirt to a depth of six feet.²³

22. See Strong, 1935, p. 266, for a discussion of the problem of Nebraska Culture burials.

23. Brooking, 1921, p. 39.

At that time Mr. Brooking and Mr. Wallace, according to the former's report, also dug in a house site on the north slope of a ridge to the west, in which they encountered the fireplace at a depth of seven feet beneath the surface. From two cache-pits excavated several artifacts, including pottery fragments, were recovered.²⁴

The excavation of 1937 revealed a structure built in a square pit with dimensions of approximately 37 feet and a maximum depth of 46 inches beneath the surface at the north wall (Figure 5). Situated as it was on a south slope, the depth to the level floor decreased to the south. An upper stratum of rich black humus 26 inches thick at the center and thinning toward the periphery of the pit represented the accumulation of soil since the collapse of the house. Beneath this the fill, consisting of a light sandy clay containing flecks of charcoal and burned earth, included the roof covering and what materials washed in from the edges of the pit before vegetation began to produce the humus zone. This lower stratum, unlike the barren humus layer above, produced occasional pottery fragments and other cultural materials. Immediately west of the fireplace and extending down through the fill from the surface to within 2 inches of the house floor was a small straight-sided pit, presumably the one mentioned by Brooking in the above quotation. Its base was at a depth of 43 inches beneath the surface at that point. The relatively clean-appearing fill of the house pit was displaced, within 6 inches of the floor, by quantities of red-burned earth and charcoal. Immediately upon the hard-packed floor beneath, and on the floor near the wall, lay masses of earth which had been subjected to intense heat prior to their final deposition. Along the south wall near the entrance deposits of burned clay impressed with grass were as much as 8 inches thick. At this point they were underlaid by a layer of clean, unburned yellow soil which had apparently slumped onto

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 37-39.

the floor from the pit wall before fire caused the collapse of the roof structure.

The determination of the outlines of the pit was facilitated by the fact that the walls, especially that to the east, were burned and smoke-blackened. They were vertical throughout. Around the margin of the pit were posts, either just inside the walls or set back into them; the holes dug to receive them averaged about 7 inches in diameter and about 12 inches in depth. Charred remnants were often found, most frequently above the floor in those moulds set back into the pit walls. A few additional posts just inside this outer row perhaps were used as braces, for their arrangement seems too haphazard to indicate their use as the main outside roof supports. Three moulds between the center of the house and each corner presumably mark the position of upright roof supports, whose arrangement and close proximity to the corners present a puzzling problem as to the roof structure. The use of long poles from the edges to the center of the house, as described for the historic plains Indians, seems to be ruled out by the positions of the supports. An alternative suggestion is that these posts supported two sets of beams, which in turn supported the inner ends of poles whose outer ends rested on the wall beams, and that the roof was finished with cribbing. Admittedly speculative, only some such explanation would seem to account for the conditions present.

Situated in the exact center of the floor, the fireplace was a shallow circular depression 36 inches in diameter containing 2 inches of ashes; beneath it the soil was burned red for a depth of 4 to 5 inches. Beneath the floor were three small pits with nearly vertical sides, all excavated near the house walls. The entrance passage, flanked by post moulds like those around the walls of the house proper, sloped gradually toward the surface to the south for a distance of 18 feet.

Despite a general paucity of specimens recovered, two rather unusual finds were made. On the floor near the southeast corner of the house was a small cord-rough-

ened pot, in fragmentary condition but complete except for a very small piece of the rim (Plate IX, 1). * That it was intact at the time it was lost or discarded was witnessed by the fact that the fragments preserved the form of the vessel in the soil surrounding them. Not far from the north wall in the fill, six inches above the floor, 29 long plano-convex scrapers of gray chert lay in a compact bundle. It is obvious from their position when found that at the time of their deposition they were in a container which probably had been either suspended on a post or rafter or lying on the roof of the lodge.

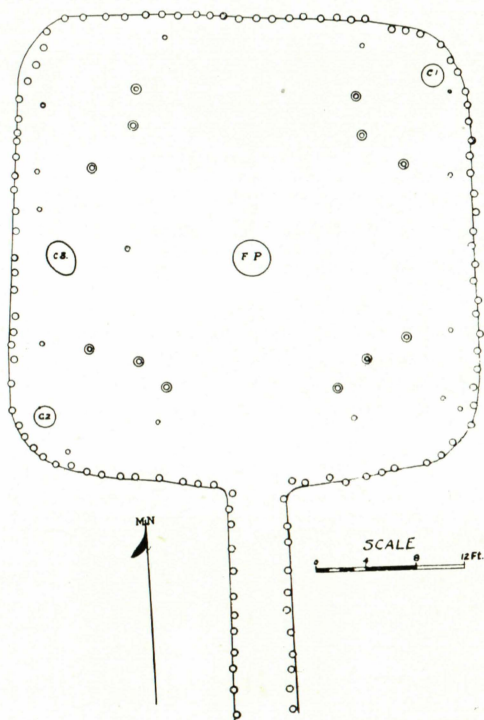


FIGURE 5. Ground plan of House 1, Cornish Site. O, post moulds; double circles, center post moulds; C1-C3, cache-pits; F. P., fireplace;, edge of house pit.

* PLATE IX: See Frontispiece.

Pottery was not recovered in great abundance in the excavation of this site. In addition to a single complete pot there are a total of 537 sherds, of which 48 are fragments of rim, and 489 are from the bodies of vessels. The characteristic form is illustrated by the complete pot, which is globular, with a relatively low flaring rim and paired strap handles, but it is probable that a rather flattened body is also represented. With the exception of 27 sherds containing shell fragments, sand and crushed stone are the exclusive tempering materials of the paste, which is usually compact and somewhat flaky. Surfaces are gray or brown and, in approximately equal proportions, are smooth or cord-roughened. Cord-roughened vessels, however, were almost invariably well smoothed while the clay was still wet. The rims are usually direct and flaring, with the lip in a few instances thickened and notched and in one case decorated with punctations, but a few vessels had collared rims which were either undecorated or were simply notched at the lower margin of the collar (Plate IX, 2). These latter rims are like those

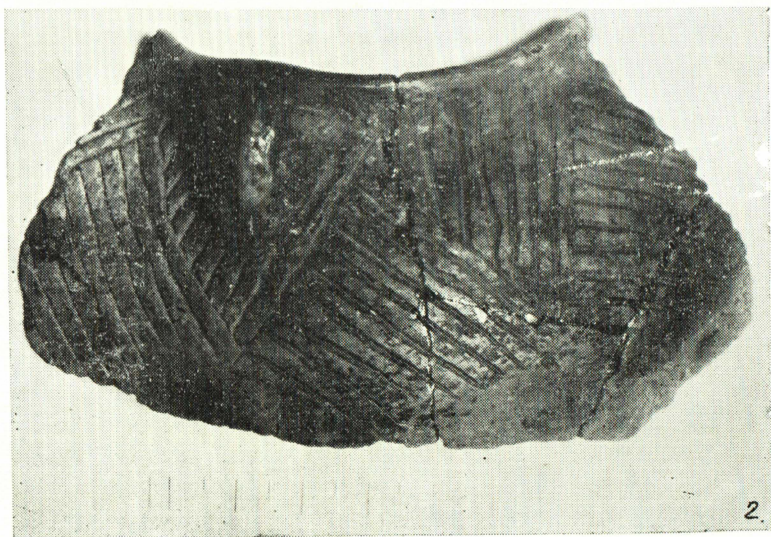


PLATE VIII—2

2. Incised shell-tempered pottery, Cornish Site.

considered typical of the ceramic pattern of the Upper Republican aspect.²⁵

Loop handles are associated with both direct and collared rims, while the single lug found (a vertically perforated type) was applied to a collared rim (Plate X, i, e.). Body decoration, consisting of incised rectilinear designs on the shoulder area, is fairly common here, as evidenced by its presence on 50 sherds from several vessels. The lines, usually combined in groups to form triangular elements, are deep V-shaped incisions. Rather unexpectedly, this shoulder decoration is combined with a collared rim on at least two vessels as well as with a low inconspicuous rim, which at least in some instances is equipped with loop handles (Plates VIII, 2; IX, 2).

Two correlations between various traits should be noted before we leave the subject of pottery, namely, the invariably smooth surface of shell-tempered pottery, and the application of shoulder decoration to smooth-surfaced vessels only. Incising occurs, however, on both grit and shell-tempered sherds.

With the exception of one extremely crude specimen, all of the five arrow points are triangular and side-notched, one of them with four side notches and a basal notch. The single exception was a small roughly fashioned unnotched triangular point slightly less than an inch in length. The others, all skillfully chipped, were from $1\frac{1}{8}$ to $1\frac{7}{8}$ inches long. By far the most numerous of chipped stone artifacts are long narrow plano-convex scrapers of gray chert with a longitudinal keel formed by skillful flaking from both edges. The occurrence of a deposit of 29 of these in the house fill has been mentioned above. As a rule, although one end tends to be rounded while the other is pointed (Plate I, 2, a), the rounded ends do not bear the type of chipping characteristic of the common end scraper, hence these are appar-

25. Wedel, 1935; Strong, 1935.

ently either side scrapers or unfinished end scrapers—probably the former. A cache of very similar objects was found by the Survey during excavations near Minneapolis, Kansas, in 1934.²⁶

In addition, as accidental inclusions in the fill, there were recovered two similar artifacts and three end scrapers manufactured by the same general method. Other chipped objects consist of fragments of thin elliptical blades, a small celt-shaped implement, and flakes, many of them unusually large, retouched on one or more edges. The majority of the 23 sandstone abraders are irregular fragments, bearing grooves or grinding surfaces of various sorts; only four are fragments with rectangular cross-sections, probably from boat-shaped forms. The grooves are occasionally of a nature to suggest their use for smoothing straight shafts, but most often they are irregular as if from use in sharpening pointed objects. A single roughly bun-shaped quartzite object has given service as both a pecking and a rubbing stone. Eight small fragments of hematite have been worked on, but in no case has there been any attempt at shaping, so the suggestion that the knife marks are the result of material having been removed for paint seems well founded.

Together with the several fragmentary scapula hoes scattered about on the house floor, parts of three awls complete the scanty list of bone artifacts. These awls are made from sections of bone worked down to give them rectangular or round cross sections; on the one nearly complete specimen the butt is composed of a part of the joint. Those awls which occurred on the floor, as well as all the hoes, were well burned.

All mussel shells occurring within this lodge site were unworked with the probable exception of one which appears to be somewhat worn on the edge and whose heavier end is roughly notched, perhaps to permit the attachment of a handle.

26. Wedel, 1935, pp. 220, 231.

The two pipes among the specimens collected are of two totally different types, both as to materials and form. The first, made from apparently shell-tempered pottery clay, is of elbow type with a strikingly modern appearance (Plate X, 2, f). Both stem and bowl are rectangular in cross-section and join at an angle only slightly greater than 90 degrees. The stem, although longer, is considerably smaller than the bowl. The total length of the specimen is 2 1/16 inches, the total height is 1 1/18 inches. The other pipe, from which the bowl has unfortunately been broken, is of the projecting stem variety and is made of a soft limestone (Plate X, 2, g). The holes in both the stem and the bowl are made by conical boring. It is especially regrettable that this specimen is incomplete because the remnants of the bowl attachment suggest it may have been a disc type, which, although common in certain Nebraska sites belonging to the post-contact period,²⁷ is rare or lacking in pre-contact complexes.

Evidence on the subject of products used for food is sketchy. Very few animal bones were found and these represented only a few mammalian forms and practically no birds or fish. A few mussel shells, several of them neatly stacked near the west wall, indicate that the river was exploited at least to some extent for food. Vegetal species consist of corn, beans and walnuts, all in a charred condition.

This lodge site, one of several scattered loosely over the bluffs bordering the Platte River in this vicinity, was inhabited by Indians whose culture was basically similar to that of other groups whose remains have been investigated in eastern Nebraska. The rectangular, semi-subterranean earth-lodge in which they lived, their techniques of manufacturing pottery and other artifacts, and their subsistence pattern combine to relate them to

27. Hill and Wedel, 1936, p. 47.
Dunlevy, 1936.

the Nebraska aspect sites previously worked. On the other hand, certain differences in the ceramics are evident between this manifestation and most of those of the Nebraska aspect thus far defined. As additional work is done in such sites, it becomes increasingly apparent that the Nebraska Culture (at one time seemingly considered a uniform cultural entity) includes a number of variants, which appear, however, to be closely related. The number of these variants, their exact definition, and their significance in the cultural history of the region are problems whose solutions must await much more excavation, for thus far the work done has served mainly to complicate the simple picture which seemed to be emerging with the early work of Gilder in a rather restricted area.



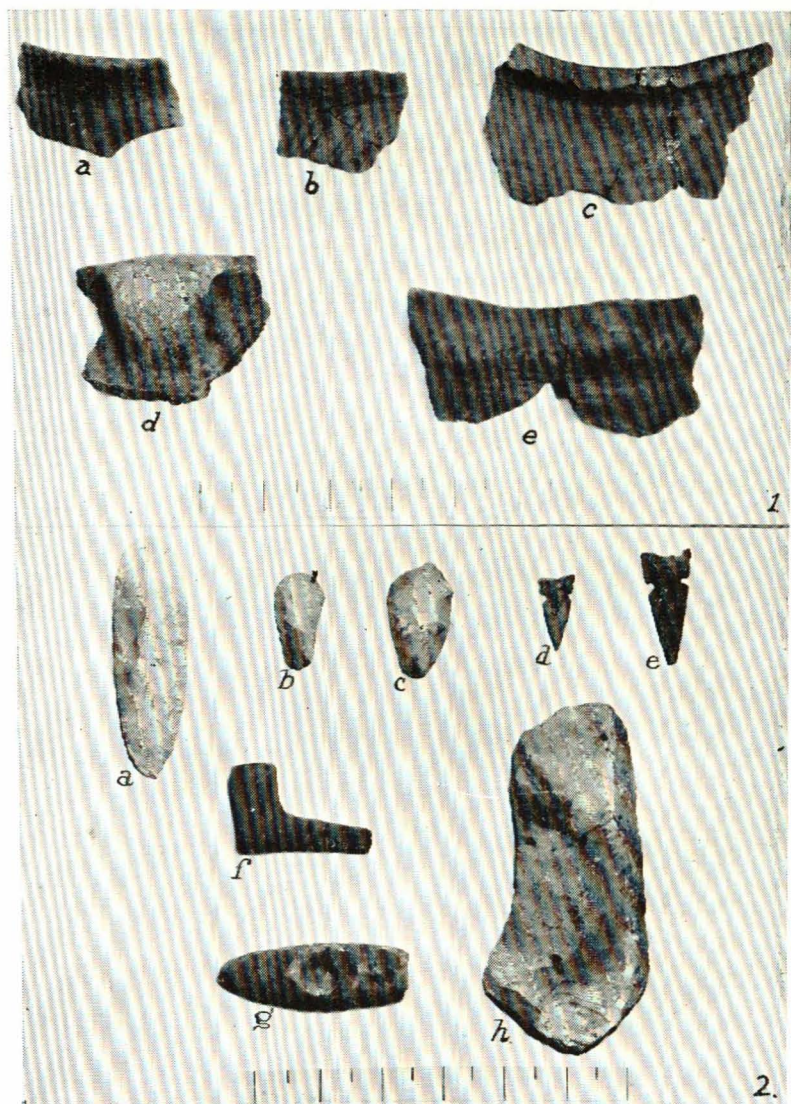


PLATE X

1. Rim sherds, Cornish Site.
2. Stone and pottery artifacts, Cornish Site. a-c, end scrapers; d-e, projectile points; f, pottery pipe; g, limestone pipe; h, flint scraper.