



The Archeological Campaign of 1937: Majors Site

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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: ground plan of House 1, restored pot, pottery pipes, stone and bone artifacts

MAJORS SITE

After the completion of its work near Plattsmouth the Survey shifted its scene of operations well down the river to the vicinity of Peru, where it was known that the remains of Indian occupation are abundant. Interest in this region was especially keen because of Sterns' report that here he had partially excavated houses in which the predominant pottery was a shell-tempered, incised ware like that occurring rather rarely in Nebraska aspect sites to the north.⁴³ Hence it was felt that investigation here might cast some light on the contacts responsible for the introduction of such apparently foreign elements into the otherwise rather homogeneous components thus far known along the river.

A surface survey and the study of local collections revealed that the area had been occupied (probably at different times) by people of several different cultures. Sites were found which yielded pottery of apparently two Nebraska aspect variants, and in various collections were observed surface finds consisting of grooved axes (with few exceptions absent from excavated Nebraska sites), large stemmed projectile points, and pottery sherds of a Woodland-like character. Especially northwest of Peru numerous depressions, the remains of former earth lodges, are located both on the bluff tops and on the slopes along several tributaries to the Missouri River. The presence of these pits has been long known. Fowke, describing a survey made by him about 1914, states:

"On various hills in the vicinity of Peru are lodge-sites, some of them circular, some rectangular, some with straight sides and rounded corners. Most of them have been dug in at random; in every case after a certain depth of accumulated earth and trash is passed through, there is a layer of clay which formed the roof, and beneath this the hard floor

43. Strong, 1935, p. 256.

with fireplace usually in the center but sometimes a little toward one side."⁴⁴

As far as we know, Fowke carried on no excavation, and his investigation was evidently restricted to the observation of surface features and to conversations with local collectors. The only systematic excavation work appears to have been that of Sterns noted above.

Northwest of Peru the Missouri River, which flows in a general southeasterly direction, at some time in the past made a wide bend to the west, where, flowing directly against the bluffs, it cut deeply into them. More recently, cutting a more direct channel, it has deserted the old and now flows at least two miles farther east, leaving a broad expanse of cultivable bottom land in a deep indentation into the bordering bluffs. Indian habitation sites are especially numerous along the ridges immediately south of the ancient bend.

One of these sites, selected by the Survey for excavation, was near the northern point of a north-south ridge abutting on the bottom lands, and overlooking on the east the narrow valley of Buck Creek. Judging from the surface appearance of this pit, the prospects of a satisfactory investigation seemed poor indeed, for almost the entire area was covered with pits and the piles of earth removed from them. We were informed that Sterns had excavated the southwestern corner, and it appeared that after his departure this was a favorite spot for the activities of collectors. Our suspicion that this was one of the lodge sites in which Sterns reported finding shell-tempered, incised pottery determined us, nevertheless, to salvage whatever sources remained.

The results fully justified this decision, for upon excavation it was found that, owing to the fact that the previous digging had been on the whole rather shallow, it was possible to ascertain nearly all the details of the house construction and to recover, not an abundant, but a fair sample of artifacts. A large proportion of the floor

44. Fowke, 1922, p. 156.

area was intact and, while the fireplace had been completely destroyed, its position was rather definitely established by the distribution of the burned earth and ashes in the digger's pit. In only one instance had any of the seven sub-floor cache-pits been found, and even then the digging was abandoned well before the bottom was reached. Measurements of the surface depression, admittedly based on estimates of the boundaries before their disturbance, gave a diameter of approximately 60 feet and a maximum depth of about 30 inches.

Because of its disturbed condition, this site was excavated by a procedure different from the method usually employed. A five-foot trench was first run along the north wall of the house, the position of all features was plotted on the ground plan, and excavation was then carried south along the entire face of the trench, the dirt being thrown back into the area already worked. The pit in which the lodge was constructed was approximately 40 feet square with rounding corners and vertical walls. From 6 inches to a foot inside the walls were upright posts set at intervals of from 20 to 40 inches; and set in from each corner, 10 to 11 feet toward the center, was a larger upright post. Three of these center posts and a large number of the outer series were marked by quantities of charcoal. The fireplace, although it had been destroyed by former digging, occupied the approximate center of the floor, which sloped up slightly toward the walls. The covered entrance passage sloped gradually to the surface from the south wall for a distance of 24 feet. Several of the posts along its walls were also charred.

Evidences that the structure had burned included, in addition to the large quantity of charcoal in many of the post moulds, areas of burned floor, charred timbers above the floor, and near the entrance a section of the earth covering which had been subjected to intense heat. Furthermore, the conditions found in several of the seven cache-pits confirm this conclusion, for where it appeared the pit had remained open until after the aban-

donment of the house, the walls were burned, and in a few instances charred roof material lay in them.

The cache-pits were rather symmetrically placed within the house, two along each of the side walls, one on each side of the entrance, and one opposite the entrance near the rear wall, and as the table indicates, were fairly uniform in size. In the case of Number 6 the collapsing of the top made the exact diameter uncertain. With the sole exception of Number 1, which was filled

DIMENSIONS OF CACHE-PITS

Cache-pit No.	Top diameter	Bottom diameter	Depth
1	38 inches	66 inches	66 inches
2	36 inches	46 inches	66 inches
3	44 inches	48 inches	63 inches
4	44 inches	48 inches	61 inches
5	42 inches	52 inches	70 inches
6	42 (?) inches	46 inches	63 inches
7	48 inches	57 inches	55 inches

to the top with refuse-laden soil, the pits contained for most of their depth a fairly clean, light fill lying over only a few inches of detritus. In each instance the walls were burned red down to this lower stratum, and in Numbers 2 and 4 charred poles and grass from the roof lay just above it, indicating that the pits were empty except for a small amount of refuse until the burning of the house. Artifacts, rather few in number, were almost exclusively confined to the fill near the pit floor. Although a few pottery sherds and stone artifacts were recovered here, the main finds consisted of scapula hoes, at least one and usually several of which lay on the floor of all but two pits.

The occurrence within this house of a few human bones, none of which appears to have been burned or cut, should be noted. A lower jaw fragment lay among sherds and other debris in a small pocket beneath the floor in the northeast corner, and two finger bones were found in the fill above the floor.

The determination of the ceramic pattern here is dependent upon the comparatively small collection of 805 sherds, 60 of which are rim fragments. Of this number, 646, or slightly less than 80 per cent, are tempered with shell, while the remainder contain sand or crushed granite. The rather frequent sherds containing both materials were tabulated according to the predominating aplastic. Regardless of the tempering present, the structure is flaky; and the color range of gray to light buff, with a grayish brown predominating, is equally characteristic of both varieties. Likewise, the use of a cord-wrapped paddle on the exterior surface is not confined to one or the other, although it occurs on a larger proportion of

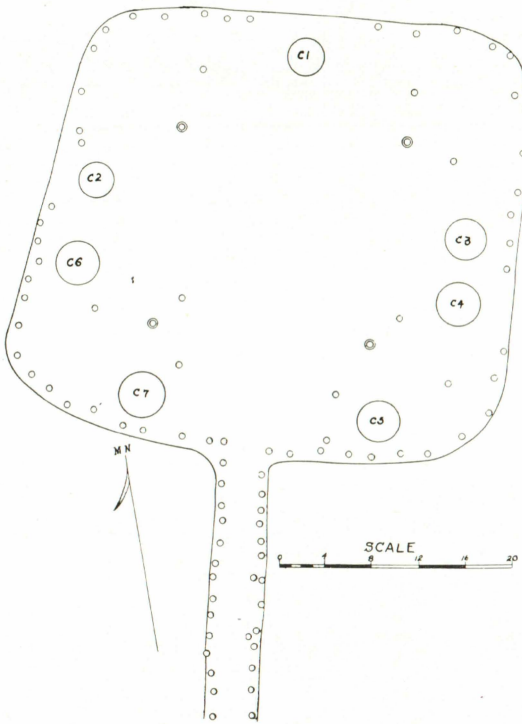


FIGURE 8. Ground plan of House 1, Majors Site. O, post moulds; double circles, center post moulds; C1-C7, cache-pits;, edge of house pit.

the grit-tempered sherds—22 per cent as compared with less than 7 per cent on shell-tempered pottery. A total of 68 sherds, all except five of which are shell-tempered, provide evidence for the decorating of the shoulder area, usually with rather deep V-shaped incisions. This number of sherds, owing to the large area of a decorated pot which is plain, does not give an accurate picture of the proportion of vessels which were thus ornamented. The designs, all of which occur on smooth-surfaced vessels, are parallel diagonal lines oppositely placed to form triangular elements. Characteristically the rims are somewhat flaring and of moderate height, and have a rounding undecorated lip, although there are exceptions to this rule. Occasionally the rim is high and the lip is notched, and in two instances there is a slight narrow collar on the rim exterior; these variations are restricted to the grit-tempered ware. Unfortunately, most of the sherds are too small to cast much light on the body shape, but the one restored pot and a large fragment indicate both a globular and a flattened globular body. Angular shoulders and pointed bases seem to be lacking. The seven loop handles, usually broad and strap-like, invariably extend from the lip to the body below the neck, where (at least in some cases) they are riveted through the wall of the vessel. On a single rim the lip has been drawn out to a small lug-like point, and three rims, one decorated with incised lines, indicate the presence of bowls.

On the whole the pottery here is not strikingly different from much of that previously found in various Nebraska aspect components, and the sole difference between it and many of them is in the proportion of various elements found. While the proportion of shell tempering is higher than in any Nebraska aspect component hitherto reported, this complex is probably, like them, one into which that trait as well as other probably middle Mississippi elements have been introduced, rather than the

postulated culture whose influence was responsible for their presence.

The brief list of chipped flint artifacts includes five projectile points, four of which are the usual small triangular notched and unnotched variety and one of which is a broken, heavy side-notched specimen; eleven end scrapers ranging from short and broad to long and narrow, a very few flake knives and fragments of elliptical scrapers, and numerous retouched flakes. The collection of ground stone objects is likewise rather limited. Two diorite celts, pecked and ground over their entire surfaces, are both relatively long and narrow, the larger measuring $7\frac{1}{2}$ inches in length by 3 inches in greatest width, and the smaller $4\frac{3}{4}$ inches by $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches. The former, elliptical in cross-section, tapers from the blade to the butt, while the latter is rectanguloid in both respects. Both deep grooves and broad concave surfaces characterize the fairly numerous sandstone fragments as well as the fewer pieces of pumice, and one surface of an irregular limestone fragment bears a circular pit $1\frac{1}{4}$ inches in diameter. The list is completed by a number of pebble pecking stones, a few of which have flattened surfaces from grinding, a few larger stones with worn surfaces which are probably mealing stones, and a number of small fragments of hematite from which portions have been scraped.

The shoulder blade of the bison was by far the most commonly utilized material for the manufacture of bone implements; in fact, except for a few awls made from sections of deer metapodials and the ulna of the dog or wolf, artifacts of no other material were found. Ten relatively complete specimens, in addition to a number more fragmentary, are the usual variety of hoe, with the glenoid border of the joint worn as if by a handle, and with the edges notched near the blade. Four are perforated near broken edges, apparently representing repair on split specimens. There are several knives cut from scapulas, and a broad blade, which is stemmed presum-

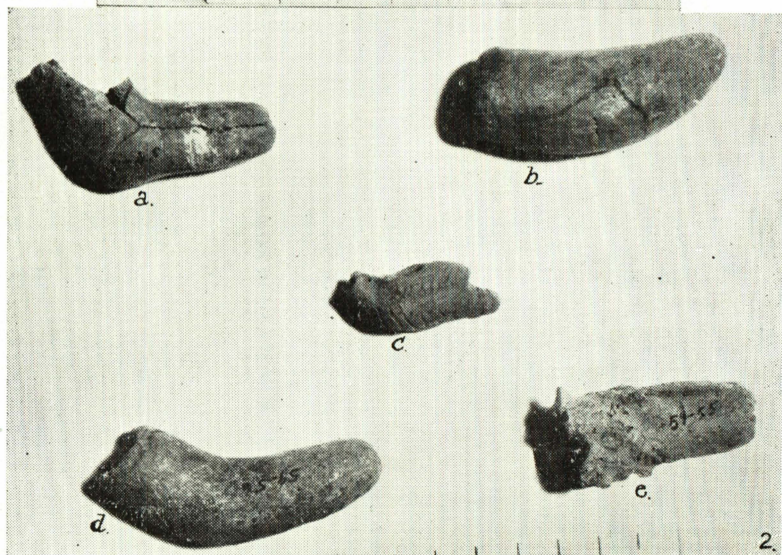


PLATE XVII

1. Restored pot, House 1, Majors Site. Height, $10\frac{1}{4}$ inches; greatest diameter, 11 inches.
2. Pottery pipes, House 1, Majors Site.

ably to facilitate the attachment of a handle, was possibly used as a hoe (Plate XVIII, 2, b).

The tobacco pipes from this house, although of a variety of forms, were made exclusively of pottery clay, the visible tempering of which, curiously enough in view of the high percentage of shell in the pottery vessels, is invariably grit. Of the five specimens recovered, four represent the gradations in range from a straight tubular to an angular elbow form. The first, which is covered over half its length by crude nodes apparently made by pinching the wet clay between the fingers, has an almost imperceptible curve; it increases uniformly in diameter throughout its length of $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches from the stem to the rim of the bowl (Plate XVII, 2, e). The next specimen (Plate XVII, 2, b), $3\frac{1}{4}$ inches long, is curved from end to end, while on the third the bowl is at an angle of about 30 degrees from the stem (Plate XVII, 2, d). With its bowl at an angle of 80 degrees from the stem, the last pipe is a good example of the obtuse-angled elbow variety (Plate XVII, 2, a). The bowls of the three last contain a heavy deposit of carbon as a result of long-continued use. A small incised bird effigy pipe, the head of which is broken, is illustrated in Plate XVII, 2, c.

Although it was reported to us that at least one ornament of mussel shell was previously removed from the site of our excavation, none of the fairly numerous shells in our collection show any evidence of work. They do indicate, however, that these products of the river were gathered presumably for food, further evidences of which include rather numerous fish and mammal bones and, in the vegetable class, a few kernels of corn only.

A short time was devoted to trenching the point north of the lodge-site, where scattered bones were found in a large pit 33 inches deep. No long bones were present, and the skeletal material, distributed rather uniformly in the soil from the surface to the floor of the pit, consisted only of fragments of the skulls, ribs, pa-

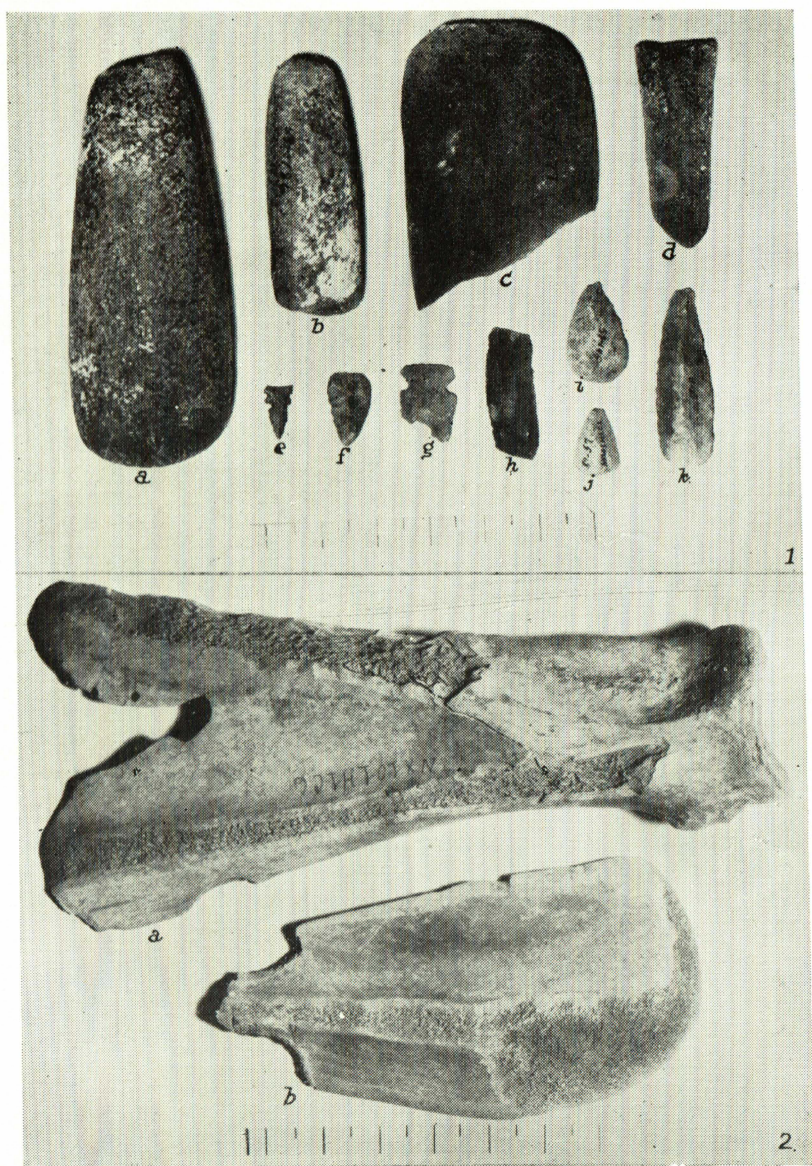


PLATE XVIII

Stone and bone artifacts, House 1, Majors Site.

1. a-b, ground celts; c-d, sandstone abraders; e-g, projectile points; h, flake knife; i-k, end scrapers.
2. a, scapula hoe; scapula implement.

tellae, vertebrae, clavicles, and other small bones of probably two individuals, an adult and an infant. Also included in the fill were occasionally very small sherds and beads of a peculiar type. These latter have been found at various points in the state. A few of them occurred among thousands of disc beads in three ossuary pits on the Republican River, two were found in as many burial sites at the Wiseman site in Cedar County,⁴⁵ Strong figures three whose provenience is not given,⁴⁶ and Gilder reports a string of them from a burial near Rulo.⁴⁷ These latter are reported to have been identified as *Anculosa Praerosa* (Say) existing in the Ohio River drainage and not found west of the Mississippi River.⁴⁸ These small brachiopods were perforated for stringing by grinding through one side, thus permitting a cord to be passed through both the natural and the artificial apertures.
