



The Archeological Survey of 1937: Pawnee Creek 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, flint artifacts

PAWNEE CREEK SITE

Pawnee Creek flows into the Platte River from the south in an area of high, rather rugged hills in which terraces are of rather limited extent. Timber is abundant here, on the bluff tops as well as in the bottoms and draws, providing fuel, building materials, and shelter for the well protected lodges on the lower lands. Houses are also present, however, on the exposed summits of the hills, although none of these was investigated. The

two dwelling sites excavated were on the first terraces on opposite banks of Pawnee Creek near where it enters the Platte River bottoms. Burial grounds seem to have been confined to the highlands, where one slab-covered pit was uncovered.

According to local information the early white settlers here reported that the Pawnee had a camp on the terrace west of Pawnee Creek, and the land survey of 1856 locates a village on the river bank about 550 feet above the mouth of the creek. While the map drawn at the time of the survey labels this a Pawnee village, the meander notes merely call it an "Indian Village lately deserted". What is here referred to was probably one of the many temporary camps composed of tipis established by the various Nebraska tribes during the time when they were much on the move. Such occupation was probably very brief, for surface material was rare here. Furthermore, no objects of white manufacture were recovered except (near the surface east of House 1) some fragments of glass and china, all of which are probably too recent to have been left by Indians, and all the aboriginal remains excavated appeared to be pre-contact.

Houses

If our excavations revealed a fair sample, the Indians who were settled here at one time lived in rectangular earth lodges with four center posts, a central fireplace, and an entrance passage. House 1, which stood on the terrace west of Pawnee Creek, was built in a straight-sided pit 23 feet square dug to an average depth of 2 feet. Around the edges of the pit floor and sometimes set back into the wall were relatively small shallow post moulds, at least some of which leaned toward the center of the pit. From 1 to 2 feet within this line were set larger and deeper posts, absent only inside the front house wall. On the basis of the evidence it is not possible to state whether these were the main outside roof supports or merely brace posts; if the former, some

posts must have existed originally which could not be seen at the time of excavation. Near each of the center posts was an extra mould which probably marks the position of a brace. The central fireplace, a shallow circular depression 3 feet in diameter, contained 3 to 4 inches of ashes and was underlaid by 2 to 4 inches of burned earth. The covered entrance extended 9 feet to the east. Burned material on the floor and the charred remnants of a number of posts indicate that at least part of the destruction of the building was the result of fire. The fill in three small sub-floor pits, as well as that above the floor, yielded fairly numerous artifacts.

House 2 had been badly mutilated by a ditch dug to drain a small pond, so that the information we have as to its structural details is not complete. Nevertheless a few post moulds, most of them charred, on three sides indicate a pit about 25 feet square and 18 to 20 inches deep. The entrance passage extended about 11 feet in a southerly direction. Four center posts formed a quadrangle with dimensions of 8 to 9 feet, in the center of which a slight depression 20 inches in diameter marked the position of the fireplace, beneath which the soil was burned red for a depth of 2 inches.

Beneath the floor of this dwelling the occupants had excavated eight pits for storage purposes, all of them between the walls and the square formed by the four center posts. Varying considerably in size and depth, they were in general similar in form; they usually expanded somewhat from top to bottom. In five instances the contents had evidently burned, for the sides and floor were burned red, and charcoal was occasionally present on the floor. On the floor of Cache-pit 1, which was only 17 inches deep, lay a quantity of charred corn cobs. Other cultural materials were recovered in moderate quantities from the various pits. Some time after the abandonment of the house and its filling with earth, two pits, one only 30 inches deep and the other over 6 feet deep, were dug into it, presumably for storage. The excava-

tion of one of them had destroyed the upper part of a cache-pit dug during the time the house was in use. Neither of these later pits contained anything other than a few scraps of bone and stone, consequently we have no clue as to the identity of the people who used them.

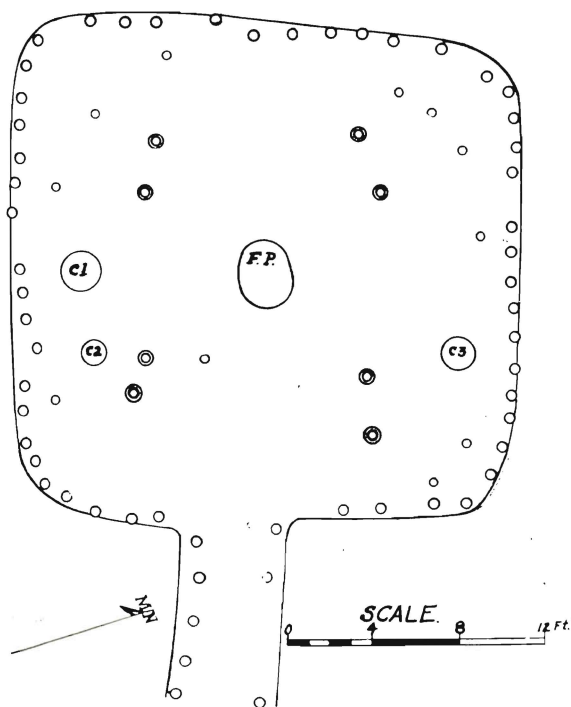


FIGURE 4. Ground plan of House 1, Pawnee Creek Site. O, post moulds; double circles, center post moulds; C1-C3, cache-pits; F. P., fireplace; , edge of house pit.

Artifacts

The pottery recovered from these two lodge-sites is like that described from Houses 1, 2 and 4 of the Ashland Site in form, tempering material, paste qualities, surface treatment, and decorative technique, except that bowl forms, found rarely at the the latter site, seem to be ab-

sent and body decoration occurs less frequently. Only two body sherds bearing incised designs were observed. While the rim forms are identical, there is a slightly greater frequency here of those with a slight collar. Shell tempering, as at Ashland, is rare and sand and gravel are the main tempering agencies. Cord marks, usually well rubbed out, are occasionally heavy and deeply impressed without subsequent smoothing. That the cook frequently let the kettle boil dry is indicated by the common occurrence of a heavy deposit of carbonized material on the vessel interior, and occasionally this same material on the outside indicates that the contents sometimes boiled over the rim of the pot.

As is commonly true in Nebraska aspect components, pottery was occasionally used as a medium for other than vessel forms. In a cache-pit in House 2 were found fragments of the bowl of an elbow pipe and from House 2 was recovered a crudely executed figurine, both of lightly fired pottery clay. The latter object, ovoid in outline and relatively thin in cross-section, bears on its upper half the representation of a human face. The nose is modeled in relief, the eyes are light punctate marks, and a crude incision probably is the mouth; slight constrictions on opposite edges may indicate the neck. Near the left eye a hole has been punched completely through the object.

Chipped stone work, while fairly abundant, is not remarkable for standardization. Arrow points, although always roughly triangular, were not made to any fixed pattern, but varied considerably in fineness of chipping and size, lengths ranging from $\frac{7}{8}$ inch to 2 inches. Both notched and unnotched forms are present, the latter of which include the larger specimens. Plano-convex end scrapers are likewise variable in size and form, although they are consistent in being worked on only one face, which in most instances is characterized by a longitudinal keel. Other chipped flint forms consist of roughly oval or leaf-shaped blades, usually thin and relatively well



PLATE VIII—1

1. Flint artifacts, Pawnee Creek Site. a-c, projectile points; d-e, end scrapers; f-h, j-k, knives; i, celt.

worked; several thick, roughly flaked, celt-shaped implements, and knives of long thin flakes with retouched edges. Unshaped flakes were frequently used as knives after being slightly worked on one or more edges.

By far the most numerous among the objects of ground stone are the abraders of Dakota sandstone. A few are fragments of boat-shaped specimens with a longitudinal groove intended for use in pairs as arrowshaft smoothers, or with several irregular grooves. More numerous, however, are unshaped fragments with grooves and depressions of all sizes and shapes, or relatively large surfaces exhibiting the results of abrading. These objects were obviously used for grinding a wide variety of artifacts. Other shaped implements of stone were not found, but rather large numbers of waterworn pebbles have been used as pecking stones, and in some instances flattened surfaces point to their use also as rubbing stones. The use of a red paint is suggested by the pres-

ence of numerous hematite fragments bearing knife marks of a sort which would result from scraping the stone.

Worked bone and antler are represented by but four specimens. One, a fragment, proves that the scapula hoe was in use, while the other three consist of two antler cylinders of the type very common in this area and a fragment of antler showing the knife marks incident to cutting off a section.

Specific evidence on the food used by the Indians at this place is rare. Animal bones were few in number, and in addition to them were recovered only a few mussel shells and but two vegetal forms. Charred corn was present in both houses, and there were walnut shells in one of the cache-pits of House 2.

No evidence of European influence on the aboriginal culture was found either in our excavations or on the surface. Hence it would seem that if an Indian village was here at a late date, the occupation must have been very brief and probably was a temporary stop while the group was on the move, possibly during a bison hunt. The group who lived in earth-lodges on this site had left before any influence by the white man was felt.

Burial

During a surface survey in the environs of the two houses excavated, a sub-surface area of slabs was discovered on the summit of a high conical hill south of House 1 and west of House 2, where we subsequently learned that flat stones had been plowed up. As it was apparent that their presence was explainable only on the basis of human activity, excavation was undertaken. There was no mound apparent at the time of our investigation, and no evidence was noted of the former existence of such a feature. After removal of the soil disturbed by cultivation, it became apparent that unshaped limestone slabs 2 to 4 inches in thickness and widely varying in size lay here in considerable numbers. The

soil above them was then completely removed, revealing a single layer of stones with but a slight amount of overlapping. At the margins of the area they were at a depth of only 4 inches beneath the present surface, but they dipped toward the center to a depth of 20 inches. Removal of the stones disclosed a pit about 7½ feet square, directly on the floor of which lay the deepest slabs. The outer margin of the pit approximately coincided with the periphery of the area of slabs. On the pit floor were found three fragments of badly decayed wood, the grain of each of which ran east and west. In the fill beneath the stones were scattered in no regular order a number of human bone fragments, most of which had been badly gnawed by rodents. The only artifacts encountered during the excavation were three small sherds, one of them a rim fragment, in the soil above the stones. All are grit-tempered and at least two are cord-marked, while the rim appears to be straight and is encircled by a row of small nodes created by punching from the interior of the vessel.

The position of the slabs strongly suggests that they originally covered an open pit, over which they were supported by a wooden framework. When the wooden supports weakened the center would naturally drop first, and before the poles gave away at the edges earth apparently filtered in to support the stones in an inclined position. This interpretation is supported by the presence on the pit floor of what appeared to be the remnants of timbers.

The use of stone slabs in connection with burials is not unknown for this general area. It is reported that the Osage covered their graves with stones,²⁰ and archeologically similar conditions have been found frequently in the Missouri River region. Near White Cloud and Troy in Kansas Fowke found stone-covered and stone cist graves,²¹ and near Weeping Water, Nebraska, were

20. Bushnell, 1927, pp. 55-56.

21. Fowke, 1922, pp. 151-154.

excavated a number of burials in stone boxes with a stone covering over the burial area. During the 1937 season the Survey also investigated a slab-covered pit somewhat similar to the one described here in the vicinity of Brownville.

Owing to the disturbed condition of the bones, the placement of the interments here is not known, and the lack of associated cultural materials precludes the possibility at present of assigning the burials either to the village complex found or to any other known complex.

Summary

At some time prior to the arrival of white men several lodges of an unknown tribe were scattered on the hill tops and terraces along the lower course of Pawnee Creek. These lodges were rectangular structures built in pits excavated beneath the surface of the ground. The people who inhabited them raised corn, beans, and probably other crops on the bottom lands, and hunted the animals which frequented the plains and the timber near the streams for their livelihood. The construction of their houses and the techniques they employed in the manufacture of their pottery and other artifacts ally them culturally with the Nebraska Culture, commonly found in the eastern section of the state. Although bone and shell objects were rarely found, the nature of the pottery, stone artifacts and dwellings is sufficiently apparent to leave no doubt as to such affiliation.

The burial complex of this community of Nebraska Culture people, on the other hand, is still a matter of conjecture. Whether or not they were responsible for the slab-covered burial on the hill-top we can not say on the basis of present evidence. Furthermore, the fact that the total burial complex has not been definitely established for any component of the Nebraska aspect prevents our suggesting even a probable answer to the

question.²² Few burial sites have been investigated in this section, and the rather superficial excavations have usually accomplished little towards a clear picture of the situation. Scattered human bones have been found in mounds or natural hillocks which also contained sherds of Nebraska Culture type, and this same pottery was found in the fill of stone graves near Weeping Water. It is obvious, therefore, that we must suspend judgment on the affiliations of the burials found here until more evidence has accumulated.
