

The Rip Van Winkle Site

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ABSTRACT

The Rip Van Winkle Site is unusual in two respects, 1) as the only known contact site on the Hudson River so far to be scientifically excavated and reported, and 2) as a rare example of a late site with well-defined stratigraphy.

The upper stratum yielded a mixture of European and Indian items. It is suggested that they were left by an Algonkian-speaking band, possibly a remnant of the Mohican confederacy, although a Mohawk party is also an admitted possibility. The middle cultural stratum is of the Chance Horizon, with typical pottery types and lithic artifacts of the period. The lower zone was an occupation of the late Middle Woodland, yielding Jacks Reef pottery and lithic types.

THE Rip Van Winkle Site (CtL 27) lies along the west shore of the Hudson River, 2 miles north of the Rip Van Winkle Bridge at Catskill, New York. We found the site in the spring of 1968 after giving up on what appeared to have been a stratified shell midden less than half a mile to the north on the property of the Coxseter family. This apparently large site, containing Archaic and Woodland artifacts, had been bulldozed into the river before it was brought to our attention. Luckily the Rip Van Winkle Site was remote enough to escape the ravenous appetite of man-operated machinery.

The site was undoubtedly chosen by the Indians because of its convenience to the Hudson as a source of water, aquatic fauna, and as a canoe travel-way. It was only 6 feet above and 20 feet from the river on a small

flat terrace, surrounded on most of the remaining three sides by steep slopes leading to the high ridge that overlooks the river. We found that the major occupied portion covered about $\frac{1}{4}$ of the terrace, butting against the steep rise in the northeast corner. An intermittent stream had worn a gully along the southern edge of the terrace and was responsible for a small, rocky, delta-like beach at the river's edge.

We found the physical stratigraphy within the 15 five-foot squares we excavated to be rather complex due to the irregularity of the preoccupation ground surface, to the natural process of soil accumulation, and to the activities of man—both European and Native.

Stratum I was a 4- to 8-inch thick topsoil which was brown to black in color, containing a few pebbles. It probably owed its composition to decayed duff and slope wash of soil from the surrounding hillsides.

Stratum II was composed of a fine gray-brown silt that varied from 6 to 20 inches in thickness, averaging between 10 and 12 inches in the area of main occupation. In several of the profiles drawn from the walls of the central squares the lower 2 to 4 inches of Stratum II tended toward a brownish humic silt in contrast to the gray-brown above. We called this

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zone Stratum IIB in some instances but eventually came to suspect that it was merely an intermediary post-depositional zone in which worm action and upward movement of midden dirt from Stratum III had caused the discoloration and change of texture. Judging from the fact that this silt is of recent (Holocene) origin and probably derived from weathered shale bedrock and possible glacial clays on adjoining rises, we must conclude that Stratum II is made up of material washed down from the surrounding ridges. The silt is not strictly alluvial, because in the latitude of the site, the Hudson does not overflow its banks at any season. Since we recovered square nails and 19th century crockery in this zone, we suspect the date of its origin to be in that century. The cause for formation may be related to excessive lumbering activity which resulted in large-scale erosion.

Stratum III, the main occupation zone, was a rich, black midden dirt throughout most of our excavation, but changing to a culturally sterile, coarse, brown soil at the peripheries. In thickness, it varied from 2 inches at west and south edges of the site to 16 inches at the northeast corner near the river bank. Generally, however, Stratum III ranged between 10 and 12 inches thick. Freshwater clam shells were in evidence throughout the midden except at the edges, and in heavy concentration in the central area. There, in three adjacent squares, we were able to distinguish two distinct layers of crushed, disintegrated and whole shells. Both of these layers were from $\frac{1}{2}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches thick and were separated by 2 to 4 inches of dark midden dirt which was relatively free of shell. Most of the surrounding squares

showed a concentration of shells near the top of the stratum which could be traced as part of the upper of the two layers just described. Approximately $\frac{1}{3}$ by volume of the total stratum consisted of pieces of flat, gray-brown Normanskill shale from the local bedrock. These ranged from small fragments to pieces a foot square and 3 inches thick. The larger pieces were concentrated in the central area in association with a related feature to be described later in this report. Almost all the shale was found with the flat side horizontal to the ground. Although occurring in a higher proportion toward the base of Stratum III, the shale slabs were found in the same position throughout, with shells, bone, potsherds and other artifacts scattered above, below and within all concentrations of the shale. Toward the edges of the midden, the shale tended to be in smaller and more randomly mixed pieces. Since Stratum IV had only a slight scattering of shale fragments, we think that most of that in Stratum III was purposely collected by the Indians from the shore or from the outcrops along the stream. We believe these slabs were set on the site surface to cover up the accumulation of sharp

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edged shells so that a somewhat level working floor could be created. Since most of the charcoal found was in a single feature in meager amounts only and admixed with the shale and midden dirt, we do not think the majority of rocks were used as roasting elements. There was little fire-cracked rock or, as mentioned, charcoal outside of the one feature.

Stratum IV was the sterile subsoil of yellow-brown clayey silt containing small rounded pebbles. Apparently a narrow gully had been eroded into the pre-aboriginal surface of this zone along the northern edge of the site where it met the rise of land. This irregularity ran some 4 to 8 inches deep from the back to the river edge of the site. The depression was probably responsible for the greater thickness of midden deposits along its course, the Indians using the depression for the one large roasting feature and as a convenient place to throw refuse.

From the beginning of our excavations, we noticed that there were three cultural horizons as evidenced by the distribution of artifactual material within vertical metric zones of Stratum III. After cataloging all artifacts and studying their depth distribution, we found that as a general pattern the upper third of all squares contained historic (Algonkian?) material, the middle third yielded Chance Horizon artifacts and the remainder evidenced late Middle Woodland occupation. Since the artifact-bearing zone averaged 10-12 inches in thickness, there was little difficulty in assigning artifacts to one of these horizons.

The upper subzone, like the others, could not be physically distinguished from the second by soil differences, although the clam shells

seemed more numerous and somewhat more layered than in the other two zones. The artifacts, however, were easily identified as being a mixture of European and Indian material. The European artifacts, probably from Dutch trade, comprised 2 small fragments of beaten brass (1 rolled), 1 small folded brass sheet (Fig. 1, 28), 3 kaolin pipe fragments (Fig. 1, 22), 2 kaolin pipe fragments with "fleur de lys" markings (Fig. 1, 21-22). (These were probably Dutch representations of the tobacco plant.) In addition, we found 3 rose-head nails (Fig. 1, 30-31), 3 fragments of Pennsylvania Redware crockery (Fig. 1, 29), a striated, tubular, blue glass trade bead 13mm. long, 2mm. in diameter (Fig. 1, 25). ✓

The lithic items included 3 Madison points (Fig. 1, 1-3), a possible Madison point tip, a Rossville point and a side-notched point (these last two possibly picked up on the nearby shore where we found numerous point varieties), 2 small chisel-like tools, possibly for opening clams (Fig. 1, 27), 1 trianguloid knife (Fig. 1, 24), 2 knife tips, 4 notched graywacke and 1 grooved quartzite (Fig. 1, 26) netsinkers, a notched graywacke canoe anchor or netsinker (7 inches long, 3½ inches thick), a quartzite pitted stone, a quartzite hammerstone, 2 endscrapers, and a Kalkberg flint core.

The aboriginal pottery has similarities to historic Mohawk-Hudson River types, generally showing paddle-anvil manufacture, thinness of body sherds, incised triangular or oblique decorative motifs, collaring or everted thickened lips, and fine grit temper. Twenty-one fragments (Fig. 1, 4-6, 7, 9, 10, 13, 15) of the Cayadutta (Kingston) Incised type (MacNeish 1952; Ritchie 1952) were

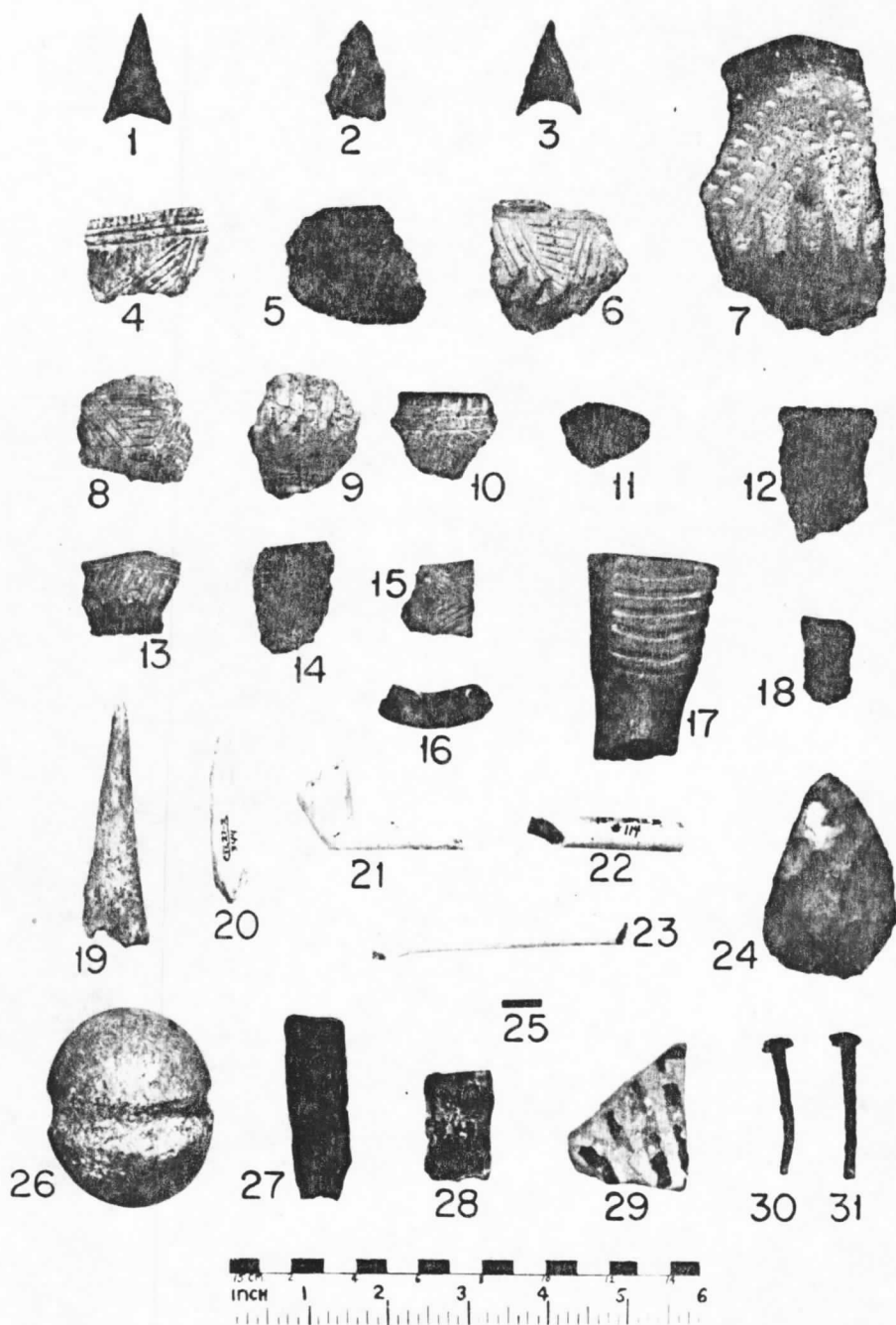


Fig. 1. Historic Iroquoian artifacts: 1-3, Madison points; 4, 5, 7, 9, 10, 13, 15, Cayadutta Incised sherds; 6, 11, 12, Otsungo Notched sherds; 8, untyped sherd with incised shoulder; 16, pipe stem; 17, pipe bowl; 18, untyped sherd with punctate face on node; 19, antler awl or flaker; 20, bone awl; 21, chisel; 22, kaolin pipe stem; 23, kaolin pipes with Dutch "fleurs de lys"; 24, glass bead; 25, glass bead; 26, grooved netsinker; 27, chisel; 28, sheet brass; 29, Pennsylvania Redware; 30-31, rose-head nails.

parently extended from the upper cultural level of Stratum III to a depth of 32 inches, the base of Stratum III. The fill was brown to black, containing much crushed shell, charcoal, fire-cracked rocks, some deer bone, 8 thin, plain body sherds, 2 untyped incised sherds, and a Madison point. A Susquehanna Broadspear projectile point was found in the fill, probably picked up from the beach or dug up from a minor lower level visitation.

2. This apparently was a large oval roasting feature, being 72 inches long by 35 inches at the maximum width. It extended from the upper level of Stratum III, 6 inches into Stratum IV and had a large concentration of charcoal at the base, predominately the remains of a single, large log. Charcoal, shell, flint debris, a Madison point, 5 thin body sherds, and 2 Cayadutta Incised rimsherds were associated, in addition to the 77 Cayadutta Incised sherds from a single pot mentioned earlier.

Conclusions

Late Middle Woodland people of about 700-800 A.D. (?) were the first inhabitants of the Rip Van Winkle Site and like the following groups were probably a small band, or perhaps merely a nuclear family, which utilized the location because of its nearness to water, protection from winds, and the accessibility to clams, fish, and game.

Following this occupation a Chance Horizon group (Ritchie 1952) visited the area for a short while, probably around 1400 A.D. The final aboriginal occupation was the most important archaeologically because it is the only known (as far

as the authors are aware) scientifically excavated Contact site on the Hudson River. These last Indian inhabitants seem to have been a small group who apparently traded with the Dutch who had moved into the upper Hudson Valley in the early 17th century. The inclusion of Dutch pottery, Dutch pipes, brass, iron nails, and glass bead, along with aboriginal pottery, pipes, and stone artifacts is very interesting and illustrates an early stage of acculturation in material objects. Although it is possible that this group was a Mohawk party which was camping along the river before or after trading at Albany, it seems more reasonable that it was an Algonkian-speaking group wandering within the Van Loon Patroonship, perhaps as a remnant of the great Mohican confederacy, soon destroyed by the intrusion of white colonials with their alcoholic beverages, diseases, and firearms.

The Rip Van Winkle Site stands as a rare example of a late stratified site, unique to date with its historic aboriginal occupation, and a memorial to the ravages of cultural contact in American history.

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