

SMITHSONIAN MISCELLANEOUS COLLECTIONS

VOLUME 99, NUMBER 15

EVIDENCE OF EARLY INDIAN OCCUPANCY
NEAR THE PEAKS OF OTTER,
BEDFORD COUNTY,
VIRGINIA

(WITH FIVE PLATES)



BY

DAVID I. BUSHNELL, JR.

Collaborator in Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution



(PUBLICATION 3601)

CITY OF WASHINGTON
PUBLISHED BY THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION
DECEMBER 23, 1940



1. The site, partly graded, showing Flat Top in the distance.



2. The site in the foreground with the slope of Sharp Top beyond.

VIEWS OF THE MONS SITE BETWEEN THE PEAKS OF OTTER

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The Lord Baltimore Press
BALTIMORE, MD., U. S. A.

EVIDENCE OF EARLY INDIAN OCCUPANCY NEAR THE PEAKS OF OTTER, BEDFORD COUNTY, VIRGINIA

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(WITH FIVE PLATES)

Bedford County, in the southwestern part of Virginia, extends from the James River on the north to the Roanoke River on the south. The southeastern part of the county is comparatively level, but beyond, toward the north and west, it is crossed by the Blue Ridge with the Peaks of Otter rising near its northern boundary. It is a region of great natural beauty, with innumerable springs and streams. The mountain slopes are covered with forests of pine and hemlock, and many varieties of trees and plants are encountered throughout the area. Wild game was formerly plentiful in all parts of the county, but during the past few years the larger animals have become less numerous.

The Peaks of Otter, which rise in the extreme northern part of Bedford County, were, before the discovery of the country far westward, thought to be among the highest on the continent. This belief was suggested by Jefferson¹ when he wrote (p. 18) :

The mountains of the Blue ridge, and of these the Peaks of Otter, are thought to be of a greater height, measured from their base, than any others in the country, and perhaps in North America. From data, which may sound a tolerable conjecture, we suppose the highest peak to be about 4000 feet perpendicular. . . . The ridge of mountains next beyond the Blue ridge, called by us the North mountain, is of the greatest extent; for which reason they were named by the Indians the Endless mountains.

The two peaks are now known as Sharp Top and Flat Top. As stated by the United States Geological Survey, the elevation of the former is 3,875 feet, and of the latter 4,001 feet, which proves the accuracy of Jefferson's "conjecture."

There is sufficient evidence now available to suggest that man had occupied or frequented the region for generations, and it is thought that a careful examination of certain restricted areas near the Peaks of Otter will tend to substantiate the belief that the region surround-

¹ Jefferson, Thomas, Notes on the State of Virginia. Philadelphia, 1788.

ing the peaks had been occupied and reoccupied by native tribes for countless centuries—since the first nomadic bands entered the vast wilderness.

Ancient trails traversed the country. A trail coming from the west is known to have followed up the valley of the North Fork of Goose



FIG. 1.—A section of the Bedford sheet, reconnaissance map, United States Geological Survey. The location of the Mons site is indicated just north of the Peak, or Sharp Top.

Creek and to have continued through Powell Gap. Another trail may have led from Powell Gap to the valley of Little Stony Creek, between the two peaks.

A map of the region now being considered is shown in figure 1. This is a detail of the Bedford sheet, reconnaissance map, United States Geological Survey.

During protohistoric and early historic times Siouan and Iroquoian tribes are believed to have lived within the bounds of the present

Bedford County. Later, in 1670, the village of the Nahyssan, a Siouan tribe, was in or near the southern part of the county when it was visited by Lederer.² The exact location of the settlement will be difficult to determine. Lederer's text is vague and uncertain, and consequently not easy to follow, but according to his crudely drawn map the tribe was established on the right bank of a river, probably the Roanoke or Staunton. Swanton has traced the movements of the Nahyssan, Saponí, and Tutelo, when they may have traversed part of the county.³

In 1846 Schoolcraft recorded an old Cherokee tradition, told by a member of the tribe, that a Cherokee village had formerly stood near the Peaks of Otter. However that may be, it is evident that the region had attracted the native hunters from remote times and that it had been occupied by tribes of different stocks, possibly with centuries intervening between the periods of occupation. But it is not possible to state with accuracy the sequence of movements of tribes, and it is a fallacy to apply dates to any tribal migrations or settlements in the Mississippi Valley and eastward before the beginning of the historic era.

Swanton has suggested the possibility that the word Otter, as now applied to the two peaks and the streams, was derived from the Cherokee Atari or Ottari, translated mountain or high hill. The belief that this may be true is strengthened by the tradition that the Cherokee once occupied a village in the vicinity of the Peaks of Otter. Place names bestowed and used by the Cherokee may have persisted until after the coming of the first European settlers by whom the Indian name Ottari would, it is easily conceived, have been rendered Otter. All this, however, is purely hypothetical.

THE MONS SITE

Early in the spring of 1940 work in connection with the extension of the Skyline Drive, in the vicinity of the Peaks of Otter, exposed the site of an ancient Indian settlement. This was partly on the grounds of the recently demolished resort hotel, Hotel Mons, and for that reason the site will be designated the Mons site.⁴

² Lederer, John, *The discoveries of . . . Begun in March 1669 and ended in September 1670*. London, 1672. Reprint 1902.

³ Swanton, John R., *Early history of the eastern Siouan tribes*. In *Essays in anthropology in honor of Alfred Louis Kroeber*, Univ. California, 1936.

⁴ I am indebted to the Rev. William Clarkson Marshall and R. L. Updike, of Bedford, for assistance and advice when we visited the site on July 10, 1940. The latter had written on April 21: "I have just returned from the site between

The site is a little west of north of Sharp Top, near several small branches that are the sources of Sheep Creek and Little Stony Creek. It is mostly surrounded by higher ground, and consequently a village or camp standing here in the midst of the dense primeval forest would have been secluded and well protected. Two views of the site, or rather part of it, are shown in plate 1.⁵ Both were made from the same point, on the north side of the course of the Skyline Drive, which is to be seen, partly graded, in the foreground. Rev. William C. Marshall, Dr. Frank H. H. Roberts, Jr., and the writer visited the site on October 15 in an endeavor to determine the extent of the occupied area, but this proved to be impossible as the surface remained thickly covered with grass and brush. However, it could be traced far beyond both sides of the new roadway and is evidently rather extensive, being crossed by two small branches and having several springs issuing from beneath the higher ground by which much of the site is bordered.

Many types of stone artifacts were exposed during the removal of the top soil. Some pieces appear to be, and probably are, much older than others, but as all came from the surface or not more than a few inches below the sod line, it is not possible to determine the relative position or sequence of the various forms. The land had formerly been cultivated, which would have caused any material that may have accumulated in heaps in or about that part of the occupied area to become scattered and intermixed.

The artifacts recovered from that part of the site through which the new roadway passes, and from the adjacent land, include flake-knives and scrapers, projectile points and other small flaked objects; larger scrapers and several forms of edged implements; axlike implements, some with and others without a groove; pebbles used as hammers and others which may have served as pestles. Fragments of steatite vessels and small bits of earthenware were encountered in the disturbed soil. Two Folsom points have been found on the site mingled with the other material.

the Peaks of Otter The construction gang on the Skyline Drive are now working in this little valley, and the sod and grass has been stripped for the width of the drive for the entire length of the valley. During the past week there has been much rain, and every uncovered point and chip of stone stands out, easily identified." Many of the specimens described and illustrated on the following pages were collected by Updike on April 21, 1940, and others were found during different visits to the site.

⁵ The photographs were made by R. L. Updike, June 27, 1940.

Quantities of flakes of many varieties of stone are found throughout the area, also many fractured pebbles, indicating that work had been done at the site. The stones⁹ include argillite, metamorphosed rhyolite, feldspar porphyry, felsite, quartz, quartzites, chalcedony, jaspers, and cherts. Several rounded pieces of sandstone that had served as hammerstones were found, but no fragments of the stone were discovered.

Pebbles and boulders exposed in the stream beds, and on hillsides, obviously supplied the stone used in fashioning the great majority of objects now found scattered over the site. Soapstone, argillite, and sandstone had been brought in, though not necessarily from a great distance.

Examples of the stone artifacts and fragments of earthenware vessels found on the Mons site are illustrated and may be briefly described:

Plate 2.—The occurrence of a large number of flakeknives and small scrapers is the more interesting and important inasmuch as similar objects are seldom found in Virginia. The flakeknives range in size from those less than an inch in length to others somewhat longer than the four specimens shown in the top row. All are thin flakes struck from a mass and do not reveal any secondary chipping. The one on the left, top row, is made of yellow or brownish mottled jasper; the next two, dark chert; and the larger specimen on the right, moss-agate. Others found with these were made of quartz and quartzite. The sketch of *a*, in figure 2, shows the curvature of the flake and the bulb of percussion at the bottom. The edges of all are slightly roughened or serrated, the result of use.

A few specimens, represented by *b* and *c*, suggest a composite knife and scraper, having two edges well defined and both showing the effect of use. Other specimens, obviously scrapers and not knives, are short and broad at the worked edge. Examples of this type are shown in *d*, *e*, and *f*.

All were probably employed for various purposes, although certain forms were undoubtedly better suited for some particular use than were others.

Plate 3.—Various types of projectile points, and small flaked objects of unknown use found on the site are illustrated in this plate.

Specimens *a*. All are made of white quartz, so plentiful in parts of Virginia, and which was used extensively in making projectile

⁹ Identified by W. F. Foshag and E. P. Henderson, Department of Geology, U. S. National Museum.

points and other small implements. The forms recovered from the Mons site are similar to others found on widely separated areas in piedmont and tidewater Virginia. As the surface of quartz is not altered by exposure to the natural elements through the centuries, it is not possible to judge the comparative age of the specimens by their appearance. Some pieces may be centuries older than others, though all appear the same.

Specimens *b*. Small points made of jasper, chert, quartz, and other stone. Part of a perforator is shown at the left in the upper row. Several specimens in this row are made of a banded flint that resembles the stone obtained at Flint Ridge, Licking County, Ohio, and it is

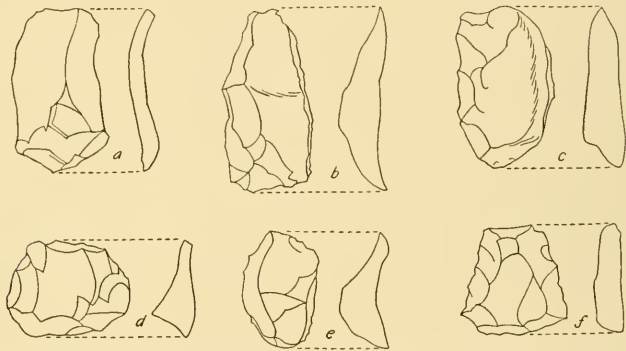


FIG. 2.—Sketches of six specimens of flakeknives and scrapers illustrated in plate 2, showing the thickness and curvature of the flakes. $\frac{1}{2}$ natural size.

believed to have been derived from that source. The three pieces at the right in the lower row, all made of chert, are of a type seldom found in Virginia. Concerning these particular specimens Updike stated in a note addressed to me:

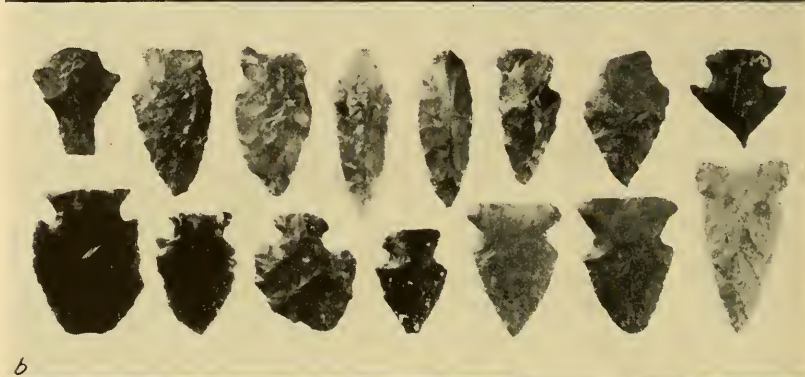
Many points from this site have broad bases and deep notches, by these characteristics differing from those found on other sites in Bedford County. So far as I know, these are not found in any other location in this county.

These specimens, with deep side notches, are similar to many found in McLean County, Kentucky, recently described and illustrated. They are of a distinctive and specialized type. The sites where the points were encountered were assigned, by the discoverers,⁷ "to the oldest horizon in Kentucky." These were evidently the "Round Grave people" of other narratives. Although it will be conceded that these

⁷ Webb, Wm. S., and Hagg, Wm. G., Cypress Creek villages, sites 11 and 12, McLean County, Kentucky. Univ. Kentucky, Reports in Anthropol., vol. 4, No. 2, fig. 20, March 1940.



SPECIMENS FROM THE MONS SITE. FLAKEKNIVES AND SCRAPERS
Natural size. U.S.N.M. No. 382135.



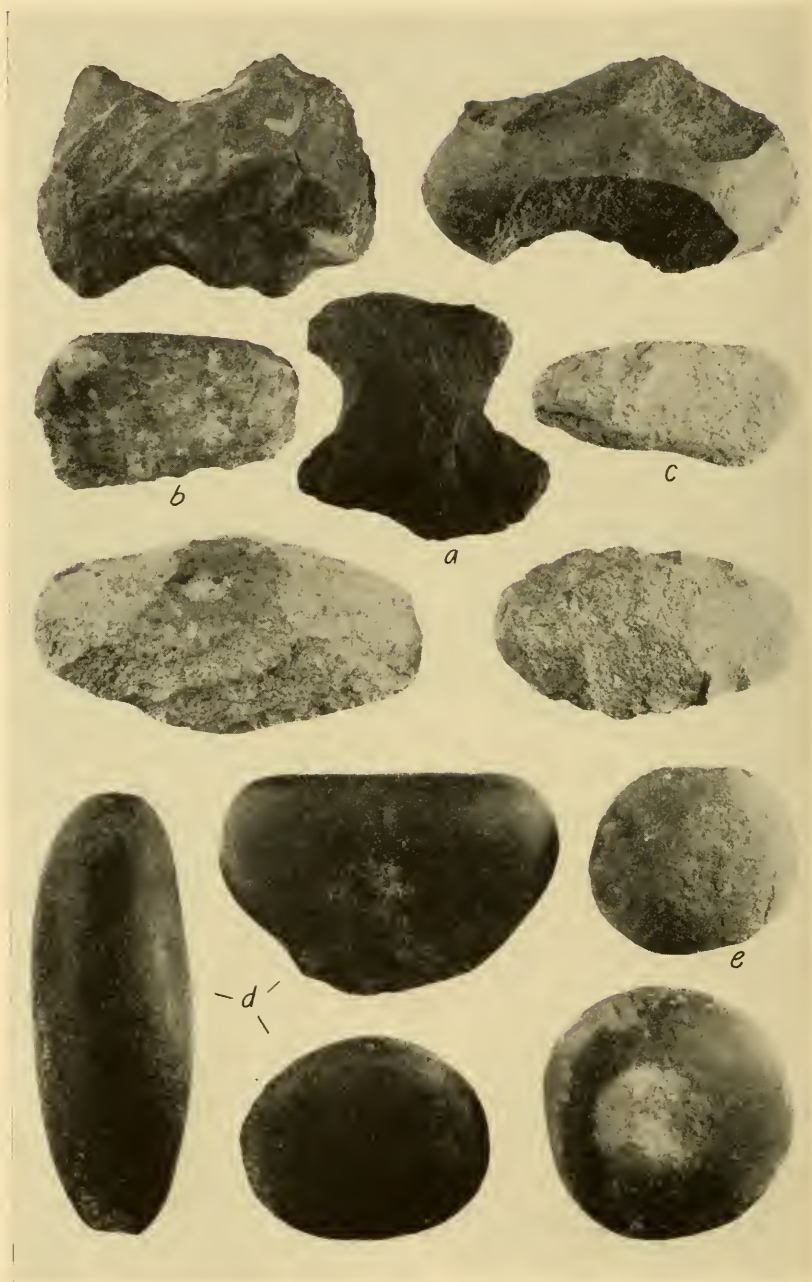
SPECIMENS FROM THE MONS SITE. PROJECTILE POINTS AND OTHER
SMALL FLAKED OBJECTS

$\frac{1}{2}$ natural size. a, U.S.N.M. No. 382136; b, U.S.N.M. No. 382137;
c, U.S.N.M. No. 382138.



SPECIMENS FROM THE MONS SITE. UPPER, PROJECTILE POINTS OR
BLADES. LOWER, SCRAPERS AND EDGED IMPLEMENTS

$\frac{1}{2}$ natural size. Upper, U.S.N.M. No. 382139; lower, U.S.N.M. No. 382140.



SPECIMENS FROM THE MONS SITE. ABOVE, SEVEN FLAKED IMPLEMENTS.
BELOW, FIVE PEBBLES SHOWING THE EFFECT OF USE

$\frac{1}{3}$ natural size.

specimens are very old, it is believed that even earlier material has been found in Kentucky.

The seven pieces forming the row beginning with *c* are made of schists.

Specimen *c*. This is a Folsom point made of quartz schist. The stone is a very dark gray, approaching black, as revealed by a small fracture, but the surface is now altered to a light gray color through long exposure to the natural elements. The three specimens to the right of *c* are similarly altered. Next beyond are two pieces that have become so greatly weathered that their surfaces are smoothed and evidence of flaking is scarcely discernible. The long specimen on the right is less deeply altered than the preceding, though the surface of the dark gray stone has now changed to a very light greenish gray.

Specimens *d*. Six specimens made of argillite. The surfaces of all are altered, some to a greater degree than others. The piece on the lower left, a side scraper, is similar to specimens discovered on the site of the ancient Algonquin village of Pissaseck, in Westmoreland County, on the left bank of the Rappahannock River.⁸ It also resembles specimens belonging to the so-called argillite culture, discovered on sites in the Delaware valley. The source of the argillite has not been discovered, but it may have been not far from the site.

Although a few scattered projectile points and other small objects made of argillite have been found frequently on village sites in Virginia, I have never before encountered them in such large numbers, nor have they been found to constitute so large a proportion of all the material gathered from a site as here. Quantities of flakes and small broken pieces of the stone are scattered over the site, thus proving that the stone had been fashioned into projectile points, scrapers, or knives near where such pieces were discovered.

Specimen *e*. A crudely flaked object of felsite. The surface is weathered to a light brownish color.

Specimens *f*. Two pieces made of a very dark or black quartzite. It is very fine grained, and the surfaces of both are now altered to a light brownish gray, with darker bands.

Obviously the 16 specimens just mentioned are very old, and some of them may have belonged to the earliest occupants of the valley.

Plate 4.—Nine examples of points made of a variety of stones are illustrated in the upper part of the plate. The surfaces of all are greatly weathered. At the left is a well-flaked specimen made of

⁸ Bushnell, David I., Jr., Indian sites below the Falls of the Rappahannock, Virginia. Smithsonian Misc. Coll., vol. 96, No. 4, pl. 3, p. 19, 1937.

dark diabase; however, the surface is now rough and decomposed and is altered to a greenish color. Very few objects made of diabase appear to have been found on the site.

In the lower part of the plate are shown several forms of scrapers and edged implements made of chert and quartzite. At the top are four scrapers with concave cutting edges. Three are made of quartzite, and one, the smallest, is made of chert. A similar piece made of white quartz is illustrated in plate 3, *a*. The large specimen in the center is not more than $5/16$ inch thick. It is made of a thin piece of dark grayish quartzite, and the lower edge had been sharpened by the removal of flakes from both sides. This may have been used as a knife with the upper part inserted in a handle made of wood or antler.

The two larger specimens at the bottom of the plate are spalls struck from quartzite pebbles or boulders. The natural surfaces are shown in the photographs, but they are weathered on all sides. The edges of both pieces are worn and battered from use. Both are thick and would have been used as hand tools, not hafted.

Plate 5.—Examples of the larger implements, many of which have been found on the site, are illustrated.

Above are seven flaked objects, all of which had probably been hafted and used as weapons or tools. All are made of quartzite of different texture and color.

Specimen *a*, with unusually deep notches, is made of a black, fine-grained quartzite like that of the three pebbles, *d*, and the implement may have been fashioned from a similar pebble. The sharp edge of *a*, part of which is missing, is shown at the bottom in the photograph. It is an interesting, crudely made piece.

The two smaller specimens, *b*, *c*, are made of a light-colored quartzite, and the surfaces of both are deeply weathered; however, the surfaces of the larger specimens above have not changed since the flakes were removed. This condition may indicate a great difference in the age of the specimens.

Below are five natural pebbles, all of which had been used. The three black quartzite pebbles, *d*, have battered edges, evidently caused by use. They would have been useful for many purposes in and about the camp. The long specimen on the left may have been used as a pestle. The small specimen, *e*, is made of a reddish sandstone and is slightly pitted on opposite sides. The larger hammerstone below *e* is a natural quartzite pebble, gray in color though the exposed surface is somewhat darker, as shown in the photograph. The edge is battered, and the stone is roughly pitted on opposite sides.

The specimens illustrated in this plate do not present any unusual features. Obviously they belonged to more than one period of occupancy.

FOLSOM POINTS

Small points or blades of the type now known as Folsom points have been found in Virginia and elsewhere in the eastern United States. They constitute a very distinctive group, and although they closely resemble the Folsom points occurring in the northern part of Colorado as discovered by Roberts,⁹ and found in other localities both north and south, they are not identical in all details. Many of the eastern points are longer in proportion to their width than are the western specimens, and often lack the long channel flakes, passing from the concave base and extending down both sides, which constitute one of the characteristic features of the western points; however, some of the pieces found in the East possess this feature. Nevertheless, one detail is common to all specimens from both East and West—the smoothing of the edge of the concave base and of the edges for a distance of an inch or more beyond the base. For what reason or by what means this was accomplished is not known, but it is always apparent and must have been done intentionally.

Beautiful examples of eastern Folsom points have been found in and near Bedford County; however, with the exception of two specimens all have been found separate from other material, on a hillside or in a field where no traces of a camp or village were discovered. The same condition is believed to apply to the occurrence of all similar specimens wherever encountered, in Virginia or elsewhere. Examples of Folsom points may have been found previously on village sites or associated with burials in the East, but if so we have been unable to learn of such discoveries.

The two examples of Folsom points known definitely to have been found on the site of an ancient settlement, in contact with other artifacts, were discovered on the Mons site. One specimen, a fragment of a point, is shown full size in figure 3. The entire finished edge of the fragment is smoothed, a characteristic feature, and the whole surface is smooth and glossy. Obviously the point was broken after it had been finished and possibly used. It is made of a rather light gray chert. Many small flakes of the same stone are scattered through the soil on the site.

⁹ Roberts, Frank H. H., Jr., A Folsom complex: Preliminary report on investigations at the Lindenmeier site in Northern Colorado. Smithsonian Misc. Coll., vol. 94, No. 4, June 20, 1935.

The second example of a Folsom point from the Mons site is illustrated half size in plate 3, *c*. I found this specimen during a visit to the site on September 5, 1940, at the edge of the surface cut away in grading the Skyline Drive, on the north side and less than 50 yards from where the fragment shown in figure 3 was discovered several years ago.³⁰ It is made of a very dark quartz schist with the surface now weathered to a light gray. It has been fractured in two places, as indicated by the dotted lines added on the photograph.



FIG. 3.—Folsom points. Above, fragment made of gray chert, found on the Mons site. Below, specimen made of red jasper, found in the valley about 2 miles south of the Mons site. Natural size.

The fractured surfaces are altered to the same degree as is the balance of the exposed surface of the stone. Although the entire specimen is worn from exposure, it is still possible to detect the smoothed edge of the concave base and the smoothed edges extending down the sides from the base, one of the curious features of all points of this type. The specimen is crude when compared with many other examples found in Virginia, but the stone of which it was made was difficult to work and a channel flake could not have been removed, as would have been possible had it been made of chalcedony or jasper. Though

³⁰ This was found by R. L. Updike, with whom I again visited the site on September 5, 1940.

less finished than many pieces, it is interesting as coming from a site that had been occupied from remote times.

An excellent example of a Folsom point was found a few years ago on a rocky hillside, in the valley of Little Stony Creek, about 2 miles southeast of the Mons site. The specimen is shown full size in figure 3. It is made of a dark red jasper, now worn smooth. A long channel flake had been removed from the side shown in the photograph, a feature more clearly defined in this than in most specimens from Virginia. A shorter flake had been taken from the other side. Small flakes of red jasper, similar to the stone of which the point was made, have been found on the site.

Other points of equal interest have been found in Bedford County, though at a greater distance from the Mons site.

SOAPSTONE VESSELS

Several pieces of soapstone or steatite vessels have been found on the site. One fragment is a handle that had extended from near the rim of a vessel. The vessel appears to have been rather large, and it had become smoothed and worn from long use. The surfaces of the pieces of stone are pitted and disintegrated, and all are of a light gray color. The stone was probably obtained at the quarry in the southeastern part of Bedford County, between Little Otter and Big Otter Rivers. Many broken, unfinished vessels have been collected from the surface of the quarry workshop,¹¹ but the quarry has not been carefully examined.

Many ancient soapstone quarries occur in Virginia. The first to be discovered and recognized as having been worked by Indians was at Chula, Amelia County. It was described in the Smithsonian Report for 1878, and soon others became known. The period to which the quarries should be attributed has not been determined. There are no accounts of Europeans' witnessing the use of soapstone utensils by the Indians of Virginia, and relatively few fragments of such pieces are encountered on the sites of native villages. However, the vast number of vessels broken and abandoned at the quarries proves that many had been made and used.

POTTERY

Fragments of pottery are found scattered through the soil, but all are very small and greatly decomposed. Five specimens are shown natural size in figure 4.

¹¹ Bushnell, David L., Jr., The use of soapstone by the Indians of the Eastern United States. *In* Ann. Rep. Smithsonian Inst. for 1939, p. 471, 1940.

Specimens *a*. I believe the impressions on the outside are of coiled basketry and that these specimens are of the earliest type of earthenware encountered in the Middle Atlantic region. A few pieces of similar ware have been found on widely separated sites. Examples were discovered by Harrington¹² in the upper valley of the Tennessee associated with material that belonged to the Round Grave people, the earliest of three distinct cultures encountered in that area, the last and most recent of which were the historic Cherokee. The

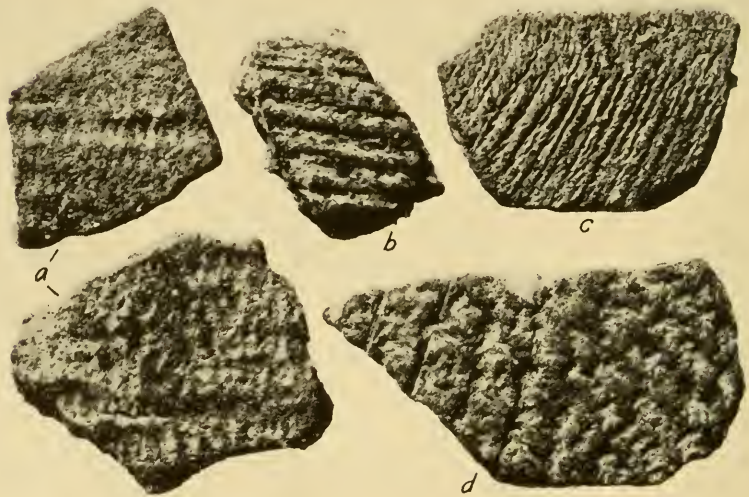


FIG. 4.—Fragments of pottery from the Mons site.
Natural size. U.S.N.M. No. 382141.

two sherds, *a*, are very hard, dark throughout, and contain a small amount of quartz sand. The latter may have occurred in the clay naturally rather than having been added as tempering material.

Specimen *b* resembles the two preceding pieces in being very hard and dark in color, but a coarse sand or crushed quartz had evidently been added to the clay. The impression of coarsely twisted cords appears on the surface. The three pieces thus far mentioned are believed to have belonged to the same early period.

Specimens *c*, *d*, are fragments of coiled ware. Both are of a reddish brown color, hard and compact. The upper piece, *c*, is part

¹² Harrington, M. R., Cherokee and earlier remains on Upper Tennessee River. Mus. Amer. Indian, New York, 1922.

of the rim of a vessel, and although it suggests a bowl of large diameter, it is less than $1/5$ inch thick. It bears on the outer surface the impressions of very finely twisted cords, passing in two directions and continuing over the top. The clay contains a large amount of very fine grit, which may have been natural, and also some larger pieces of crushed quartz. The lower edge, as shown in the photograph, is a concave surface extending the entire length of the sherd and is the bottom of a coil of clay applied when building up the wall of the vessel.

The lower specimen, *d*, resembles fragments of several vessels recovered from sites on the Rappahannock and Rapidan Rivers. The impression of a net is clearly defined; however, some of the strands, those on the extreme left, are not twisted but are straight. These may have been sinew or some vegetal material, but the greater part of the sherd is similar in appearance to some found at Skinkers Ford on the Rapidan,³³ which are believed to bear the impression of a textile woven entirely of loosely twisted cords made of the hair of the bison or of some other animal.

Among the bits of pottery found scattered over the site are several others bearing faint impressions of nets and some of single twisted cords, but the two specimens, *a*, are the only examples of the early ware bearing the impression of basketry. The latter are different from all others; they are harder and darker in color and are less disintegrated although believed to be the oldest. The surfaces of other small sherds are so greatly weathered and worn that it is no longer possible to distinguish any markings that may originally have been on the outer surfaces. Some bits may be fragments of smooth vessels that were never marked by cords or nets. Better examples of all types of earthenware may be preserved beneath the surface of the site.

CONCLUSION

The variety of objects found at the Mons site should be accepted as evidence that it had been frequented by man from the earliest times, and beneath its surface may be hidden conclusive proof that makers of Folsom points once occupied the valley.

As previously mentioned, certain material recovered from the site—projectile points and fragmentary pottery—is similar to that attributed to the Round Grave people of parts of Kentucky and Tennessee. In the former region these were regarded as belonging “to

³³ Bushnell, David I., Jr., *The Manahoac tribes in Virginia, 1608*. Smithsonian Misc. Coll., vol. 94, No. 8, pp. 39-40, pl. 17, *b*, 1935.

the oldest horizon in Kentucky." And in Loudon County, Tenn., the remains were the earliest of three distinct periods of occupancy recognized, the last and therefore most recent being represented by the historic Cherokee.

The occurrence at the Mons site of material similar to that attributed to the early people of parts of the country west of the mountains suggests the probability that the vicinity of the Peaks of Otter was occupied during that same period, long before the arrival of the Cherokee, who, according to their tribal tradition, once had a village near the Peaks. But others had been in the region many centuries before it was claimed by the contemporaries of the Round Grave people; these were the makers of the Folsom points, probably the first nomadic hunters to penetrate the wilderness.