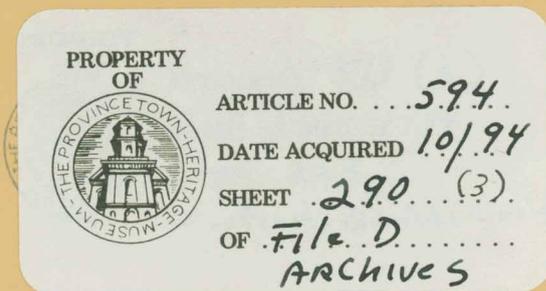


A SHELL HEAP SITE ON GRIFFIN ISLAND,
WELLFLEET, MASSACHUSETTS

ROSS MOFFETT



Reprinted from
AMERICAN ANTIQUITY
Volume 28 No 1, July, 1962

stage having grit-tempered, dentate- and rocker-stamped pottery, stemmed and side-notched points was followed by a Late Woodland 1 stage using coarse shell-tempered, straight-sided vessels, and large triangular points. A late Woodland 2, or final, stage had fine shell-tempered, globular pots, to some extent suggestive of late Windsor pottery of the coastal section west of Cape Cod.

GRIFFIN ISLAND is one of a chain of so-called islands adjacent to Cape Cod Bay in the northwestern section of the town, or township, of Wellfleet. These islands, which are in the newly established Cape Cod National Seashore Park, are areas of high ground, composed of stratified glacial sand and gravel, now connected with one another and with the mainland by sand spits and modern dikes. Griffin Island has an extent of about one square mile and a maximum elevation of 80 feet. On its exposed western side this island terminates sharply in an eroding cliff, and on other sides it rises boldly from tidal flats and from wide marshes bordering Herring River and one of its tributary brooks.

Six hundred feet south of the steep bank defining the north end of Griffin Island is a small bog which marks the lowest level of a closed depression, apparently an atypical kettle. The shell heaps and midden deposits (Site M-42-53N) extended in a line on the southerly facing slope of the depression for 350 feet east of a north-south paved road built about 1955. There was at least one shell heap west of that road. As early as 1951, when I first visited the site, the location had already been largely dug out by collectors, and in 1960, when the island was then slated for the National Seashore Park, a real estate firm almost completely obliterated the site with a bulldozer. I would estimate that the site originally consisted of from 10 to 15, small, sometimes overlapping shell heaps and patches of dark midden earth.

In and around the shell heaps were clumps of pitch pines, plus a scattering of red oaks, scrub oaks, and beach plum bushes. Covering much of the ground was a tough matting of bearberry. With a few exceptions, the data and artifacts basing this report are from excavations in 1942 and 1943 by Mrs. Ethel Boissevain Lesser and from my own 1958 work in which I was aided for two days by Guy Mellgren (Table 1, Fig. 1).

Area 1 (1958), the farthest east of the shell heaps save one, was a much disturbed patch of dark gray sandy midden about 24 feet in diameter and with a central thickness of 5 inches. Above this lens was a thin sandy topsoil covered with reindeer moss. Under the midden were two areas of reddish burned sand and one pit containing discolored sand. At one side the midden graded into a small dump of oyster and quahog shells. In addition to chipped-stone artifacts (Fig. 1, 1-8), Area 1 produced two transversely grooved pebbles, or net sinkers, and 20 fragments of a gray, coiled, grit-tempered vessel bearing dentate-rocker stamping combined with dentate stamping in straight lines (Fig. 1, 9).

Area 2 (1958), 60 feet west of Area 1, was an irregularly shaped deposit of 96 square feet of black earth and

A SHELL HEAP SITE ON GRIFFIN ISLAND, WELLFLEET, MASSACHUSETTS

ROSS MOFFETT

ABSTRACT

A group of small middens has yielded cultural materials that are characteristic of Cape Cod. A Middle Woodland

shells. This stratum, 3 inches in maximum thickness, was separated from normal yellow glacial sand by a varying thickness of stained brown sand. Above the midden were 4 to 5 inches of gray sandy loam covered with bearberry. Under the black layer were one burned area and four

pits, the latter filled with discolored sand. Just outside the dark area was a pit containing many burned pebbles, but no charcoal. Chipped stone specimens from Area 2 are shown in Figure 1, 19-27. Pottery from this area consists of one very small, grit-tempered fragment.

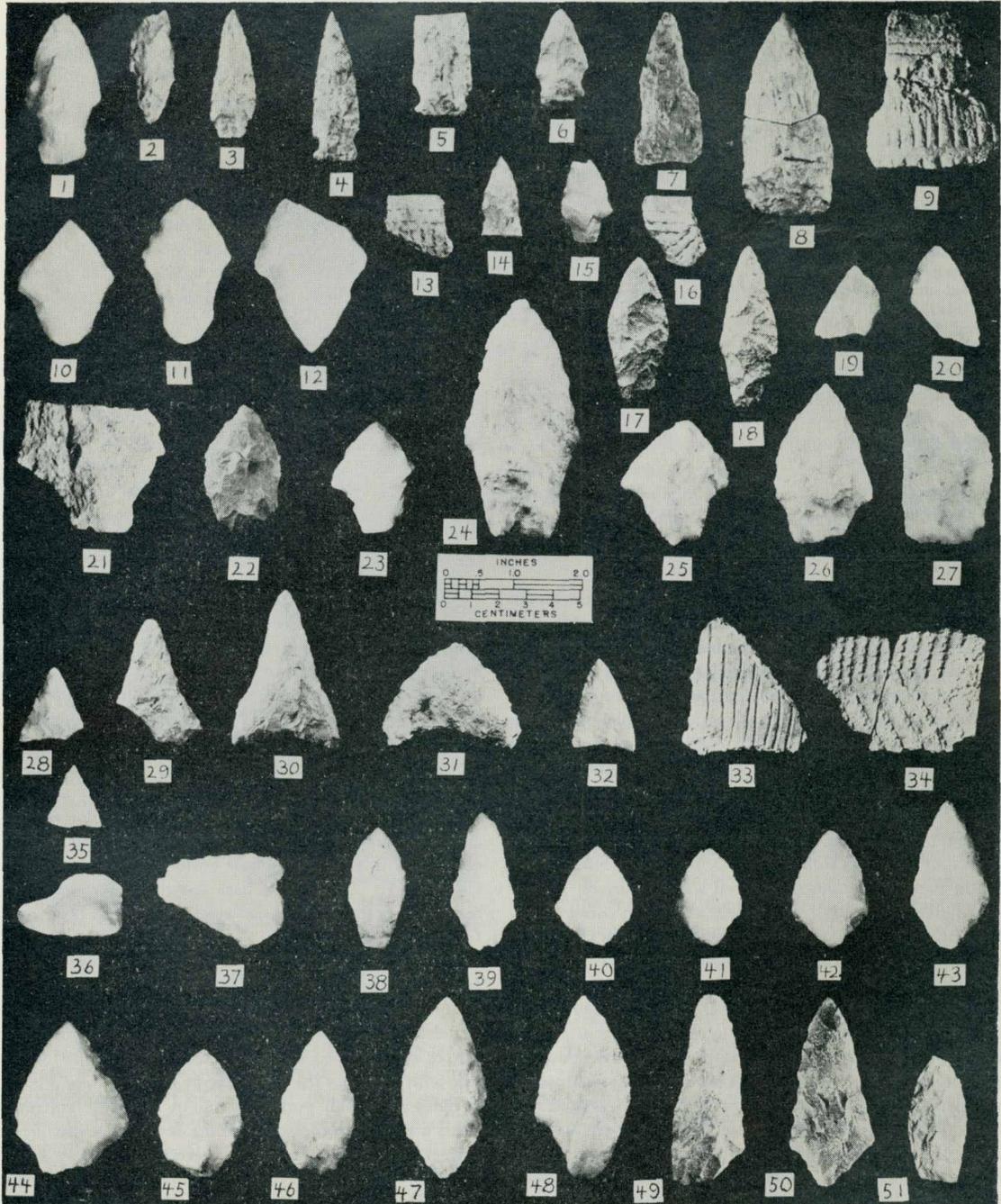


FIG. 1 [MOFFETT]. Chipped-stone artifacts and potsherds from a shell heap site on Griffin Island, Wellfleet, Cape Cod, Massachusetts. See Table 1 for details of type identification of stone artifacts and text for identification of pottery. 1-9, Area 1; 10-12, Area 4; 13-16, Lesser's excavations; 17, 18, area unknown; 19-27, Area 2; 28-51, Area 3.

TABLE 1. CHIPPED STONE ARTIFACTS FROM THE GRIFFIN ISLAND SHELL HEAP

| Type | Quantity | Illustration reference | Material | | | Provenience | | | | Pits |
|----------------------|----------|------------------------|----------|---------|-----------|-------------|--------|--------------|-------------|------|
| | | | Quartz | Felsite | Quartzite | Loam | Midden | Stained sand | Yellow sand | |
| AREA 1 | | | | | | | | | | |
| Narrow-stemmed Point | 3 | 2, 3 | | 2 | 1 | | 3 | | | |
| Broad-stemmed Point | 1 | 1 | 1 | | | | 1 | | | |
| Side-notched Point | 5 | 4-6 | | 4 | 1 | | 5 | | | |
| Unstemmed Knife | 5 | 7, 8 | | 5 | | | 4 | | | 1 |
| AREA 2 | | | | | | | | | | |
| Triangular Point | 2 | 19, 20 | 2 | | | 1 | 1 | | | |
| Leaf-shaped Point | 1 | 22 | | 1 | | | 1 | | | |
| Broad-stemmed Point | 4 | 23-26 | 4 | | | | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Stemmed Knife | 1 | 21 | | 1 | | | | | 1 | |
| Unstemmed Knife | 1 | 27 | 1 | | | 1 | | | | |
| AREA 3 | | | | | | | | | | |
| Triangular Point | 7 | 28-32, 35 | 1 | 6 | | 4 | 3 | | | |
| Leaf-shaped Point | 2 | 46, 51 | 1 | 1 | | | 1 | 1 | | |
| Narrow-stemmed Point | 1 | 39 | 1 | | | 1 | | | | |
| Broad-stemmed Point | 2 | 44, 48 | 2 | | | | | 2 | | |
| Diamond-shaped Point | 5 | 40-43, 50 | 4 | | 1 | | 2 | 3 | | |
| Tapering Point | 2 | 38, 45 | 2 | | | | | 2 | | |
| Double-pointed Point | 1 | 47 | 1 | | | | 1 | | | |
| Side Scraper | 1 | 37 | 1 | | | | 1 | | | |
| Concave Scraper | 1 | 36 | 1 | | | | 1 | | | |
| AREA 4 | | | | | | | | | | |
| Broad-stemmed Point | 2 | 10, 11 | 2 | | | | | | | 2 |
| Diamond-shaped Point | 1 | 12 | 1 | | | | 1 | | | |
| AREA NOT KNOWN | | | | | | | | | | |
| Tapering Point | 2 | 17, 18 | | 2 | | | | | | |
| TOTALS | 50 | | 25 | 22 | 3 | 6 | 27 | 9 | 2 | 4 |

Area 3 (1958), 40 feet west of Area 2 and found intact under thick bearberry, had, underlying 4 inches of nearly sterile topsoil, a midden-like stratum, 1 to 5 inches thick, of dark brown to blackish brown sand, which contained artifacts, chippings, whole and broken pebbles, and other camp refuse, including traces of bone. Chunks of broken quartz were numerous. As with Area 2 there was a varying thickness of stained sand between the dark midden and the yellow sand. On the north, or uphill, side, the camp debris ended abruptly at the edge of a natural layer of gravel, which was doubtless at the surface in Indian times. At the west side of Area 3, in part in black earth and in part in gray sand, occurred a lens of oyster shells. There were two pits, each filled with discolored sand. Although the excavation comprised 20 squares of 4 by 4 feet, only seven of these held a significant number of artifacts (Fig. 1, 28-51).

Potsherds from this area fall into two categories. (1) Two small, shell-tempered fragments, apparently from one vessel, came to light, one at the top of the midden and the other 2 inches lower. They are from a pot with coil construction and thick walls marked with cord-wound-stick indentations. These sherds are friable and tend to split parallel with the surfaces. (2) Grit-tempered sherds were found at the juncture of dark midden with stained sand at two places in Area 3. One find involved 12 pieces, all from the same vessel, on which dentate stamping is combined with incising in parallel lines (Fig. 1, 33, 34).

Of the excavated areas, only Area 3 showed typological stratigraphy, despite the fact that the upper 1 to 2 inches of the dark midden were probably mixed, owing to scuffing by late dwellers and to modification, or to flattening out, of this layer by slope erosion before the accumulation of topsoil. In conformity with the expected positional relationship for Cape Cod, shell-tempered pottery and late types of triangular points were higher than grit-tempered pottery and stemmed points.

Area 4 (1952, 1958) was probably an important area. About 40 feet in greatest dimension, and lying just west of Area 3, it had been almost entirely dug out before my visit of 1951. The meager data show the presence of grit-tempered pottery and broad-stemmed points (Fig. 1, 10-12).

Early work was reported by Mrs. Lesser (Boissevain 1944). The artifacts kindly lent me by her seem, with few exceptions, to postdate the finds of the later excavation just described. Owing to disturbance by anonymous collectors and by road builders, I was unable in 1958 to locate with certainty the areas dug by her.

Sixty-two small potsherds are in the early collection. With the exception of one minute fragment which is grit-tempered, this pottery is tempered with finely broken shell. Walls are relatively thin, 3/16 to 5/16 inch. Coil breaks are absent. Cord malleation occurs on the exteriors of 27 pieces, with sometimes incising in addition. Six specimens are indented with the edge of a scallop shell. Other sherds are too small or too eroded for outside treat-

ment to be determined. Interiors are commonly smooth, although a few fragments show fine striations, suggestive of the use of a comb-like scraper. Two rim sherds marked with a scallop shell have a distinct outward convexity and doubtless are from pots with channeled, or extruded, collars (Fig. 1, 13, 16).

Chipped-stone artifacts found by Mrs. Lesser include one stemmed point of yellow flint-like rock unlike any other material known from the site (Fig. 1, 15). Present also is the tip of what was probably a stemmed point (Fig. 1, 14). In addition the report of 1943 mentions the finding of a grooved ax and six triangular points.

DISCUSSION

Stratigraphy in the thin and scattered middens of Griffin Island leaves something to be desired. The available data and artifacts, however, fit into the general sequence of cultural stages for Cape Cod, as worked out from a study both of single-component and of stratified sites.

With the exception of a superficial part of Area 3, and possibly of a slight overlay of Area 2, the classifiable material from the four areas that are numbered represents the Middle Woodland horizon. The presence of this level as it occurs on Cape Cod is revealed mainly by grit-tempered, rocker- and dentate-stamped pottery (Moffett 1957, Pls. 3, 4, 5 lower half), associated with stemmed and side-notched points. The pottery, which occurs with considerable minor variation in form and decoration, strongly resembles the earlier types of Point Peninsula ceramics of interior New York (Ritchie and MacNeish 1949). These similarities, however, may be due to a common source of distribution, rather than to direct derivation. At any rate, the Cape Cod pottery of this time did not, I believe, descend from New York Point Peninsula ceramics through the New York and Connecticut coastal area, which was then devoted to pottery of the Windsor tradition (Smith 1950). It seems quite possible that the Middle Woodland vessels of Cape Cod came from northern New England by way of the coast of Maine.

The obvious difference between the relatively slender projectile points of felsite and quartzite from Area 1 and the heavy stubby specimens of quartz from Areas 2, 3, and 4 probably has, within the long span of Middle Woodland, a technological and chronological importance, which is not yet understood. In terms of the Wellfleet section of Cape Cod, this level at Griffin Island has a close analogy with the lowest stratum of the Seth's Swamp site (Torrey 1946).

The upper part of Area 3, to judge from quite small potsherds, refers to the Late Woodland I period, a time represented on Cape Cod by coiled, thick-walled, coarse shell-tempered, straight-rimmed pots with channeled interiors and either cord malleated or cord-wound-stick decorated exteriors (Moffett 1957, Pl. 6, 1-10). While some vessels may have had conoidal bases, in other instances the bottoms were rounded or broadly U-shaped. Stone points were predominantly of large triangular type. This Late Woodland I level is found at many sites in the

Cape Cod region. In Wellfleet it comprises the top stratum of the Seth's Swamp site (Torrey 1946).

Save for a few specimens that are perhaps relatively early, the artifacts excavated by Mrs. Lesser are from the Late Woodland 2 period, the final Woodland manifestation of late prehistoric and of early historic times. Thin-walled, globular vessels, doubtless resembling the "earthen pots" seen on Cape Cod by the Pilgrims in 1620, were tempered with finely broken shell, or rarely with fine grit. Necks were constricted and surmounted either with flaring rims or with channeled, or extruded collars, the latter signifying, I believe, an extension to this area of influence from the Niantic stage of the Windsor pottery of Long Island and coastal Connecticut (Smith 1950). Surface treatment of late Cape Cod vessels consisted of cord malleation, often accompanied by incising, and, as in the case of the Niantic-like pots, of scallop shell designs. The containers with flaring rims were widely distributed in this area (Moffett 1957, Pl. 7, 1-4, 6, 7, 9), but those with channeled collars were of more limited occurrence. Aside from Griffin Island, however, sherds of the last kind have turned up on Cape Cod in Barnstable (Bullen and Brooks 1948, Fig. 2 a) and in Eastham (Johnson 1942: 29). From the Hemenway site in the latter town are rim sherds, now in the Peabody Museum, Harvard University, that are virtual duplicates of Griffin Island specimens (Fig. 1, 13, 16). During this late period, as in the preceding period, projectile points were triangular.

To sum up, the Griffin Island site may be said to epitomize the archaeology of Cape Cod for Middle Woodland and later periods. Missing from the site are vestiges of earlier cultures; namely, Early Woodland and Late Coastal Archaic, levels which might be expected at a site in this region. Each habitation area was doubtlessly the remains of a house site with its accompanying shell dump. Indicated is a seasonal use of the location by one or two families at a time who came to dig for shellfish in nearby flats. There is little evidence, such as a wide surface spread of stone chippings, of prehistoric garden plots on the island whose present soil is infertile. Of the three recognized cultural levels at the site, at least the most recent one represents the historic Nauset or their ancestors, a people for whom we have first hand accounts, notably from Champlain and the Pilgrim chroniclers.

BOISSEVAIN, ETHEL

1944 Observations on a Group of Shell Heaps on Cape Cod. *Bulletin of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society*, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 6-11. Andover.

BULLEN, R. P. AND EDWARD BROOKS

1948 Shell Heaps on Sandy Neck, Barnstable, Massachusetts. *Bulletin of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society*, Vol. 10, No. 1, pp. 7-13. Andover.

JOHNSON, FREDERICK

1942 The Hemenway Site, N-42-42, Eastham, Massachusetts. *Bulletin of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society*, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 27-30. Boston.

MOFFETT, ROSS

1957 A Review of Cape Cod Archaeology. *Bulletin of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society*, Vol. 19, No. 1, pp. 1-19. Attleboro.

RITCHIE, W. A. AND R. S. MACNEISH

1949 The Pre-Iroquoian Pottery of New York State. *American Antiquity*, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 97-124. Menasha.

SMITH, C. S.

1950 The Archaeology of Coastal New York. *Anthropological Papers of the American Museum of Natural History*, Vol. 43, Part 2. New York.

TORREY, HOWARD

1946 Evidences of Typological Stratigraphy at Seth's Swamp Site, Wellfleet, Massachusetts. *Bulletin of the Massachusetts Archaeological Society*, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 50-2. Andover.

PROVINCETOWN, MASS.

November, 1961