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ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECONNAISSANCE ALONG THE
CUMBERLAND RIVER IN THE OUTER NASHVILLE BASIN AND
THE WESTERN HIGHLAND RIM

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ABSTRACT

The Cumberland River region is a rich archaeological area that has received very little scientific attention. A brief, but systematic survey along the Cumberland yielded 41 previously unrecorded sites and recollections from 17 recorded sites. The small sample size, which inhibited the reconstruction of prehistoric settlement systems and patterns, was found to be adequate to reconstruct a tentative cultural history of the area.

The Cumberland survey encompassed a 30 mile section of riverine corridor (River Mile 156-186) from Bordeaux, a suburban area of northwest Nashville to Ashland City. The surveyed area lies on the western perimeter of the Outer Nashville Basin and penetrates into a portion of the Western Highland Rim. The physiography of this section of the Outer Nashville Basin is characterized by an entrenched river channel with prominent meander bends along with low uplands (500' AMSL) with gradual slopes lying 1000-4000 feet distant from the river edge. Uplands of greater elevation (600-700' AMSL) and inclination lie further back from the meander bends and exist as bluffs along the water's edge opposite these bends. As the Cumberland enters the Western Highland Rim, the riverine corridor becomes more restricted: meanders and the low uplands disappear. Both the low and elevated uplands are extensively dissected by numerous secondary streams that flow into the Cumberland.

The survey area lies within the limits of the Western Mesophytic Forest as defined by Braun (1950:122). In the Nashville Basin, this forested region consists predominantly of hickories and oaks with some occurrences of sugar maples and cedar stands (Braun 1950:132). The survey area also is included within the limits of the Carolinian Biotic Province (Dice 1943:16) which is characterized by a rich and diverse faunal assemblage. An exhaustive synthesis of the plant and animal resources available in the Middle Tennessee area is discussed in the First Report of the Normandy Archaeological Project (see Faulkner and McCollough 1973:8-51).

The relative lack of archaeological research and the loss of potential archaeological data due to the expansion of Nashville and the construction of Old Hickory Lake and Percy Priest Lake were primary reasons for the selection of

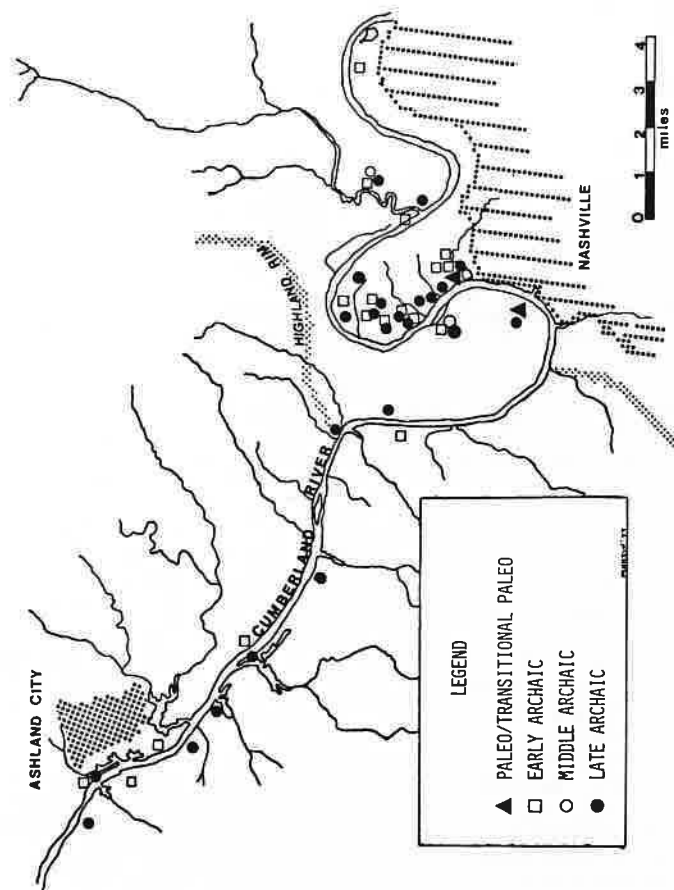


FIGURE 1. Distribution of Paleo-Indian and Archaic period sites.

this area for survey. Previous archaeological investigations in the Nashville Basin and Middle Cumberland region have consisted predominantly of the work of antiquarians (Jones 1876; Thruston 1890; Myer 1928) and concerned amateurs (Dowd 1969, 1970, 1972, and 1974). Recent research has transpired on only a very small scale (Ferguson, ed. 1972) and has been entirely oriented to the investigation of Mississippian period sites. With the exception of a Smithsonian River Basin Survey (Solecki 1954), site survey data has been accumulated only on a piecemeal basis and in a nonsystematic manner. Systematic surveys, which are required to initiate an understanding of a region's cultural history, have been entirely neglected. This survey represents the first systematic attempt to record all sites possible within a given area and assess the significance of the data obtained.

Industrial development and the lack of extensive row crop agriculture hampered the investigation of the survey area. In order to conduct a thorough survey, attempts were made to recollect and redefine known sites, to survey areas having conducive collecting conditions, and to test prospective areas that were currently in pasture. Testing, which not only proved to be very difficult during February because of inclement weather, was also non-productive in the documentation and delimitation of site areas and was subsequently discontinued, leaving large areas uninvestigated. After the limited number of cultivated fields had been surveyed, an intensive survey utilizing a boat was conducted along the river banks. The boat survey was successful in recording 21 sites buried under alluvial deposition and afforded the opportunity to investigate sites that would have gone unnoticed on a normal surface survey. Such a survey allowed for the recording of the stratigraphy for various sites and the delimitation of shell midden deposits. The survey concluded with the intensive survey of Cockrill Bend, an area under extensive cultivation by the State Prison Farm. A total of 25 sites were recorded in the latter area.

A grand total of 41 previously unrecorded sites were located and 17 others were resurveyed and collected. Considering the small sample size and the sampling biases involved, little can be said concerning settlement systems and settlement patterning. Although a large number of unanticipated sites do occur on the floodplain, a major sampling bias was created by the riverbank survey in the location of a large number of floodplain sites. A total of 34 sites was recorded on the floodplain, six on the alluvial terraces, 14 on the low uplands area, and three along secondary streams. One cave site was also recorded. Given the lack of floodplains in most of the secondary valleys and the lack of flat ground on the extensively dissected elevated uplands, prehistoric occupation in these particular physiographic zones was probably minimal and confined to seasonal or ephemeral encampments.

A total of 141 components can be isolated from the 58 sites, of which 68 are represented by only one diagnostic artifact. The components are represented by 559 total diagnostic items, 210 lithic artifacts and 349 potsherds. Although sample size is admittedly small, a tentative cultural history of the area can be reconstructed with the additional aid of local informants and by information available from 27 previously recorded sites within the survey area.

Evidence for Paleo-Indian and Transitional Paleo-Indian occupation indicates that this area was known and frequented by Paleo-Indian populations. It is attested by the recovery of one Greenbriar projectile point, one Hardaway Dalton point, and by a collector's report of a fluted point from the Ashland City area. The sparse occurrence of Paleo-Indian artifacts in private collections and from

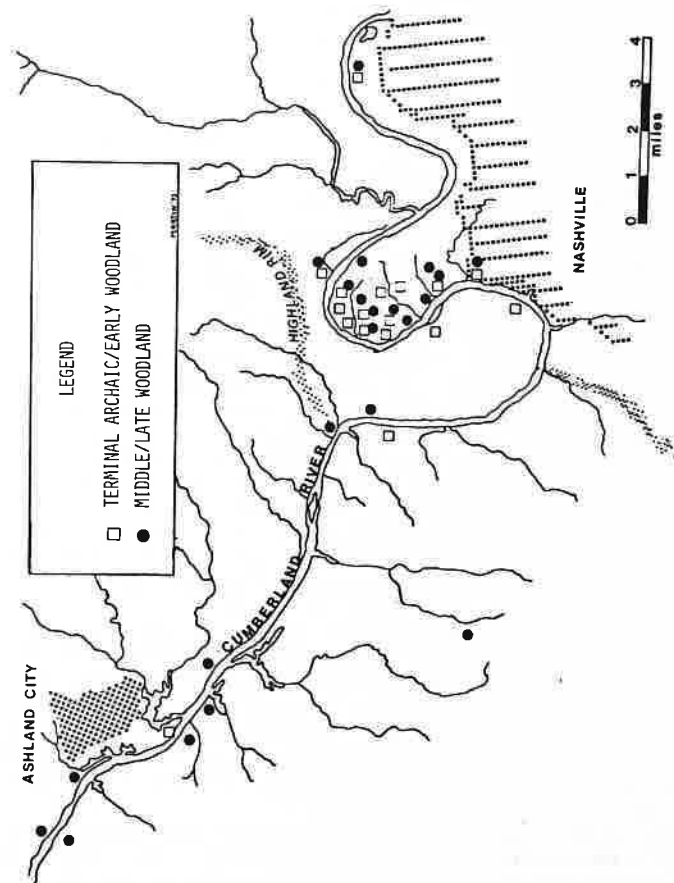


FIGURE 2. Distribution of Terminal Archaic/Early Woodland and Middle/Late Woodland period sites.

the survey sample tend to indicate that Paleo-Indian settlements were highly dispersed, but the possibility does exist that Paleo-Indian components may occur as buried deposits or in wooded upland areas that are inaccessible to surveyors and collectors. Several additional isolated Paleo projectile points are known to occur in the surrounding region (Lewis 1953:38; Solecki 1954:15; Coe and Fischer 1959:75) but there is only one site in the surrounding region that has produced evidence for any intensive or long term Paleo-Indian occupation (Dragoo 1973).

Early Archaic sites are well represented by both amateur collections and survey data from 18 sites and are marked by the occurrence of Kirk Corner Notched, Kirk Stemmed, Harpeth River, Plevna, Lost Lake, Big Sandy I, Cypress Creek projectile points/knives and by keeled endscrapers. No bifurcate base projectile points/knives are present in the survey sample, but both Lecroy and Kanawha projectile points/knives occur on an infrequent basis in private collections. Although Early Archaic artifacts occur on a number of sites, the predominant occurrence of single artifact components make any statements other than those concerned with the artifacts themselves unwarranted. Considering the predominantly later prehistoric components at some of these sites and the reworking on some of these artifacts, it is highly possible that some of these artifacts were picked up elsewhere and carried to their present location by prehistoric inhabitants at a later point in time. The prehistoric recovery and modification of earlier artifacts has been documented and discussed by previous researchers (Jolly 1970).

Middle Archaic components are marked by the occurrence of four Eva projectile points/knives on three sites from the survey sample and are represented in private collections by the occasional occurrences of Eva, Benton and White Springs projectile points/knives. Analysis of private collections and collector reports indicate that all of the above mentioned projectile points/knives occur on two additional sites within the survey area, both of which are shell middens. The relative lack of Middle Archaic components compared to Early Archaic and Late Archaic components tends to suggest that this area was sparsely populated during this period.

From the survey sample there are a greater number of site components and projectile points/knives for the Late Archaic period than for any other time period represented. The occurrence of Late Archaic sites are marked by the presence of Ledbetter, Pickwick, Kays and untyped stemmed projectile points/knives. Both survey and collector data indicate strongly that this segment of the Cumberland Valley was extensively populated during Late Archaic times.

Additional evidence for Archaic occupation in this region is marked by the occurrence of Big Sandy II, untyped projectile points possessing Archaic characteristics and by fragmented Archaic projectile points. Big Slough projectile points/knives were noted to occur in private collections. The flaking patterns on the Big Slough projectile points/knives are characteristic of the Early-Middle Archaic time period while the flaking patterns of the Big Sandy II projectile points/knives are characteristic of the Middle-Late Archaic time period.

Terminal Archaic/Early Woodland sites are indicated by the presence of Cotaco Creek, Wade and Adena projectile points/knives on 16 sites while an Early Woodland affiliation is suggested by the occurrence of a single fabric-impressed limestone-tempered sherd. There is a tendency for a greater number of sites and more intensively occupied sites to occur in the Outer Nashville Basin than in the Western Highland Rim. Site location in this area, where low uplands and

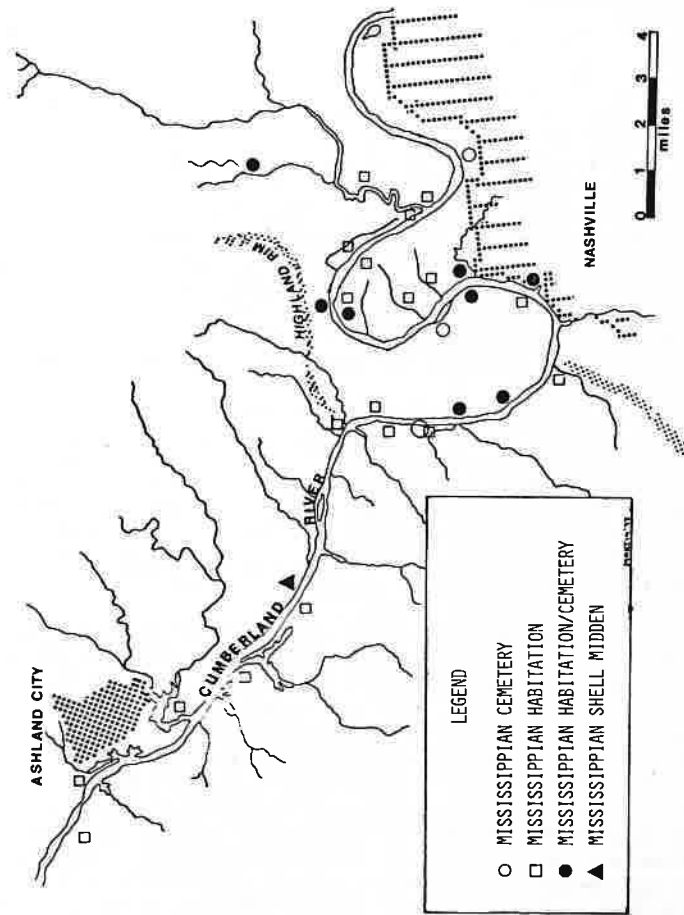


FIGURE 3. Distribution of Mississippian period sites.

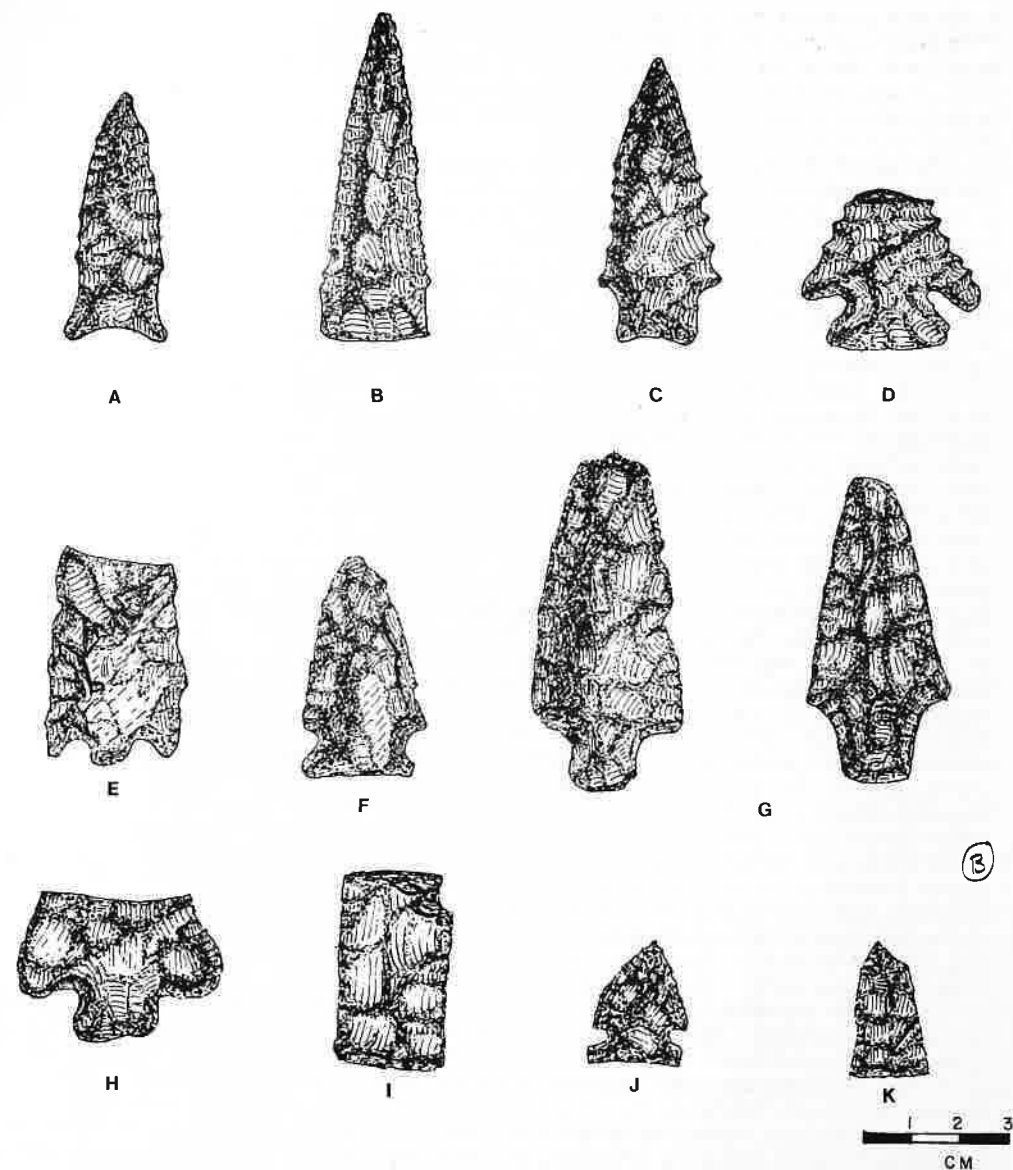
This figure includes 11 unvisited Mississippian sites in the survey area that had been previously recorded.

extensive alluvial bottoms occur, would be optimal for the exploitation of both floodplain and upland resources. Evidence for elaborate burial ceremonialism is evident during this time period. A site situated within the limits of the survey area has yielded a burial accompanied by Wade and Cotaco Creek projectile points/knives along with artifacts made of Dover chert, galena and hematite (Dowd 1970:1-14).

Sites of the Middle Woodland time period are represented by 19 separate components and are evidenced by the presence of Copena and Bakers Creek projectile points/knives and by the occurrence of core and blade work. Prismatic bladelets are the most predominant lithic artifact. Medium to large triangular projectile points of the Middle Woodland variety tend to conform in the majority of instances to the Copena type rather than to the McFarland type. Middle Woodland ceramics are undoubtedly represented in the survey sample, but considering the absence of any established ceramic series from excavated site contexts, Middle Woodland ceramics remain chronologically indistinguishable from Late Woodland ceramics.

Only a paucity of Woodland ceramic material has been previously reported from the Tennessee portion of the Cumberland River drainage. The Woodland ceramics in these various assemblages were fit and in some instances forced into ceramic types that had been previously defined in other drainage basins (see Coe and Fischer 1959; Dowd 1969; Dowd and Broster 1972). The lack of a properly established ceramic typology for the Middle Cumberland area along with the small sample of Woodland ceramics recovered by the survey prompted the classification of ceramics into descriptive rather than typological categories. All Woodland period ceramics that were not fabric-impressed were placed into a Middle/Late Woodland category and are represented by a small sample of 134 sherds from 15 sites. Siliceous-tempered ware, with a tempering of either quartz or chert oftentimes with varying amounts of fired clay particles, is represented by 49 cord-marked, three plain and 18 residual sherds. Limestone-tempered ceramics are represented by 15 plain, five cord-marked, five residual sherds and by the occurrence of a single check stamped sherd. Clay/grog tempered ware is represented by 11 cord-marked, seven plain, one incised, one rectangular punctate sherd, and 18 residual sherds. The rectangular punctate sherd has a thickened rim and conforms to ceramic types defined for the Driskill Complex along the Lower Cumberland (Clay 1963:214). It is significant to note the presence of three limestone-tempered check stamped sherds and one limestone-tempered podal support fragment from a reliable amateur's collection from a site located on Cockrill Bend. Instances of check stamping and complicated stamping, both characteristic of the South Appalachian Ceramic Tradition, have been reported from the Barkley Reservoir (Coe and Fisher 1959:31) but neither have been reported from the Lower Cumberland in Kentucky (Clay 1963).

Although no definite conclusions regarding cultural affiliation can be drawn, certain suggestions can be made concerning the age of some of these ceramic types. Vessels with tetrapodal supports are known to occur in neighboring regions only in Middle Woodland context, thus the presence of a limestone-tempered podal support fragment indicates that limestone tempering is present during this time period. Limestone tempering appears to persist in time. Recent excavations at 40DV53 on Mansker Creek, a tributary of the Cumberland in North Nashville, has yielded a homogeneous assemblage of cord-marked limestone-tempered ceramics that is currently believed to belong to the early portion of the Late Woodland time period (William O. Autry, personal communication). A possible temporal distinction



Cumberland River Survey: Selected Lithic Artifacts

FIGURE 4. a) Hardaway Dalton; b) Harpeth River; c) Kirk Stemmed; d) Lost Lake; e) Eva; f) Big Sandy II; g) Late Archaic Stemmed; h) Cotaco Creek; i) Copena; j) Knight Island; k) Madison.

in limestone-tempered ceramics is also suggested by survey data. Although sample size is small, a tendency for limestone-tempered ceramics to occur exclusive of siliceous and clay-tempered wares is suggested.

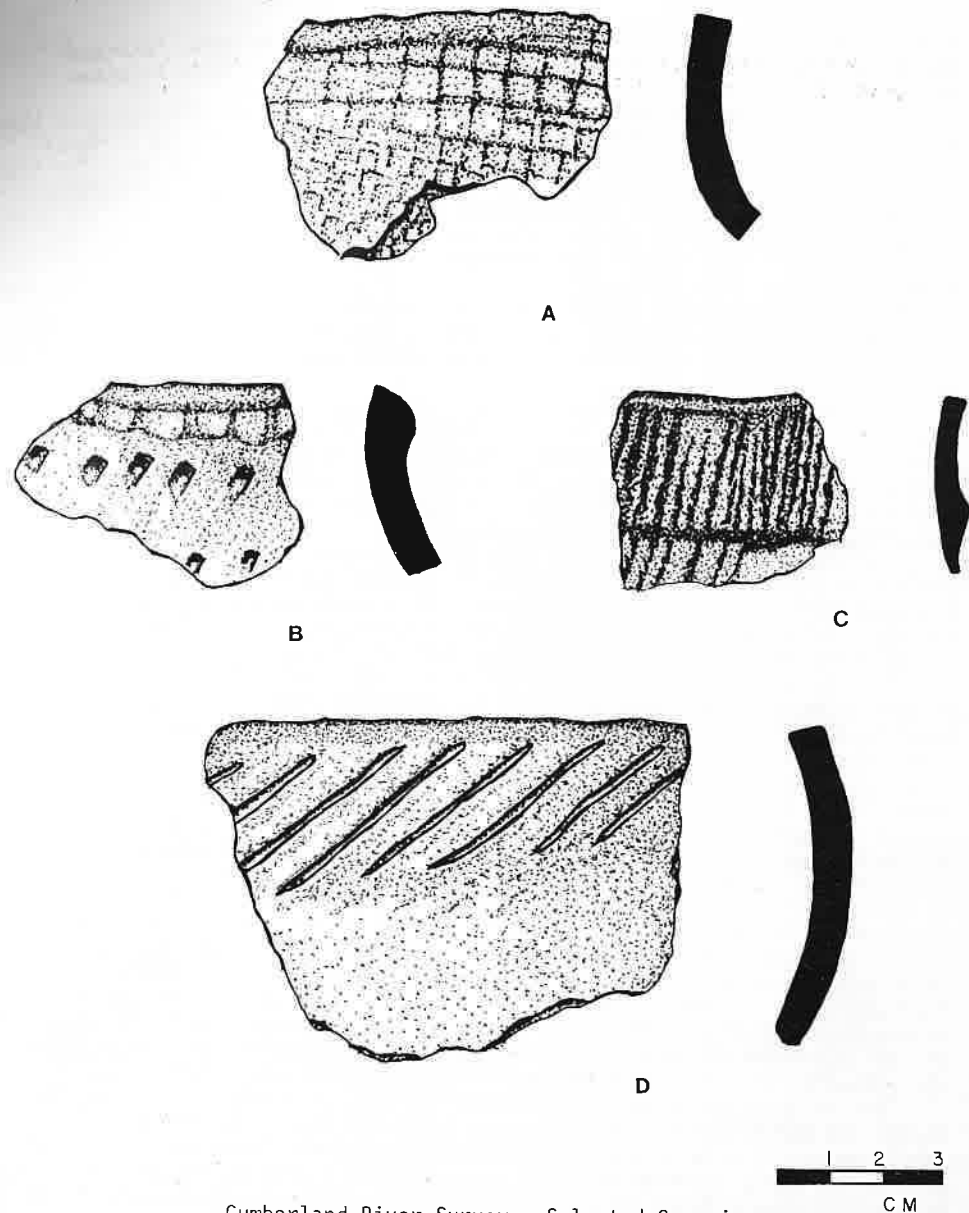
No stone or dome shaped earthen mounds of the Middle or Late Woodland time period were found within the survey area. In fact, the occurrence of these mounds is quite rare along the Cumberland River and its' tributaries. The Glass Mounds, situated on the Harpeth River near Franklin, are the only demonstrable Middle Woodland mound group in the Middle Cumberland River region. Cremations accompanied by objects of copper, mica and galena have been recovered from this site (Clark 1878:272; Putnam 1882:106-107). These are probably one of the same mound groups that were reported at a much later date (Jennings 1946:126). Additional mounds of possible Middle Woodland affiliation have been reported (Faulkner 1968:21; Walthall and Keel 1974:2-3); however, some of these additional references are merely different references to the Glass Mounds (see Griffin, *et al.* 1970:107).

Late Woodland lithic components are represented by the sole occurrence of a Knight Island projectile point and possibly by a portion of the eight small straight-based triangular projectile points which were placed into a Late Woodland/Mississippian category. The presence of both Middle Woodland and Late Woodland components on a minimum of 22 sites suggests that this area was more than modestly populated during this time span.

The earliest investigators (Jones 1876; Thruston 1890) have commented on the preponderance of stone box burials in the Nashville vicinity. Thruston believed that this indicated the presence of a large population and refers to the surrounding area as having a "cordon of frontier forts" to protect a "central and thickly settled district" (Thruston 1890:4).

Mississippian components occur on 20 sites and are evidenced by the presence of hoes, hoe chips and shell-tempered ceramics. The size and debris densities at many of these sites along with the numerous occurrences of stone box cemeteries indicate an intensive occupation by a large, stable population. The presence of a settlement hierarchy is suggested by differences in site size and debris densities at Mississippian period sites. Although survey data alone cannot be considered conclusive, the pattern suggests that these sites may represent villages, hamlets and farmsteads. In terms of settlement distribution, a concentration of large Mississippian sites with associated stone box cemeteries can be observed in the section of the survey conducted in the Outer Nashville Basin. Although the exact significance of this cluster remains uncertain, it may be postulated that an economic advantage, in terms of arable land, may lie in the occurrence of more extensive alluvial bottoms along this particular section of the Cumberland. Evidence for participation in an extensive trade network is evidenced during this time period in the Middle Cumberland region by the occurrence of artifacts made of Dover chert, Chattanooga black shale, conch shell, copper, steatite and catlinite (see Thruston 1890; Dowd and Broster 1972; Ferguson 1973).

Recent excavations by the Tennessee Division of Archaeology at the Mound Bottom and the Sellar's Farm sites have indicated that both loop and strap handle vessels are in evidence at Mississippian mound complexes in the Nashville Basin. The early radiocarbon dates and loop handle ceramic vessels at the Mound Bottom site (see O'Brien 1977), one of the most elaborate Mississippian mound complexes in the Nashville Basin, strongly suggests that a more complex degree of social organization is in evidence immediately following the Late Woodland time period. A chiefdom level of sociopolitical organization for this early



Cumberland River Survey: Selected Ceramics

FIGURE 5. a) Limestone tempered check stamped; b) Clay tempered punctate; c) Clay tempered cord marked; d) Clay tempered incised.

Mississippian site has been hypothesized and tested by data from excavated context (O'Brien 1977). The excavations, while not supporting every aspect of the chiefdom model, have indicated that there is supporting evidence for the model (O'Brien 1977:468).

It is pertinent to note the conspicuous absence of Mississippian mound centers along this particular riverine section of the Cumberland. Two Mississippian mound complexes, the Brick Church Pike Mounds (40DV39) and the Nashville Mounds (40DV4) lie within a few miles to the northeast and east of the survey area. Several additional Mississippian mound centers are located in the Nashville Basin and in the Western Highland Rim. The majority of those located in the Nashville Basin are situated on tributary streams of the Cumberland while those in the Western Highland Rim are located adjacent to the Cumberland River. The significant gap in the occurrence of these mound centers and the differences in the settlement location between those in the Nashville Basin and those in the Western Highland Rim may be the combined result of sociopolitical and environmental factors.

The importance of mussel exploitation in this region is evidenced by the presence of ten shell midden accumulations, some of which show considerable depth and stratigraphy. The occurrence of these middens in direct association with Archaic, Woodland and Mississippian materials indicates that this food source was known and exploited through a considerable period of time.

A proper study of the raw material resources was not attempted; however, it was observed that medium to large sized water worn cobbles occurred on numerous sites in primary stages of core reduction. This phenomenon strongly suggests the presence of a locally available water carried flint source. A total of three items of Dover chert was present in a sample of several thousand lithic items collected. Local collectors report that Dover chert is known to occur in the survey area, especially in the form of hoe chips on Mississippian period sites.

Acknowledgements

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Table 1. Number and kind of components and diagnostic elements represented.

CUMBERLAND RIVER SURVEY

Cultural Type	Number of Components	Diagnostic Elements
Paleo/Transitional Paleo	2	(2) 1 Hardaway Dalton, 1 Greenbriar.
Early Archaic	18	(26) 5 Early Archaic corner notched (Decatur, Kirk, Palmer), 3 Plevna, 1 Lost Lake, 3 Big Sandy I, 4 Harpeth River, 3 Kirk Stemmed, 2 serrated biface fragments, 5 keeled endscrapers.
Middle Archaic	3	(4) 4 Eva
Late Archaic	23	(52) 52 stemmed points (Pickwick Elora, Kays, Ledbetter and untyped or undifferentiated stemmed points).
Indeterminate Archaic	16	(16) 5 Big Sandy II, 3 untyped and 8 fragmented points.
Terminal Archaic/ Early Woodland	17	(28) 13 Adena and Adena-like, 5 Cotaco Creek and Cotaco Creek-like, 9 Wade and 1 fabric-impressed limestone-tempered sherd.
Middle Woodland	19	(66) 7 Copena, 5 Bakers Creek, 54 prismatic bladelets.
Middle/Late Woodland	14	(136) 2 medium sized triangular points and 134 clay, siliceous and limestone-tempered sherds.
Indeterminate Woodland	2	(2) 2 celt fragments
Late Woodland	1	(1) 1 Knight Island point.
Late Woodland/ Mississippian		(8) 8 small straight-based triangular points.
Mississippian	20	(218) 2 hoes, 2 hoe chips, 214 shell-tempered sherds.
Total	141	(559)

Table 2. Distribution of the components in the various physiographic zones and selected geological features.

	Sample Size	Floodplain	Alluvial Terraces	Lower Riverine Uplands	Secondary Stream Valleys	Caves
Paleo/Transitional Paleo	(2)	2				
Early Archaic	(18)	7	4	6	1	
Middle Archaic	(3)		1	1	1	
Late Archaic	(23)	13	3	6	1	
Indeterminate Archaic	(16)	8	2	5	1	
Terminal Archaic/Early Woodland	(17)	8	3	5		1
Middle Woodland	(19)	12	2	4	1	
Middle/Late Woodland	(14)	13		1		
Late Woodland	(1)	1				
Indeterminate Woodland	(2)	1		1		
Late Woodland/Mississippian	(6)	4	2			
Mississippian	(20)	14	3	2	1	
Total	(141)	83	20	31	6	1

Table 3. Woodland Ceramics

	CLAY					SILICEOUS			LIMESTONE				
	Residual	Punctate	Incised	Cord-marked	Plain	Residual	Cord-marked	Plain	Residual	Fabric-impressed	Check Stamped	Cord-marked	Plain
40DV14/Open Habitation													
40DV36/Open Habitation					1	1							
40DV37/Open Habitation						30							
40DV69/Open Habitation					1								
40DV71/Open Habitation													
40DV76/Open Habitation													
40DV78/Open Habitation													
40DV93/Open Habitation													
40DV96/Open Habitation													
40CH12/Open Habitation													
40CH20/Cave													
40CH31/Open Habitation													
40CH33/Open Habitation													
40CH56/Open Habitation													
Total													

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