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Frank Martine Heal, Editor



NOTES ON SLAUGHTER CREEK

By D. S. Davidson

At various times during 1933-1934 the writer, under the auspices of the Faculty Research Committee of the University of Pennsylvania and accompanied by graduate students of the Department of Anthropology or by members of the Archaeological Society of Delaware, conducted excavations at Slaughter Creek, the most extensive known aboriginal site in Delaware. Although these efforts to date must be considered as of a most preliminary nature it is possible on the basis of the information secured to outline some of the broader problems which beg for treatment and to suggest a few tentative conclusions which pertain to them, subject to reconsideration when the site has been more extensively surveyed. The following notes, therefore, are offered for the primary purpose of acquainting the members of the Society with the status of part of the work so far conducted and with the problems which should be taken into consideration in the planning of further activities in the state.

The Slaughter Creek site, as is well known, is situated on Prime Hook Neck, the southern shore of Slaughter Creek, and extends from the edge of the marshlands, which stretch eastward to Delaware Bay, for an undetermined distance inland. The site obviously is a most favorable one. The land is fertile and well suited to agriculture, the adjacent marshlands, and woods must have provided an abundance of fowl and game, and the waterways and Delaware Bay contain a never failing supply of fish and shellfood. Indeed, shellfood seems to have been of primary importance in the diet of the aborigines if we may judge from the great abundance of refuse-pits filled with oyster and other shells, a characteristic feature of this site, in distinct contrast to aboriginal locations further inland in which shells are generally lacking.

Shell heaps as evidence of aboriginal occupation are not uncommon in all parts of the world but in most localities they are situated on the coast, as near as possible to the source of supply. This seems natural since shellfood is a bulky commodity which contains little food in proportion to its weight and great quantities of which can not be carried easily even with baskets or other containers. In most areas shell dumps are in the form of small mounds rising above the surface of the ground, subsequently covered by sand or earth as the result of natural agencies.

The shell accumulations at Slaughter Creek differ in these two respects for not only were the bivalves transported, presumably by canoe, several miles inland from the bay but the shells were carefully disposed of along with other rubbish in large pits dug for the purpose. Although the earth is soft in this locality as elsewhere in Delaware, the digging of these pits must have entailed considerable labor for many of them exceed ten feet in surface length and width and the larger ones may be between four and five feet in depth. The tools employed in making these excavations were not discovered but may have been the shells, themselves. When it is realized that the Slaughter creek site is studded with these pits, the total number probably running into the hundreds, the great amount of labor involved can be appreciated. Whatever the direct motive for these efforts may have been the results certainly contributed to a more sanitary condition of the village.

An examination of the pits leads to the conclusion that they were rapidly filled. The precipitous walls and the bottoms show no accumulations of humus, for the mixture of refuse and debris rests directly upon the yellow alluvial earth. Judging from the importance of shellfood to the occupants of this village it seems not unlikely that even the larger pits could have been filled within a few weeks by a few families each bringing in daily from the bay a canoe load of oysters.

The contents of the pits consist almost entirely of shells of which many show evidence of contact with fire. Presumably heat was an important agency in the opening of these delicacies for the red and yellow scorching tends to be more prominent on the outer surface of the shells. There are many examples of shells blackened both inside and out, but this condition, it would seem, can be ascribed reasonably to accidental dropping into the fire or to subsequent burning of mixed refuse.

Although we have no direct evidence as to the habits of these Indians in policing their village, there are reasons for believing that the shells, possibly after each meal, were gathered into baskets or other containers and dumped into the pits. Shells usually free from much earth or other debris are often found solidly in spaces of a cubic foot or two as if dumped out of some sort of container rather than tossed individually or in small groups into the pit. Along side of such an accumulation or surrounded by several of them one occasionally finds others of approximately equal size consisting of a few shells mixed with charcoal and earth, fragments of animal bones, sherds of pottery, and occasionally, a broken stone or bone artifact, as if representing the sweepings of a hearth gathered together in a basket for disposal in the pits. Many of the pottery fragments in such a space belong to the same pot and can be fitted together into a larger section as indicated by the accompanying figures. However, in no instance was it possible to piece together as much as a quarter of a vessel, a fact which demonstrates that the other parts of broken vessels were disposed of elsewhere. It seems not unlikely that several refuse-pits were being filled at the same time, hence it may be possible to add to the fragments at hand sherds to be collected in other pits. Although pieces from different pits have not yet been found to fit together there are a few pieces from different pits which appear to belong to the same pot.

It should not be supposed from the above remarks that these refuse-pits were built up in any orderly arrangements, for such is far from being the case. Pot sherds which have fitted together have come from various parts of a pit, a fact which would seem to indicate that they were tossed in with sweepings at different times or that large fragments were thrown in on the shells to break into smaller pieces and fly in all directions.

Most of the pits so far opened were found to contain mostly shells and only an occasional pot sherd, animal bone or broken

artifact. In only a few instances were these objects at all prominent and in only one pit, the first excavated, could they be said to be prolific. Practically all the specimens illustrated in the accompanying figures were extracted from this first excavation. It is to be expected that others pits containing even a greater abundance eventually will be found.

It seems strange that the debris in the pits contained no evidence of agriculture. No corn cobs, kernels of corn, or seeds of any description were recovered. The damp climatic conditions of this region are not conducive to the preservation of perishable materials; nevertheless we should expect to find a few charred fragments if such had been deposited. There can be no doubt but that agriculture was practiced at the time these pits were dug. The extensive site indicates that it was occupied by a relatively large sedentary population and the great variety of pottery vessels, usually associated with agriculture, supports this contention. Furthermore the styles of incised ornamentation on the ceramic ware, as well as the presence of certain artifacts and types of burial in the pits, suggest that the site dates from late prehistoric times when agriculture was practiced, if we are permitted to draw analogies with the well authenticated evidence from New York and Pennsylvania. It is to be hoped that further inquiry will settle this question.

Slaughter Creek pottery is typical of that found throughout Delaware except that the tempering material consists mostly of pulverized shell. The color varies for the most part between yellow and light red, the size from small cup-like containers to large vessels twelve inches in diameter and from fifteen to eighteen inches or even more in depth. The bases, as in most Algonkian pottery, tend to be pointed but there are a few examples of the rounded forms, typical of Iroquoian ware. No indications of the Iroquoian collar were found, all vessels being characterized by straight rims flush with the sides of the vessels or slightly everted.

Incised and unincised ware are common, the outer walls of both sometimes have a ribbed appearance or show impressions of the usual twig and fabric types, and the inner walls are marked by scratches left during the smoothing process. The custom of incised ornamentation and the designs themselves are suggestive of distant Iroquoian influences. Although the incised vessels obviously were contemporary with those not so decorated, the suspicion seems warranted that the latter represent the continuation of historically earlier styles. Theoretically we should expect to find in Delaware older sites characterized only by unincised pottery. Such appearances would be consistent with chronologies suspected or already established in various parts of the general North Atlantic area.

The incised vessels generally but not always are equipped with slightly turned or everted rims whereas the unincised vessels tend to be straight lipped. All rims are smooth on the inner and upper surfaces, any decoration, if present, tending to be confined

to the outer edge. Such decorations, with variations, consist of short, deep, diagonal and closely spaced parallel grooves which reach only to the wall of the neck. Just below the overhanging rim or commencing at the mouth in the straight-rimmed vessels there may be one or more horizontal grooves which extend in a band of varying width around the entire vessel. In some instances this band may be broken by other designs but usually the latter are found below or adjacent to the lowest horizontal groove. Accordingly they may commence near the rim or several inches down the side of the pot.

These incised designs, although individually varying, are constructed almost entirely upon a triangular pattern, another feature which brings to mind Iroquoian vessels. They may consist of a triangle filled with lines parallel to one side or containing a graduated series of smaller isoscles triangles drawn from a common base line. Other arrangements include unbordered triangular spaces filled with parallel lines or herring-bone-like patterns. Rectangular forms are exceedingly rare and no examples of circular, curved, representative, or naturalistic motifs have been encountered. A more detailed study of the design elements must await the securing of a greater series of specimens.

In distinct contrast to the relative abundance of pottery sherds in the first pit the objects of stone or bone were decidedly scarce, a condition typical of shell heaps throughout the North Atlantic area. Even fewer artifacts were recovered in the other pits so far examined. Of those extracted most are in a broken condition, a reasonable explanation for their presence in refuse dumps!

Another interesting fact is the scarcity of stone chips. Nowhere in the Delmarva Peninsula do they seem to be numerous, that is in terms of their abundance in other areas, and this suggests that ready-made arrow heads and other objects of stone may have been imported. The few chips present indicate that some stonework was practiced but they are by far too few to warrant the belief that the numerous stone weapons collected as surface finds were all manufactured locally. Since the peninsula in general is devoid of stone the natives were forced to import either the raw material or the finished products or both. A detailed study of the types of stone present and their nearest mainland quarries might produce some interesting clues as to inter-tribal intercourse and exchange.

Very few arrowheads were found in the pits although they are common enough as surface finds on this site. The specimens, although mostly broken, appear to be definitely of the notched or stemmed types. Triangular arrowheads, so typical of Iroquoian sites in New York State but lacking in the earlier Algonkian levels of that region, were not recovered from the excavations but are found on the surface, as elsewhere in Delaware. It must not be concluded that they were not contemporary with the pit deposits for we have too few stone specimens to warrant at the present time any definite statement. Furthermore, as we have seen, the pottery designs suggest that the site was

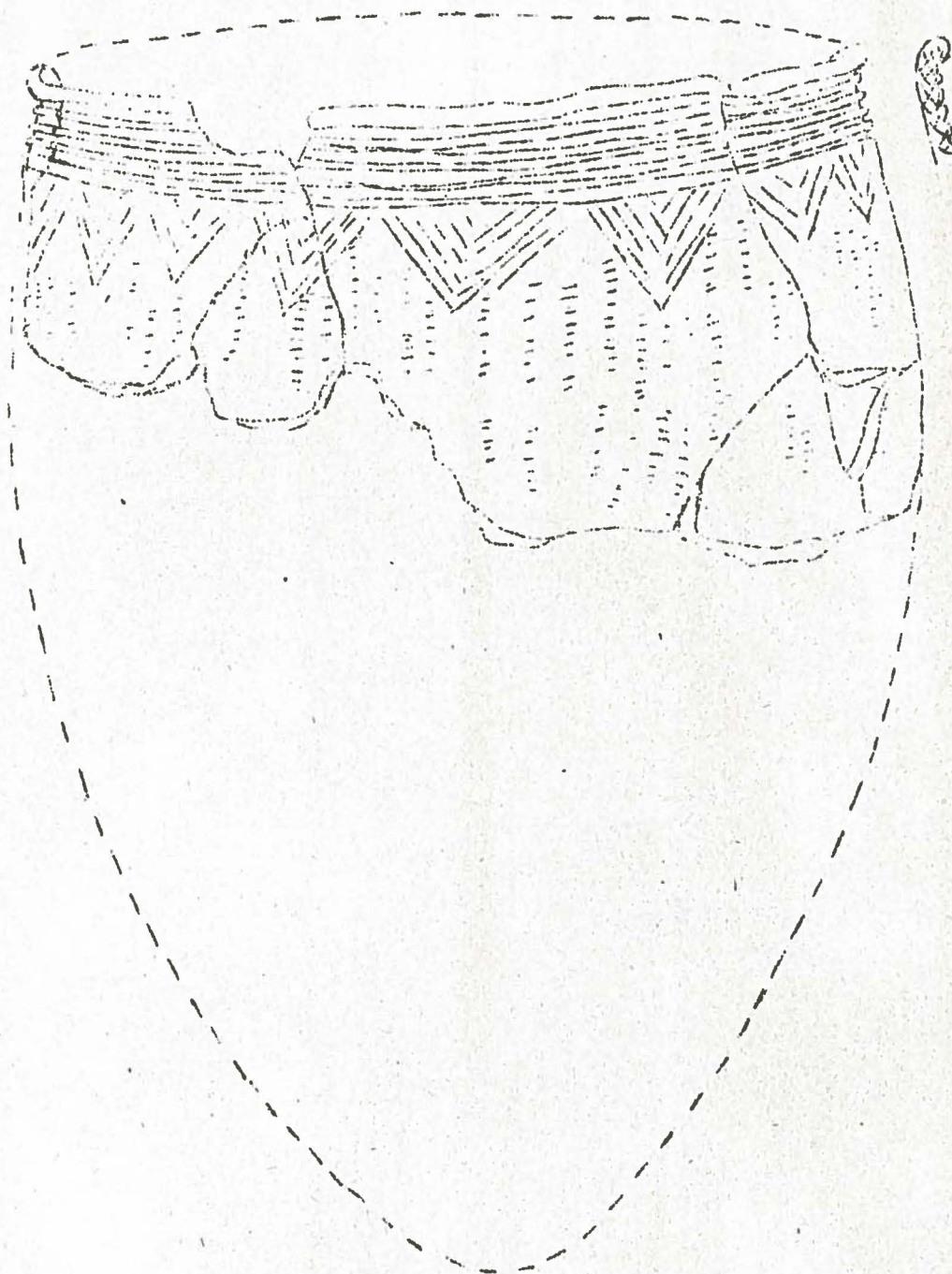
occupied during relatively late prehistoric times when theoretically the presence of triangular arrow heads should be not unexpected. Another factor which indicates the recency of the pits is the custom of placing in them cleaned-bone and nested burials, a practice which appears to have diffused to Delaware from the south just before the period of Colonial occupation. This question is to be discussed in a forthcoming issue of American Antiquity.

Other stone objects taken from the pits include only a crude scraper, two small and but partially polished celts, and an interesting small smooth stone with a scratched design consisting of a zigzag pattern of from three to five lines. Stone axes and pestles as yet have not appeared other than as surface finds.

Bone objects include several awls, a flat needle broken at the eye, a gorge, and two fragments of split bone showing a highly polished outer surface, and fractured at each end where perforations had been made.

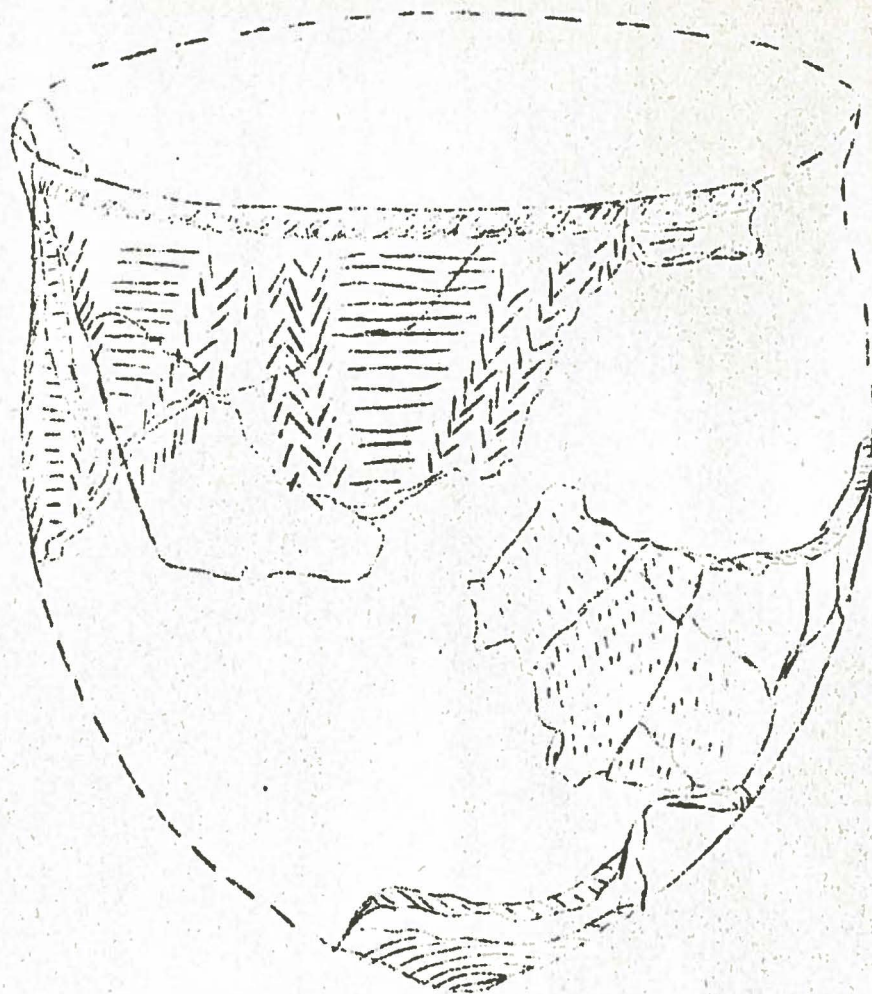
The time has not yet arrived for a detailed discussion of the cultural position of the Slaughter Creek site for although the surface finds indicate certain correlations, we are not yet certain that all of them were contemporary with the pits and the objects contained in them. That the culture of the entire Delmarva peninsula is preponderantly Algonkian, to use the term in its New York connotation, seems clear, but as I have pointed out in a former issue of this bulletin several Algonkian levels should be distinguishable. Typical of Algonkian culture are the following as known from surface collecting; straight-stemmed and notched arrowheads, cylindrical pestles, grooved axes, a few problematical stones, pitted hammer-stones, steatite bowls, straight-stemmed pipes, and unincised pottery vessels with pointed bases. From the pits we can add awls and gorges. On the basis of our knowledge of other regions we can indicate the following as suggestive of relatively recent Iroquoian influence; triangular arrowheads, small celts, needles, incised pottery vessels, rounded bases and designs of triangular pattern. Subsequent investigation in Delaware and in other areas undoubtedly will permit us to add to these two lists and some revision may be required. However, the first duty of the Society is to foster a meticulous and comprehensive excavation of Slaughter Creek and other sites with the primary purpose of determining the association of these traits as they are found in situ. It can be only after we have an abundance of information of this type that it will be possible to proceed with the important questions of the chronological aspects of culture in Delaware and the Delmarve Peninsula.

SLAUGHTER CREEK

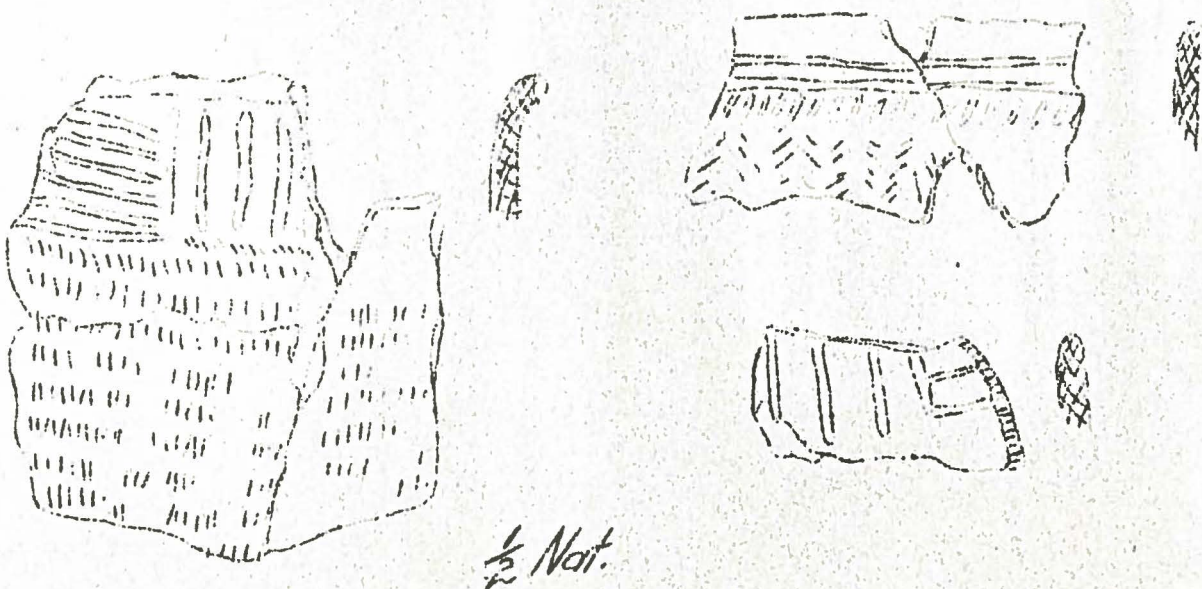


Reconstruction of a large pottery vessel

E. H. H.

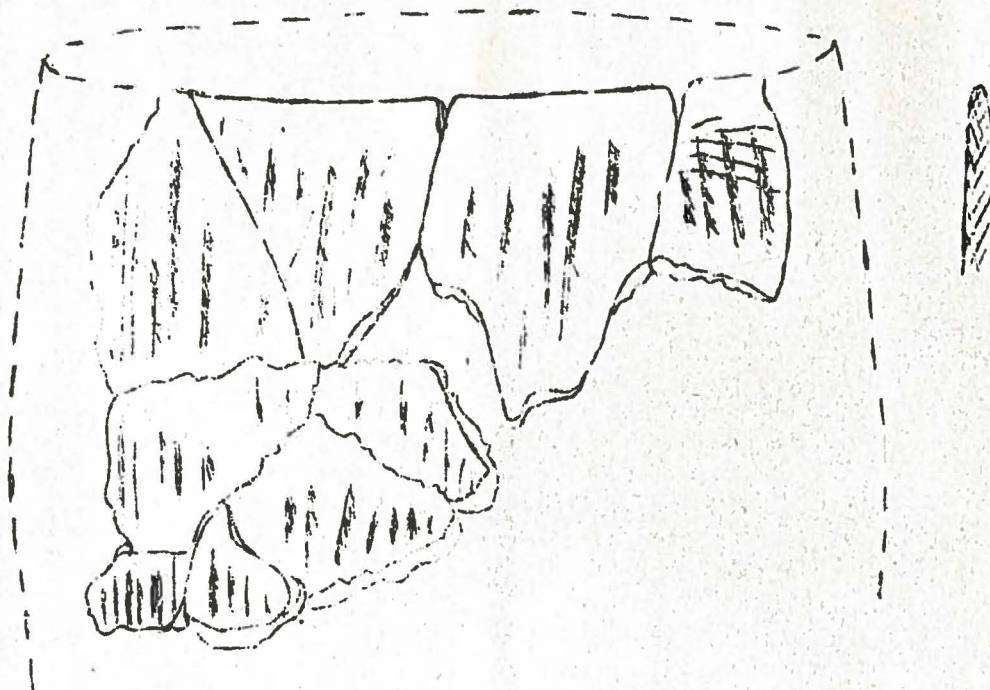


T y p e s o f I n c i s e d D e s i g n s



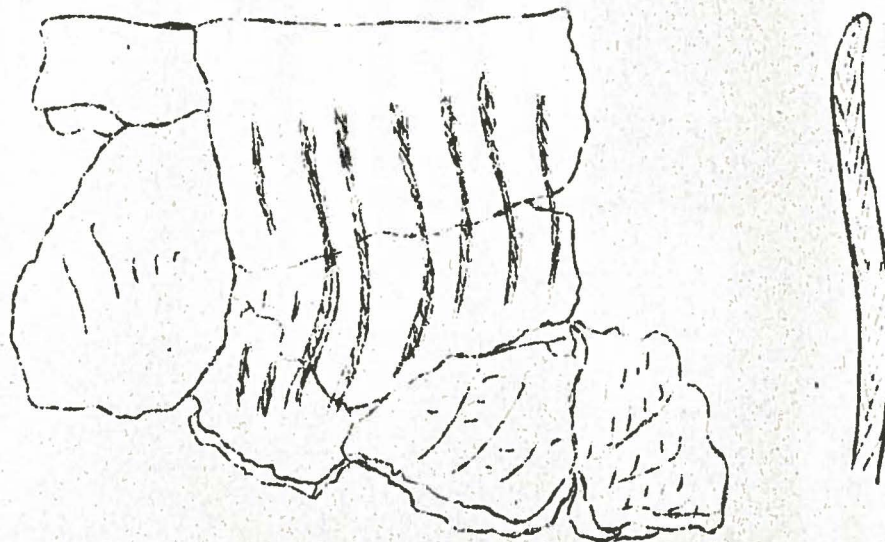
1/2 Nat.

S L A U G H T E R C R E E K

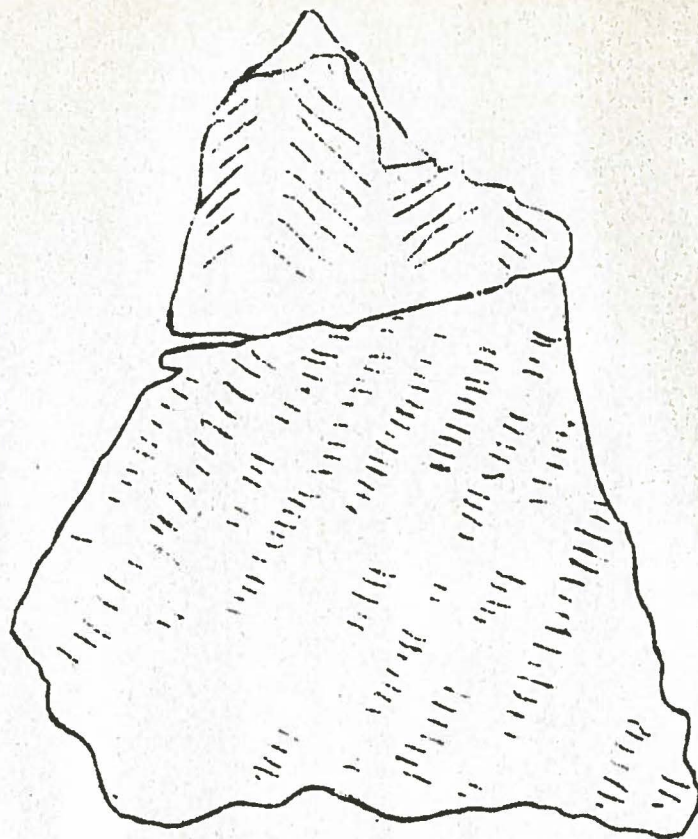


Unincised Pottery Vessels

The lines indicate the strokes in finishing
the sides before firing

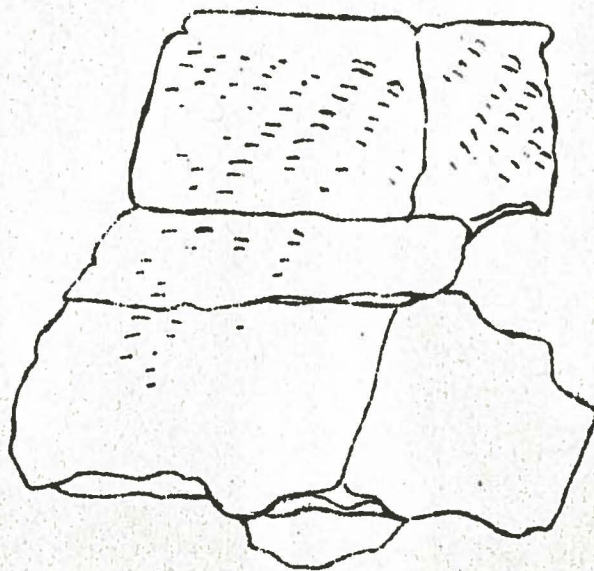
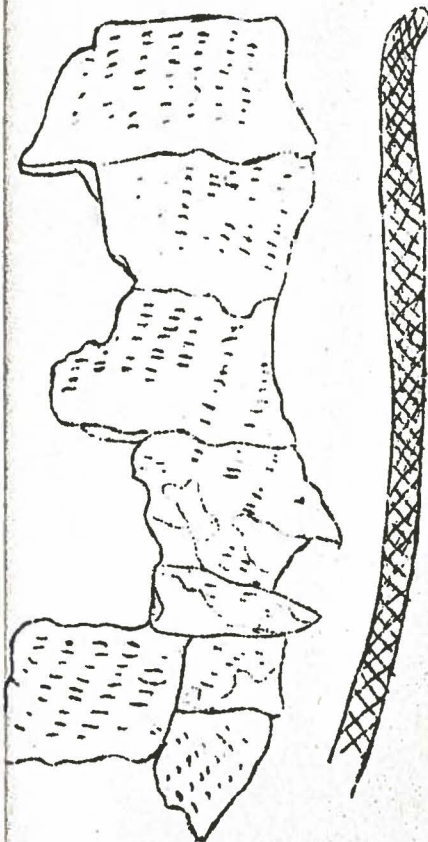


$\frac{1}{2}$ Not

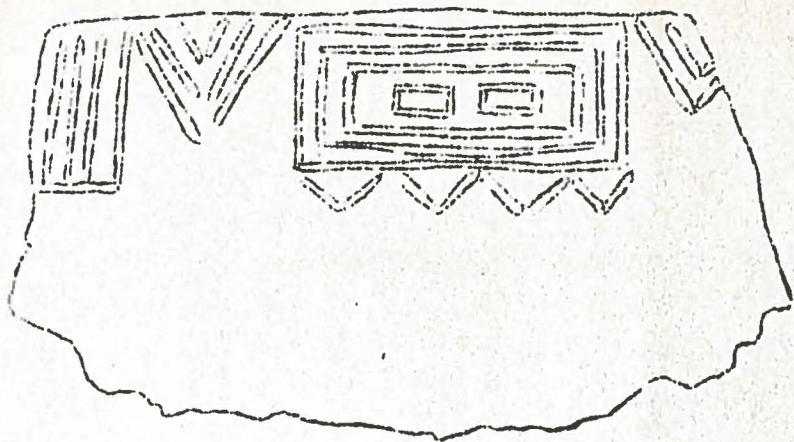


S L A U G H T E R C R E E K

Incised and undecorated pottery

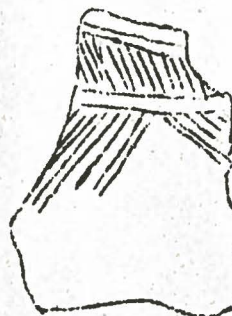
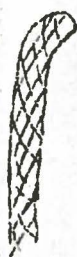
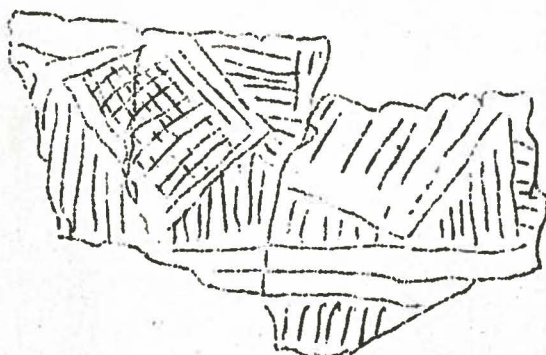


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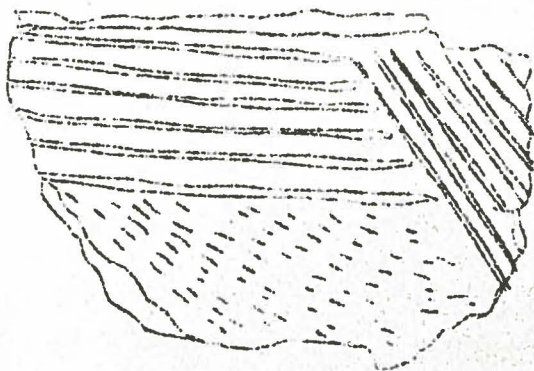


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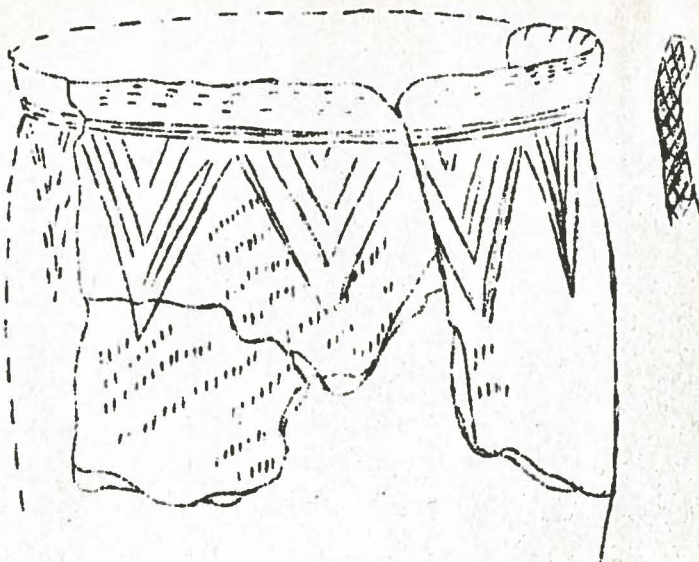
Types of Incised Designs



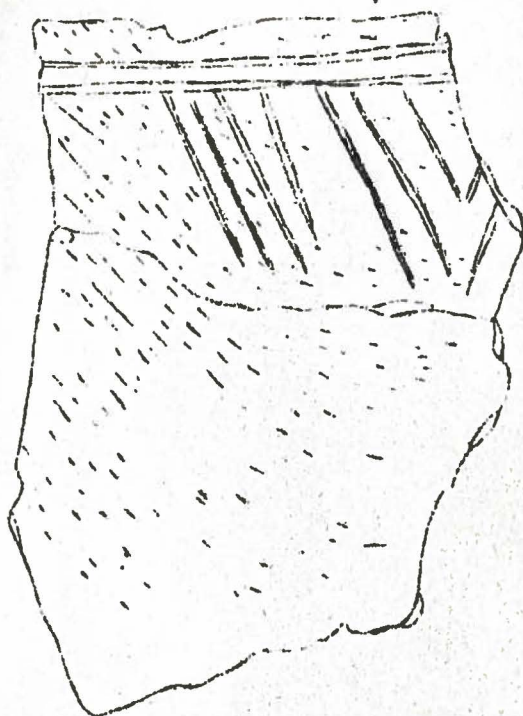
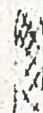
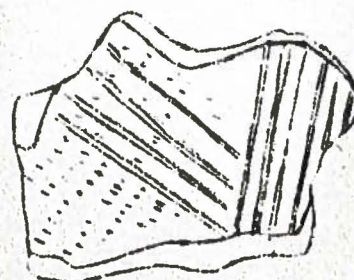
Rectangular motifs seem to be generally lacking,
this specimen being an exception.



1/2 Nat.



Note the swollen rim, an
uncommon feature in vessels
from this site.

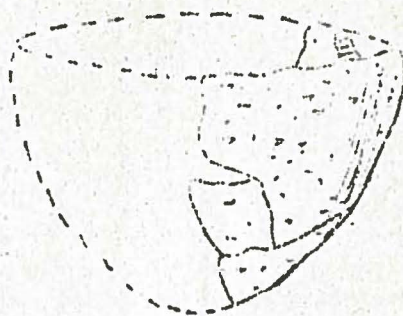


BLUNT CREEK

INDIAN MOUND

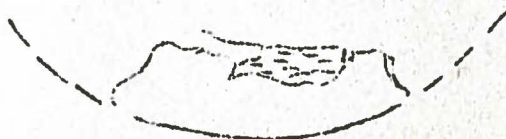
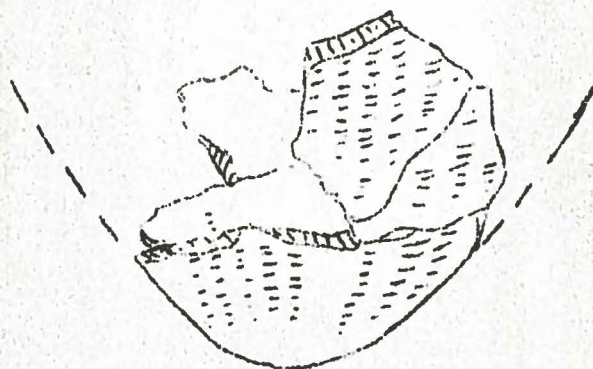
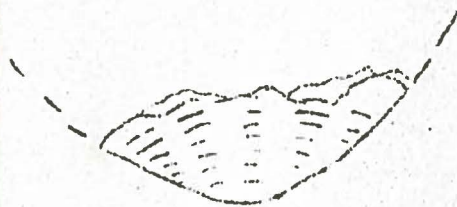
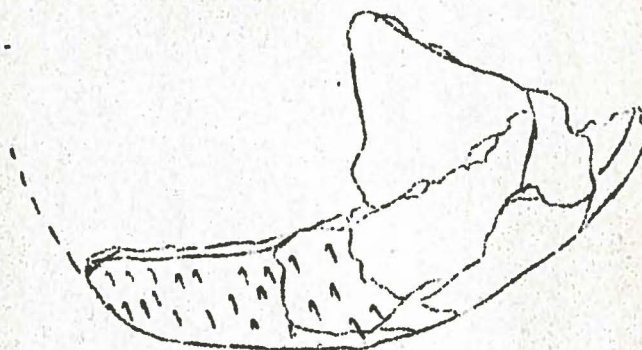
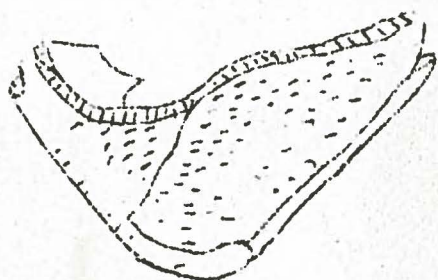
7/2 Net.

SLAUGHTER CREEK



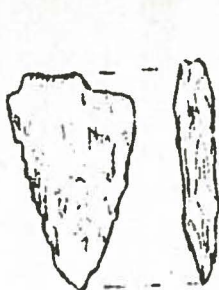
Small clay cup

Types of bases of Large Ceramic Vessels

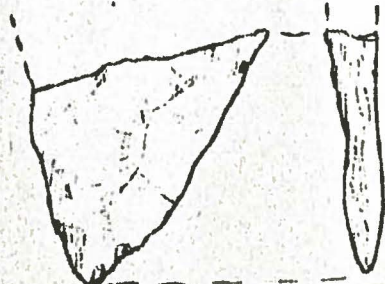
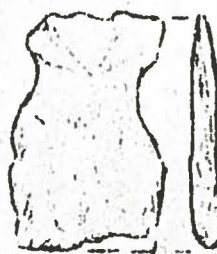
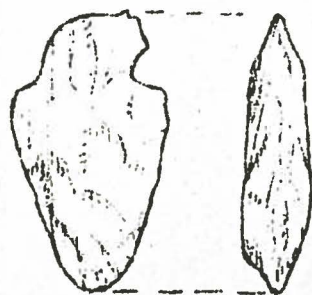
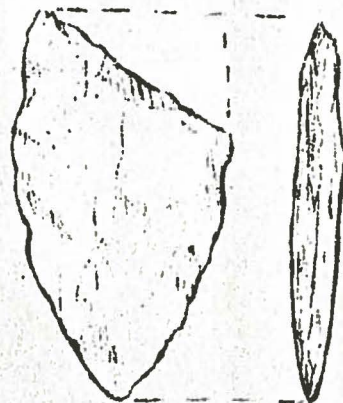
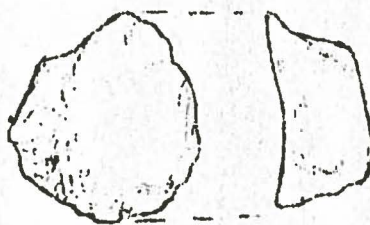
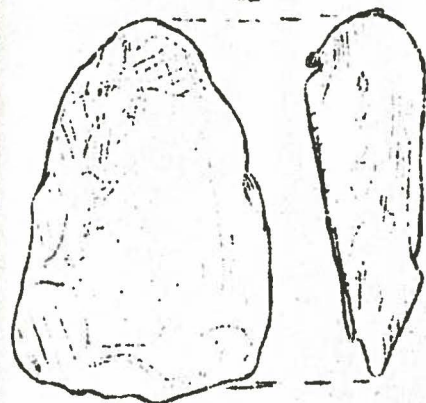
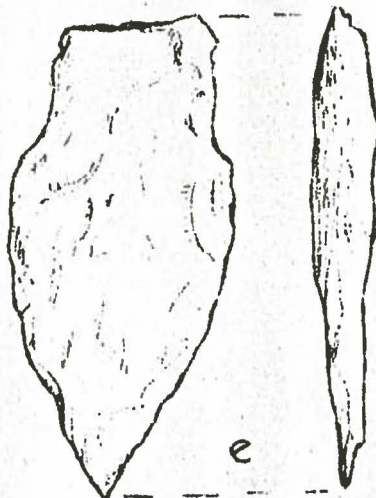
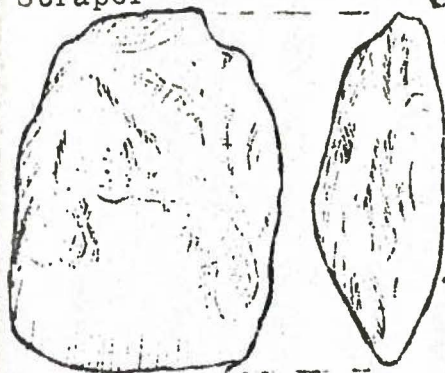


$\frac{1}{2}$ A/at.

SLAUGHTER CREEK STONE OBJECTS



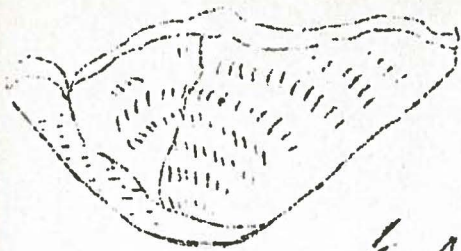
a
c, e, f, i, j, l, & m...
Arrow Heads
g, Small Celts
Incised Stone
Scraper



k
Full Size

m

SLAUGHTER CREEK



1/2 Nat.

Pottery Vessel Bases

- a pipe stem
- b-c highly polished split bone strips broken at perforations
- d needle broken at eye
- e gorge f-j bone awls



a



b



c



d



e



f-j



Full Size

Archaeological Society of Delaware

Minutes of the June Meeting

President Crozier called the meeting to order at 8.15 p.m. in the Lecture Room of the Wilmington Institute Free Library. Reading of the minutes of the preceeding meeting was dispensed with.

The speaker of the evening was introduced by the president. He was Dr. Edgar Howard, of the Museum of the University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Howard delivered a most interesting talk based upon his researches at Carlsbad, Folsom, Clovis, and Portales, New Mexico. A series of very fine slides illustrated the address. Dr. Howard has been active in the discovery and classification of the so-called Folsom and Yuma arrow points and his slides and remarks were very enlightening.

President Crozier adjourned the meeting in order to afford the members and guests an opportunity to examine bird points exhibited by Mr. Joseph Wigglesworth.

Respectfully submitted,

H. Geiger Omwake,
Secretary