

DISCOVERY OF A BURIED ABORIGINAL SHELLHEAP IN THE ILLINOIS RIVER VALLEY

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A buried shell deposit which has been determined to be of artificial origin and which is consequently believed to be a shell heap made by early inhabitants was discovered in the Illinois river valley in 1937 by George Schoenbeck, member of the Peoria Academy of Science, and of the State Archaeology Society.

It is the purpose of this paper to give a report of the discovery, including a description of the site and its location, and a brief statement of the geologic situation.

The deposit was exposed as a bed, or layer, in the face of a roadside cut at a point three miles distant from the present channel of the Illinois river.

It was discovered in the summer of 1937 and reported on the day of the first examination, in July, to the geology section of the Peoria Academy of Science; later, in March and April of 1938, the site was shown to Anson M. Simpson, director of the archaeology section of the Academy, and to Dr. John Voss, paleontologist, each of whom made an examination. Shells, charcoal, and pieces of broken rock were collected, including one piece, excavated by Dr. Voss and Mr. Schoenbeck, which, it is thought from its appearance, may have been used as a hammer stone. Photographs of the site were made by Dr. Voss and the author.

It was the opinion of the Peoria Academy members that the deposit, which was composed of shells with charcoal in association, was a refuse heap left by aborigines who had dwelt along the Illinois river in time past, and that it was, possibly, of very great age. A report to this effect was made to the Illinois State Geological Survey by Mr. Simpson, as leader of the archaeology section, accompanied by a request for an examination to determine the nature of its origin, whether natural or artificial, and to ascertain the geologic relations and age which would explain its underground position so distant from the present Illinois river.

In response, two examinations were made, one on June 7, and the other on June 20, 1938, by Dr. George M. Ekblaw, Geologist and Head, Areal and Engineering Geology Division, and a report was given July 15, 1938. Shells were submitted to Frank C. Baker, Curator of the Natural History Museum, University of Illinois, for identification and his report was included by Dr. Ekblaw.

The deposit is located in the extreme northwest corner of Sec. 11, T. 28 N., R. 2 W., Woodford County, one mile south of the Marshall-Woodford county line, almost directly across the Illinois river

from Chillicothe. It is situated in the east side of a roadside cut made in connection with the current improvement of the Lacon-Peoria highway along the base of the east wall of the Illinois river valley. The cut was made through a long, talus slope extending from the valley wall all the way down to the flat bottom of the Illinois valley.

The shell deposit is in a band, irregular in depth, and ranging from one to three feet above the base of the cut. Its highest point is at approximately the deepest part of the cut and it slopes gently northward, steeply southward. With the shells is a considerable amount of charcoal. The deposit was visible for more than eighty feet of the length of the band.

The shells were identified by Mr. Baker as of seven species, including:

- Amblema carpicata*
- Cyclonaias tuberculata*
- Quadrula pustulosa*
- Elliptio dilatatus*
- Elliptio caesidens*
- Pleurobema coccineum*
- Tamapella ventricosa*

He reports that all of these mussels live now in the Illinois river in the vicinity of the deposit.

All of the shells are mature and with them are associated neither young nor immature pelecypods nor any species of gastropods. That the shells are all mature specimens of a limited number of species, that with them are associated neither immature shells of the same species nor representatives of other species, and that they are associated with charcoal would indicate that they were accumulated by artificial rather than natural means. This is the conclusion given in the report of Dr. Ekblaw.

The report further states that the location of the shell heap is accounted for by the fact that the Illinois river channel ran along the east valley wall in the vicinity of the deposit in relatively recent time, eroding the base of the wall; and that it did so at a time contemporaneous with, or subsequent to, the accumulation of the heap by the Indians, or earlier inhabitants, is the interpretation. The material covering the shells is a part of the new talus which has washed down since the river migrated farther out in the valley. Estimated age was given as in the hundreds.

Attention might be called, at this time, to a possible significance in the size of the shells, which are uniformly small,—being smaller, in comparison, than those found on other Indian sites of the region,—and in the fact that there has not been collected yet even one large shell such as has been found, not infrequently, at other sites.

Concerning the lack of fashioned stone tools in the material so far excavated, remarked by Dr. Ekblaw in his report, Mr. Simpson reminds us that other shell banks without implements have been recorded and cites one mention of such contained in J. W. Foster's "Pre-Historic Races of the United States," page 162; in which five locations in Maine and Massachusetts are listed. It is suggested that the lack of artifacts made by hand of the man who discarded the shells might indicate an age that would reach back to a time when he had none.

In conclusion may it be stated that up to the present time, although excavations and study of the find have been limited, the site distinctly offers opportunity for future scientific exploration.