

A Point of Land and Prehistoric Peoples

Prehistoric artifacts found near the confluence of the Raccoon and Des Moines rivers, in central Iowa, remind us that Euro-Americans—explorers, traders, trappers, soldiers, and settlers—were not the first to find this point an advantageous location.

by Christopher M. Schoen



This T-shaped drill (about twice actual size) was found amidst chipped flakes of stone.

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How long and how frequently prehistoric peoples had visited this location—where the Raccoon River flows into the Des Moines—is unknown, but sometime between 8500 and 800 B.C., during the Archaic Period, a small group of people came to this point of land for a short period. On the highest spot of the point one individual looked out over the river valleys while he chipped flakes off a cobble of flint-like rock, used to make and sharpen tools such as projectile points to hunt game, knives to skin and cut up game or shape wood and bone, and drills (*see left*) to bore holes in wood, bone, and shell. The cobble of Winterset chert was collected from the riverbed or perhaps from a bedrock outcrop in the region. He left behind a pile of the chipped material, which eventually became buried by soil accumulating over the spot.

About 1100 A.D., near the end of the Late Woodland Period, large groups of prehistoric people began to settle in the central Des Moines

valley (in present-day Marion, Polk, and Warren counties). These people, who were part of a widespread culture archaeologists have called Oneota, have been attributed to the Moingona phase based on patterns of pottery decoration and other characteristics.

One group of related families selected the point of land at the two rivers as the site to stay for an undetermined period around 1300 A.D. Because the point was at the interface of a woodland along the rivers and prairie, the resourceful Moingona community could take advantage of the varied wildlife and materials each vegetal and topographical niche offered. The site was protected from spring flooding and away from mosquitoes. The point was high enough that breezes brought temporary relief from the heat of the warm season and gnats and flies. The group erected small to moderate-sized structures of poles covered with mats or bark, and dug a few pits to store foodstuffs and other materials. From the bottomlands,



they collected wood for fuel and for building materials, as well as clay and mussel shell to make their pottery (*above*). The group may have been there over much of the year. They hunted deer and bison nearby and butchered them on site. The teeth, feet, and ankle-bones were disposed of in a trash midden. Ducks, soft-shelled turtles, fish, muskrats, and beaver were captured in the rivers or at nearby wetlands. The bones of the larger mammals were broken to get at the marrow. The Moingona group harvested corn, sunflower seeds, little barley, and goosefoot from cultivated fields located on the floodplain. Wild goosefoot and dock, both seed plants, were gathered for food. Acorns, hickory nuts, mulberries, grapes, wild strawberries, edible mushrooms, and other wild foods undoubtedly were collected as well.

Archaeologists are still trying to clarify the relationships of late prehistoric groups and the Native American tribes who occupied the prairie lands that eventually became Iowa. The Ioway, Otoe, and Missouri were the first tribes documented by explorers, traders, colonizers, and soldiers in the region. The Ioway, Otoe, and Missouri were gradually displaced by the closely allied Sauk and Meskwaki in southeastern and central Iowa during the 1700s. In 1735, members of the latter two tribes established a village for a few years on an island in the Des Moines River a few miles north of the confluence with the Raccoon River. The Sauk and Meskwaki continued to traverse the Des Moines area to hunt, fish, trap for furs, and raid the Dakota until 1845. They established villages a few miles from the point in 1842. ❖

Above: Sherds from the rim and body of clay vessels, with typical Oneota decorative patterns of crossed lines and concentric circles. Below: The projectile point was probably attached to an arrow shaft and used by people of the Oneota culture.



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