
When Capt. John Smith ascended the Potomac river in 1608 he described an Indian village extending some distance along the eastern bank of a large tributary entering from the east near the head of navigation. To this village, "with 80 able men," Smith gave the name "Nacotchtanke" (Arber). Later the missionaries, who arrived on the Potomac in 1634, latinized this name to Anacostan (Tooker), whence is derived the present name of the river and city—Anacostia. Except for references to trade relations and skirmishes, both with the English and neighboring tribes, this village figures very little more in written history. The date of its abandonment is not certain, but it was probably during the middle or latter part of the seventeenth century. The Potomac region in general was abandoned by the Indians about 1700, according to Mooney.

There is some question as to the tribal affiliation of the inhabitants of Nacotchtanke. Mooney (map, pl. VII) considers them Algonkins and includes them in the Powhatan Confederacy, but notes that they received Smith peacefully, thus disobeying Powhatan's orders. According to the Handbook of American Indians, Shea considers this group Iroquoian.

In substantiation of the historical record regarding the location of Nacotchtanke are the reports of local collectors. In 1889 Proudfit stated (pp. 242–243):

\(^1\) Approved for publication by the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. Received February 19, 1937.
These fields [from Giesboro Point on the south to within a short distance of Bladensburg on the north] have been under cultivation for many years, and are regularly visited by local collectors, yet they are today, in places, fairly strewn with the wreck of the old village life.

In addition to the stone relics... it should be observed that an abundance of pottery, in fragments, is to be found—one of the unfailing evidences of permanent aboriginal occupation.

This statement seems to have been accepted by the investigators who have published subsequently, including Holmes and Ulke.

Since the above covers almost everything that is known regarding Nacotchtanke, it is of interest and importance to record the finding of two ossuaries at Giesboro Point during the past year. As is often the case, the burials were discovered accidentally. In the course of grading operations directed toward the extension of Bolling Field, the army flying field, a power-shovel exposed some human bones on September 11, 1936. The District coroner, Dr. A. Magruder MacDonald, was notified by those in charge of the work. He pronounced the bones to be those of Indians and ordered them saved; also, he notified the Smithsonian Institution.

On the morning of September 12 the senior author visited the site in company with F. M. Setzler, Acting Head Curator of Anthropology, U. S. National Museum. At this time a skull and a few bones, still remaining in situ, were removed. In the afternoon Dr. Wedel accompanied the senior author to the site. We were soon rewarded by the exposure of a second ossuary which we were permitted to excavate by our own methods. This operation, in which we were assisted by Robert Ladd of Washington, required the next two whole days. The details follow.

**THE SITE**

At the confluence of the Potomac and Anacostia the eastern shore (Fig. 1) is comparatively low-lying, forming an almost level plain between the rivers on the west and the hills to the east. At the time of our visit the grading operations were far advanced. Since some 7–8 feet of earth was being removed at the point where the ossuaries were located, it appeared that here a natural ridge of sandy soil extended in an east-west direction from the shoreline toward the hills. This agrees with the location of the ten-foot contour line on the Geological Survey map (Fig. 1).

*Pit no. 1.*—This was located some 150 yards from the river bank and about a quarter of a mile south from the line of the Portland
Street entrance to Bolling Field. Most of the bones had been removed by workmen and the power-shovel prior to our arrival and had been placed in barrels. From descriptions given by the laborers, as well as from the few bones left in situ, it appears that less than twelve inches of sandy soil covered the bones. The layer within which the latter

were scattered was of about the same thickness. Owing to the uniformly sandy character of the surrounding soil and to its disturbance by machinery, efforts to define the original edge of the pit were unsuccessful. It was evident, however, that the area within which the remains occurred was not more than ten or twelve feet in diameter. No record was obtained of any cultural material having been seen.

*Pit no. 2.*—The second pit was encountered by the shovel at the time of our work and was completely excavated by hand. It lay some
50 or 60 yards due east of the first. The soil covering it was but a few inches deep, and there was some evidence that the uppermost bones had been broken and otherwise disturbed by plowing. No pit outline could be traced, but the bones occurred over an irregular area roughly fifteen feet in diameter and at a depth of six to eighteen inches. The "matrix" in which the bones occurred was of the same light colored sand as that constituting the ridge.

Burial was clearly secondary but some articulated bones were found. The skulls, most of which were crushed, were scattered throughout the pit, with a somewhat greater number in the lower level. In some instances two or more skulls lay together, but there appeared to be no consistent disposition in "nests." Generally the long-bones were grouped in bundles, those of several individuals sometimes being found together. Pockets of calcined human bone were noted, but it was not clear whether this represented cremation or was due to some accidental factor. Mingled with the human bones at one point were a number of deer bones.

Cultural material was obtained from the second ossuary, but in very limited amount. There were recovered three small grit-tempered potsherds, bearing impressions of a cord-wrapped paddle. Also, a small crudely made serpentine ornament, perforated and carelessly scored, was found in the dirt thrown out of the pit. Since they were not seen in situ, it is possible that both the sherds and ornament entered from the surface. Directly associated with and partly contained in one skull were fourteen tubular shell beads, 6 mm in diameter and from 10 to 20 mm long. No metal, glass or other material of European origin was found.

THE BONES

Since the first pit had been almost completely excavated before our arrival, we could not hope to recover many whole bones for the Museum collections. Alternatively, we limited our collection to those parts of more particular interest, namely, the temporal bone, jaws and teeth, distal end of the humerus, proximal end of the femur, pathological and anomalous bones. The same policy was adopted in selecting bones from the second pit, but here fortunately the method of excavation permitted the recovery of more whole bones. A count of the temporal bones, humeri, and femora from the two pits (Table 1) gives some reason for believing that approximately the same number of individuals was buried in each. This number is above 63 but is not likely to have been more than 70. The smaller number of tem-
poral bones recovered from the first pit may be explained by the fact that the workmen and others removed the skulls for souvenirs before our arrival. The excess of temporal bones in the second pit may possibly mean that more skulls than extremities were interred. However, it should be remembered that, when broken, the parts of the long-bones are more difficult to identify than the parts of the skull. It is quite possible, therefore, that we may have overlooked some humeri and femora.

**Table 1.—Number of Bones Recovered from Ossuaries**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bone</th>
<th>Pit No. 1</th>
<th></th>
<th>Pit No. 2</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>Left</td>
<td>Right</td>
<td>Left</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humerus (distal)</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Femur (proximal)</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is certain from an examination of the bones that both sexes are represented, but not disproportionately. According to the stages of dentition shown in the lower jaws, adults predominate. Four immature lower jaws, the youngest 2–6 years old, were found among the bones from the first pit. Of twelve such jaws from the second pit, the youngest was 1–2 years old.

Measurements of two skulls from the first pit give cranial indices of 68.3 and 71.9. Nine skulls from the second pit, all reconstructed and mostly female, have cranial indices ranging from low dolichocrany to high brachycrany (72.6, 72.7, 75.1, 75.6, 75.7, 77.3, 79.4, 84.0 and 86.0). Except for the most extreme brachycranial skull, the range is characteristic of the Algonkins (Hrdlička, 1927).

Two other features of the bones indicate that the inhabitants of this site were typical eastern Indians. Ear exostoses are present in 10 per cent of the ears (169), which is only slightly higher than the figure (8.5) reported by Hrdlička (1935) for the Indians north of Virginia. Septal apertures of the humerus are present in 43.2 per cent of the cases (134), and this too agrees well with the figure (40.4) reported by Hrdlička (1932) for the eastern Indians. These similarities become more impressive when it is realized how different are the figures for other Indian tribes. For example, among the Sioux the incidence of ear exostoses rises to 22 per cent, whereas that of septal aperture falls to 21.5 per cent (Hrdlička, 1932, 1935).

Among the pathological bones recovered were a number, mostly tibiae, bearing lesions generally regarded as having been produced
by syphilis. It is noteworthy that more of these bones occurred in the first pit, in which also the bones were somewhat better preserved. Another, but minor, pathological condition to which these Indians were extremely susceptible was dental caries.

DISCUSSION

The finding of two ossuaries at Giesboro Point is further evidence of a habitation site in the vicinity. According to historical record this was Nacotchtanke. Although nothing is known of the limits of this village at the time the burials were made, it is reasonable to believe that it was not very far away—perhaps to the north. It is probable also that originally the burials were deeper, and it is possible even that a low mound was raised over them. The ultimate shallow position of the bones may be accounted for through the farming operations to which this area was subjected later. The number of individuals buried in these pits probably has some relationship to the population of the village, but the time interval involved is not known.

The chief reason for reporting these ossuaries is that they indicate some of the burial customs prevailing in this region. When Bushnell, in 1920, reviewed these customs for the Powhatan Confederacy, he knew of only one site at which ossuaries had been found. Since then, in 1935, Judge Graham has reported a group of four ossuaries found at Potapaco (now Port Tobacco), another site marked on Smith’s map.

The senior author had the pleasure of assisting Judge Graham in excavating the pits at Port Tobacco, so he was in a position to make comparisons between the two sites. Briefly, it may be said that in appearance the burials were very similar, making due allowance for differences in soil. The scarcity of cultural material in the Anacostia pits is in contrast to those at Port Tobacco. Nevertheless, the type of cultural material encountered—beads, ornaments—is still consistent with Smith’s statement (quoted from Bushnell, p. 28) that,

For their ordinary burial they digge a deep hole in the earth with sharpe stakes; and the corpses being lapped in skins and mats with their jewels, they lay them upon sticks in the ground and so cover them with earth.

While it is not clear what Smith meant by the term “corpses,” it is possible that he is referring to bodies that have been allowed to decompose in a charnel house. At Port Tobacco remnants of skins and mats which had been preserved by copper were found associated with the bones in the fourth pit. The finding of calcined bone in the second
pit at Anacostia is something new for this area and cannot be clearly explained.

The occurrence of pathological bones in the pits, both at Anacostia and at Port Tobacco, with lesions resembling syphilis may be interpreted in different ways depending on whether or not syphilis is proved to be a pre- or post-Columbian disease. If pre-Columbian, this finding is of little significance historically. However, if post-Columbian, then these burials would date from the historic period and the different incidence of diseased bones in the two pits would take on more meaning. The absence of associated European objects is not contrary to the possibility that syphilis is a post-Columbian disease; it could have preceded Smith to this region.

Skeletal remains are rapidly being accumulated from Maryland and Virginia. Already it is recognized that a rather uniform physical type existed among the eastern Indians. Detailed study of this material eventually should indicate the closer physical affiliations of the various bands.

LITERATURE CITED


