

Boneing up on Archaeology: Summer 2007 at the Danbury Site

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As the Cleveland Museum of Natural History's intern for summer 2007, I spent six weeks in the field at Danbury and three weeks in the lab at CMNH. The Danbury site is located on Sandusky Bay and is a prehistoric site that was occupied from the Late Archaic to Late Prehistoric periods.

The field season started off with a bang and a baptism by fire for me as we encountered a burial the first week. The burial, which became Burial Feature 07-01, was the first burial I had ever excavated. BF 07-01 was an extended burial of a young male; it was missing the lower left leg and most of the right leg. I got to practice my osteological knowledge as we identified bones during mapping and removal of the feature. Directly to the north of BF 07-01 was a flexed burial (BF 07-02) that seemed to be much older, in terms of time of burial, than BF 07-01. The position of the burial (flexed) and the condition of the bone (extremely fragile,) lead us to believe this predated the extended burial. I spent one of the few rainy days we had during the season carefully and quickly removing the flexed burial.

BF 07-01 was completely removed, but the pit feature it was contained in, 06-14, had to be completely excavated. Stratigraphy within this unit was extremely complicated and many hypotheses were offered as to the cause. The burial pit was dug in prehistoric times and then truncated in recent years by a backhoe during road construction and filled back in with gravel.

Except for a short foray to excavate BF 07-08, I spent the second half of the field season excavating the ossuary, BF 07-04. An ossuary is a burial that normally contains more than one individual. Several skulls had already been uncovered when I moved to the ossuary, but none of us initially had any idea of the extent of the feature. This feature was discovered when excavations in the unit east of the ossuary ran into a fire pit. When the area west of the fire pit was excavated, the ossuary was discovered.

The ossuary took almost three weeks to excavate. Excavations took such a long time because of the density of bone in the area, and because we wanted to be able to document as much as possible in situ, as many bones were broken during removal. There were at least 30 individuals interred within the ossuary based on the amount of skulls that were excavated. The ossuary was mapped twice, at a shallow level, and a deeper level. More bones were encountered after the second map was made, but we were simply not able to map them all.

My break from the ossuary entailed supervising the excavation of BF 07-08, a sub-adult burial. This feature was found while cross-sectioning a feature that had been recognized earlier in the season, but not further investigated. The juvenile remains were well preserved, except for missing lower legs on both sides of the body. Two types of shell beads were found with this burial. A disc bead was found along the spine, and four marginella beads were found underneath the skull.

I returned to the ossuary for the rest of the field season. Close to the end of our season, we decided to cross-section the ossuary to try and determine the extent of the bones. We removed the east half first and the west half on the last day. The only associated artifacts or cultural inclusions found besides pottery in the fill were a netsinker

and red-ochre stained bones. While working in the ossuary was tedious at times, I gained a lot of experience with techniques used to excavate human bones. In turn I was able to practice my bone identification skills on the multitudinous bones in the feature.

Back in the lab, I continued working with the bones removed from the ossuary. The museum will not be keeping these human remains. They are sent to Ohio State to be studied and then returned to the site for reburial by the Wyandotte nation. At Ohio State the bones are examined for age and sex more than cultural factors. Thus, my project in the lab involved studying the bones from the ossuary to determine if bones had been altered by the Native Americans. I looked at the bones for evidence of cut marks, red ochre stains, burning, and copper stains. Pottery found in the burial feature and the wear patterns on the teeth suggest that it was created during the Early Woodland period, about 3000 years ago. Before interment, bones were often defleshed or separated from joints in order to fit them into a smaller area or make them easier to transport. These marks are still present on the bones and can be seen with the naked eye. I identified about six bones with cut marks and 15 bone fragments with red ochre staining. I also found several burnt bones, and one copper-stained bone. I wrote a technical report about the ossuary and my study of the bones that the museum can use in order to show the significance of the Danbury site.

Confidence was the main aspect I gained through my internship this summer. Before this summer I had not spent as much time in the field, nor did I have any experience excavating complicated features. While at Danbury this summer, I was able to refine my excavation techniques, as well as participate in the recovery of human remains. Not many students today have this opportunity. Supervising the excavation of

the child burial allowed me to realize that I am capable of overseeing archaeological projects. Working in the lab allowed me to undertake my own research and learn more about Native American burial practices. I was proud to be a part of preserving the archaeological record in a threatened area. I am extremely grateful to the Cleveland Archaeological Society as well as Dr. Redmond and staff at the Cleveland Museum of Natural History for supporting my internship this summer.