

Explore Nebraska Archeology

Blue River Basin Archeology



Nebraska State Historical Society



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Nebraska State Historical Society
is to safeguard and interpret
Nebraska's past for the people.

Explore Nebraska Archeology, No. 1

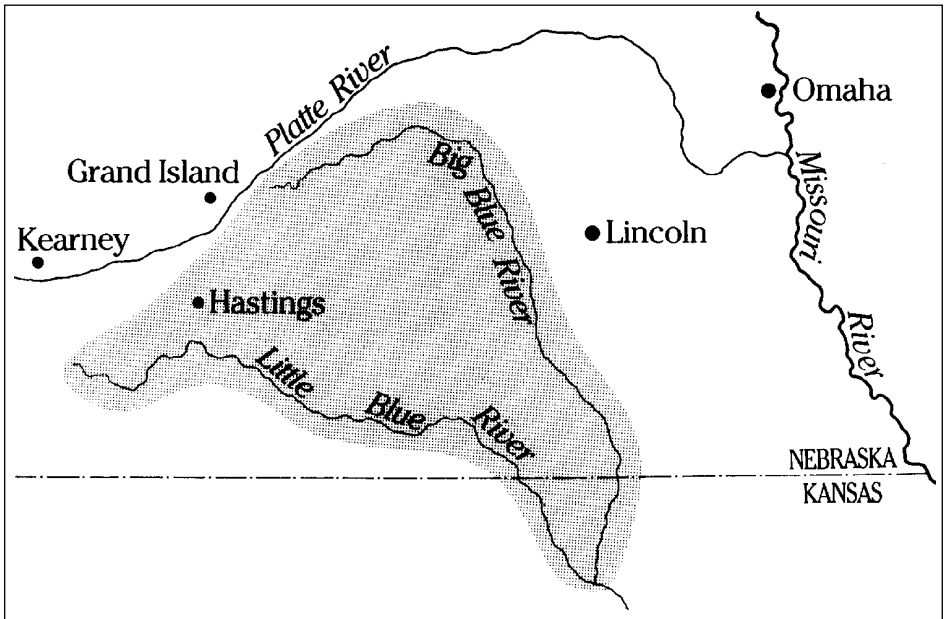
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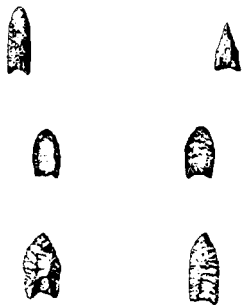
1997

In the spring of 1993 the Nebraska State Historic Preservation Office commissioned the Archeology Laboratory, Augustana College, Sioux Falls, South Dakota, to conduct a search for archeological sites in the Blue River Basin. This search covered 5,500 acres in Seward and Thayer counties, and recorded 33 previously unknown archeological sites. Information in this pamphlet on the Native American and Euroamerican history of the area is derived from that survey and earlier work done in the watershed and surrounding region.



The Blue River Basin.

Cultural Periods and Point Types in the Blue River Basin.

<p>Post-contact 100–400 years ago</p>	
<p>Plains Village 600–1,000 years ago</p>	
<p>Plains Woodland 1,000–2,000 years ago</p>	
<p>Late Archaic 2,000–5,300 years ago</p>	
<p>Middle Archaic 5,300–7,000 years ago</p>	
<p>Early Archaic 7,000–9,000 years ago</p>	
<p>Paleoindian 9,000–12,000 years ago</p>	

Blue River Basin Culture History

River valleys have long been a focal point for human occupation. The Blue River basin is one of several important watersheds in the Central Plains. It provides abundant natural resources that have attracted people for thousands of years.

Human history in the basin is poorly known. Constructing a detailed sequence of events has therefore been difficult. Much of what is known about ancient events in the Blue Valley is derived from reconstructions of history from the general area of the Central Plains. It is with that information that archeological sites and artifacts from the basin can be compared and used to expand our understanding of the Blue River's history.

Sites identified in the basin represent six major, often overlapping, cultural traditions or lifestyles.

They include:

- Big Game Hunters (Paleoindian)
- Foragers (Archaic)
- Early Potters (Plains Woodland)
- Village Farmers (Plains Village)
- Caddoans/Siouans (Post-contact)
- Europeans and Americans

The traditions are based on groups of sites that exhibit similar patterns of technology, lifestyle, and apparent connections or continuity through time. However, whether the traditions represent actual tribes or related ethnic groups is not always known. Some traditions may be produced by contemporaneous peoples that speak separate languages. Yet, because their lifestyle may be similar, leaving behind the same types of tools and remains, it is often impossible to identify the separate ethnic groups that may have existed.



Big Game Hunters (9,000–12,000 years ago)

The earliest documented human occupation on the Central Plains is dated at around 12,000 years ago near the end of the last great Ice Age. These early people are called Paleoindians. This tradition is characterized by a highly mobile lifestyle that relied on the hunting of big game as a primary food source. Reconstruction of the customs of this tradition are derived primarily from animal kill and butchering sites, and small temporary encampments. The bones of butchered mammoths, camels, ground sloths, extinct forms of bison, and other animals have been found.

Within this tradition several complexes have been recognized largely on the type of chipped stone spear points that were made and used. Many of these forms have been named and some that have been found in Nebraska include the Clovis, Plainview, Folsom, Hell Gap, Agate Basin, Alberta, Scottsbluff, Eden, Frederick, Lusk, and Brown's Valley types. These styles can be found distributed over most of the Great Plains.

Seward and Thayer counties have not produced intact Paleoindian sites, but local collectors report finding projectile points from this early period. It is possible that because of changes in the topography over the last 10,000 years, many sites have been destroyed by erosion or buried due to wind and stream silting.

Foragers (2,000–9,000 years ago)

By 9,000 years ago the last Ice Age had ended and the climatic patterns characteristic of the modern period became established. Many of the animals such as mammoths, camels, horses, and others that had dominated the Plains during the Ice Age had long become extinct. People changed the way they lived in response to shifts in climate and available plants and animals.

More diverse hunting was practiced utilizing both large and small game species. Wild plant resources were also exploited to a greater extent than during the Paleoindian tradition. People continued a nomadic lifestyle. Permanent villages are unknown, although the same location may have been returned to from year to year.

Many changes in tool forms appear. No longer are particular projectile point styles found over large areas. It appears that the range or movement of people was more localized than during the Paleoindian period.

Four sites related to this tradition have been identified in Thayer and Seward counties. None have had archeological excavation and what is known comes from inspection of surface remains.

Two of the sites occupy hilltop locations and two are on high terraces. All are near a flowing stream. The proximity to water was an important camp selection criterion. Evidence of structures has not been found and shelter was probably provided by temporary brush lean-to constructions or tents.

One of the characteristic tools during this period was a type of axe made from basalt obtained from glacial till deposits. The axe was made by pecking it into shape and then finishing it by grinding. These axes had a groove cut around the surface for hafting to a wood shaft.



Forager period axe.

Early Potters (1,000–2,000 years ago)

The Woodland tradition was a time of innovation during which many new technological, economic, and social ideas made their appearance. Many of these new elements were borrowed or brought in from other cultures



Early ceramic vessel.

present in the great woodlands to the east of Nebraska. The name Plains Woodland reflects this adaptation of ideas from the east for use in a Plains environment.

Among the technological innovations is the appearance of the bow and arrow. Earlier, projectile points were used on hand held spears or short spears thrown with the assistance of a device called an atlatl.

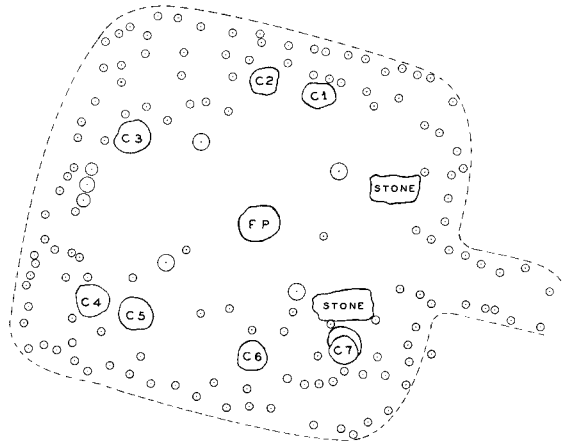
A second important new technology was the first use of pottery. Large ceramic vessels were produced during this period for use in storage and cooking.

Other innovations of importance include the first documented use of semipermanent dwellings found on sites that appear to have been occupied year-around. Often near these small village sites archeologists find evidence of elaborate burials in earthen mounds.

Near the end of the period, evidence of experimentation with small scale gardening is evident. People began to grow corn, gourds, and squash.

Survey in Seward and Thayer counties identified seven sites with Plains Woodland occupations. Again, little information on the particular lifestyle practiced in the Blue Basin is available since none of the sites have been excavated.

Interestingly, axes found on these sites have a groove only three-quarters of the way around the head. The top surface of the axe is not grooved. Most sites are located on high spots within the flood plains of major streams. Again, no evidence of permanent shelters has been found on these sites.



Floor plan of Village Farmer lodge.

Village Farmers (600–1,000 years ago)

The Central Plains Villagers tradition is marked by a change in subsistence and material culture traits by local Woodland populations. The adaptation may have been caused by the ending of a moist climatic period, and consequent thinning of game and plant resources.

Subsistence practices were altered by more intense use of small garden horticulture based largely on maize, beans, and squash. Although horticulture was an important addition to the people's subsistence, hunting and wild plant gathering was still pursued extensively.

Sites consist primarily of occupations with isolated or small clusters of wattle and daub lodge ruins. The lodges were square to rectangular in floor plan, timber-framed with extended entranceways and covered with a mixture of branches, grass, and mud plaster.

Pits for storage of food and tools are often found below lodge floors. Pits were also used for trash and garbage disposal. Sites are usually located along streams, where suitable garden locations were available.



Artifacts include a wide variety of pottery types. Vessels were globular, with rounded bottoms and decorated only on the rim areas. Vessels were not painted and most decoration consisted of geometric patterns of lines cut into the soft paste of the rims prior to firing.

Also characteristic of this period are bow and arrow projectile points that are triangular, with hafting notches on the lower edge and sometimes on the bottom.

The Central Plains tradition has been divided into a number of regional groups or “phases”. Among these are the St. Helena and Nebraska phases centered along the Missouri River, the Upper Republican phase along the Republican River, the Itskari phase in the Loup drainage and the Smoky Hill phase in the Lower Blue and Kansas River basins. The Blue River basin is situated in an area pivotal to understanding the development and interrelations of these complexes.

When Central Plains tradition people vanished from the Blue River drainage is unknown. However, they were certainly gone by 600 years ago. For some two hundred years there appears to have been little to no occupation in the basin. At least the current evidence is still lacking. It is not until the seventeenth century that we again begin to find consistent use and occupation in the drainage area.

Caddoans/Siouans (100–400 years ago)

The Caddoan tradition encompasses the sites of the historically documented occupations of the Pawnee and Arikara peoples in Nebraska. One site found in Seward County is attributable to the Pawnee. The Pawnee used the Blue River drainage as an important hunting and resource gathering area from permanent villages to the north along the Platte and Loup rivers and farther down the Blue near the Nebraska-Kansas border.



Sketch of Oto-Missouria Agency in Gage County (1871) by Agent A. L. Green.

The final American Indian groups that utilized the Blue River basin were peoples representing several tribes that spoke various Siouan languages. These included the Oto, Missouriia, Ioway, and Kansa. The area was primarily utilized on a temporary and seasonal basis from permanent villages to the east and south. The last reservation-era Oto village was located on the Blue River.

Europeans and Americans (100–300 years ago)

The earliest European use of the Blue River drainage area was probably from Spanish and French traders coming out of the Southwest and the lower Mississippi valley. The earliest physical evidence of European occupation in the drainage is related to travel. The Overland (Oregon-California) Trail, branches of which pass through Seward and Thayer counties, was an important transportation route from ca. 1841 until ca. 1869, when it fell into disuse upon the completion of the Union Pacific Railroad. Several sites related to the trail, many early homestead sites, and other early settlement period locations have been recorded.

Although much of archeological research is directed at reconstruction of history before Europeans and written records, a significant amount of information can be learned from Euro-

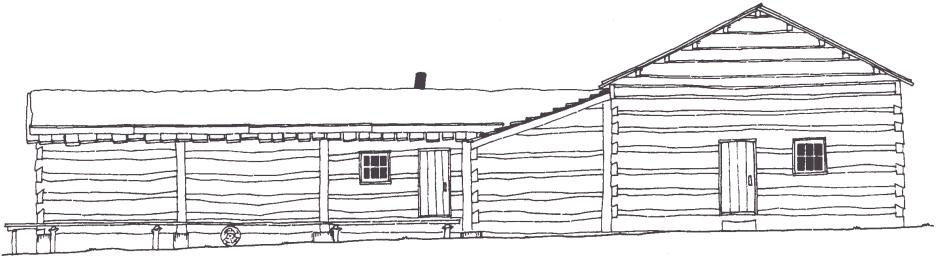
american sites. Often no records were kept or they have been lost and what information remains can only be learned by examination of the physical remains from the sites where that history was made.



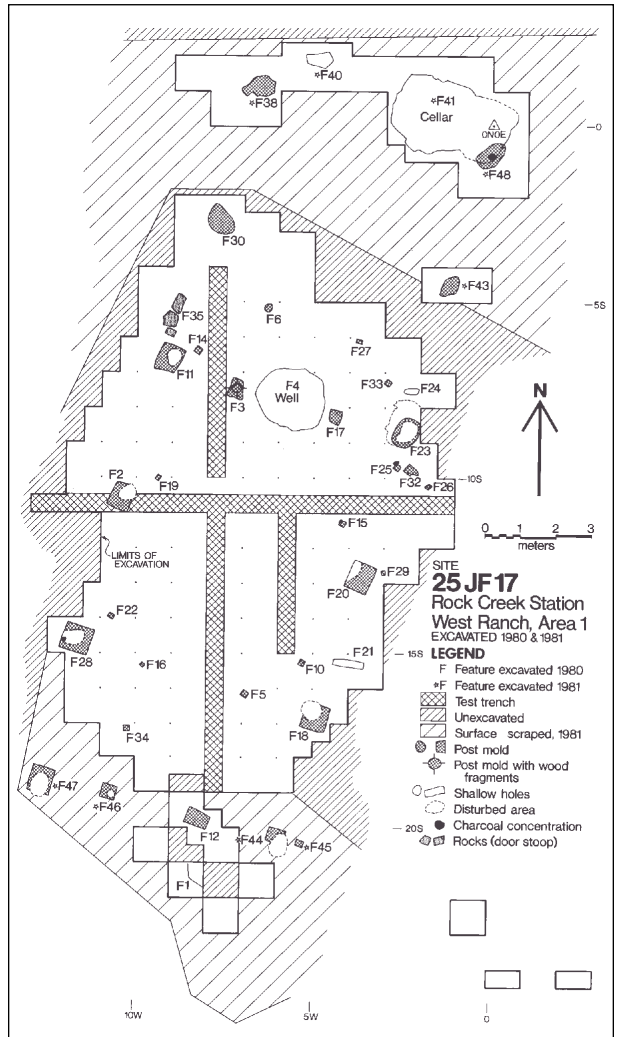
Excavation of Village Farmer lodge site.

Participating in Archeological Preservation

Over 10,000 years of human occupation in Nebraska took place prior to written records, map making, and photography. The only way to tell the stories of ancient people is through the archeological remains and oral traditions they left behind. Archeological sites are fragile and non-renewable resources, and modern land use practices and urban expansion are taking an alarming toll on the archeological record. Looting for fun or profit are also having serious affects on significant sites. A looted or otherwise disturbed site is nearly impossible to interpret for the public. For example, the buildings reconstructed at Rock Creek Station Historical Park are the result of archeological investigations.



Excavation and reconstruction of building at Rock Creek Stage Station.



Had the site been vandalized and large amounts of artifacts carried off, it would have been impossible to determine the locations of doors and windows and assign functions and events to the buildings.

The Nebraska State Historical Society recognizes the need to strike a balance between archeological conservation and public desire to participate in research. This publication series is directed to this need. The Society also invites anyone to contact us about volunteer opportunities. The Society sponsors bus tours of sites and volunteer excavations for the general public.

Please call the Society archeological staff at (308) 665-2918 or (402) 471-4789 for more information.

Additional Reading

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