

Discovery of an Early Prehistoric Site in the Cooper River

by Doug Boehme

I discovered the prehistoric underwater site, known as 38BK1766, in the Cooper River, Berkeley County, in the summer of 1994 while sport diving. The site consisted of a rich scatter of a wide variety of Native American tools found in a 200 to 300 foot stretch of the river. The tools range in age from Paleo to Woodland, and include a more diverse assemblage than just projectile points normally discovered in the local rivers. The site appears not to have been heavily collected by divers in the past and represents an excellent opportunity to document an interesting site.

I quickly realized that this might be a significant discovery and contacted Lynn Harris, head of the Sport Diver Archaeology Management Program of the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology. After visiting the site, Lynn concluded that the distribution pattern was consistent with deposition patterns of the river, rather than the material being in situ. She encouraged me to maintain careful records on the site and enter it into the state's site file.

I subsequently made numerous visits to the site over the next two years, collecting under the provisions of the South Carolina Underwater Antiquities Act of 1991, cataloging materials recovered, and finally submitting a site file report. The help of professionals such as Dr. Al Goodyear, Tommy Charles, and Dr. Ken Sassaman was invaluable in identifying and cataloging these artifacts.

No in situ material was determined to be present. No stratigraphic information was available, which limits the scope of this investigation primarily to artifact analysis. Dozens of hours of diving on the site confirmed the initial conclusion that artifacts had been redeposited from their original position by the action of the river. Almost all artifacts were found in gravel deposited by the river in narrow strips running across the river channel, providing information about fluvial and depositional processes.

I discovered one exception to this in a small, fairly dense, scatter of artifacts near the bank. This scatter contained a number of heavier objects such as banner stones, baked clay objects, and a grooved axe. This material may point to an in situ site on the bank. Until this area can be investigated, the bulk of information about this site must be gleaned from analysis of the raw material and typology of the artifacts discovered.

The time frame of occupation is a relatively easy question to answer. The projectile points recovered can be rather accurately dated by their shape and manufacture. Occupation seems to run from Paleo to Woodland. Middle Archaic seems to contain the heaviest concentration. There were no Mississippian tools found. My personal diving experience and communication with other divers indicates that Mississippian stone tools are somewhat uncommon in the Cooper River. This contrasts with the Mattassee Lake project which took place twenty to twenty-five miles from this site. A number of triangular Mississippian points were recovered during the project. Paleo was the most lightly represented era with only one specimen; however, considering that only four

hundred Clovis points have been registered in the state, this is a significant representation.

The raw materials used to make these tools have the potential to provide information about trading patterns of the inhabitants. The materials include:

Orthoquartzite--This is a rather coarse material resembling sandstone. The grade and workability of this stone vary greatly, but in general it is difficult to work and often erodes badly once in the ground or river. The main attraction of this material is that it can be obtained within a twenty to fifty mile radius. That fact probably accounts for it being the most common raw material on site.

Coastal Plain Chert--This is a flint-like material which varies in color from tan to gray to white to orange. The majority of chert found was an orange Allendale Chert from in and around Allendale County, South Carolina. This is a high-quality, attractive, and easily worked material which was likely in demand given the distance it had to be imported.

Quartz--This is a white, glassy-looking rock which comes from upstate South Carolina. It is difficult to work and most artifacts are rather small.

Mingo Chert--This rock is found in various locations along the South Carolina coast. It ranges in color from very translucent to rather dark and contains contrasting colored inclusions.

Rhyolite--This material is a fairly homogeneous gray, often exhibiting darker bands running through it. This rock is found predominantly in North Carolina.

Comparison with the Mattasee Lake project shows that this site has less orthoquartzite, rhyolite, and white chert, while having more Allendale Chert. Only those tools which could be securely typed within their time frame were used. It should also be noted that a significant number of orthoquartzite flakes, as well as a small number of Allendale Chert flakes, were found on the site.

Artifacts recovered from the site include a Clovis projectile point approximately 10,000 to 11,500 years old. A paleo Clovis is a small, thin lanceolate point made from orthoquartzite. The fluting on both sides, and grinding of the base and lateral sides near the base (presumably to prevent the sharp edge from cutting the binding material) is characteristic of Paleo technology (figure 1).

Dalton points have many similarities to Clovis, lacking fluting and lateral grinding. Note the serrated edges of the specimen in figure 2. Daltons are Late Paleo from 9,500 to 10,000 years ago. The flake knife or prismatic blade is of the same time frame as Dalton, although they have been found in both Paleo and Early Archaic assemblages. This blade was made from a single flake off a prepared core (figure 3).

A Kirk Blade is typical of Early Archaic tools. It is a well made stemmed blade exhibiting basal grinding. Many examples found on site have been resharpened unilaterally, resulting in a bevelled appearance to the blade edge. This is characteristic of Early Archaic. The time frame for Early Archaic is 8,000 to 9,000 years ago.

The Middle Archaic assemblage shows more diversity in form. The Morrow Mountain points are thick blades with a heavy ridge down the middle on one side. They have a weak, rounded stem.



Figure 1: Orthoquartzite Clovis point (Photo by D. Boehme).

The Guilford is a large, heavy, rather crudely made lanceolate blade. A smaller version with a concave base and small “ears” on the base (termed Santee Lanceolate by Tommy Charles) were a common point type for this site. Time frame for Middle Archaic is 5,000 to 8,000 years ago.

The Late Archaic was associated with a reversion to stemmed points such as the Savannah River and Broad River points. These are robust, often crudely, made blades with a straight stem and broad blades. They range from 3,000 to 5,000 years old, and a Late Archaic-Early Woodland blade with many similarities to the Savannah River, with a narrower blade and a less well defined stem.



Figure 2: Dalton point (Photo by D. Boehme).

Woodland points show many similarities to the better made Savannah

river points with corner notching. Woodland ranges from 1,500 to 3,000 years ago.

Baked clay objects are presumed to be clay replacements for cooking stones. They are crudely made by hand and basked in a fire. They were found both tempered and untempered. Many were found at Charlestowne Landing and were dated at approximately 4,000 years ago.



Figure 3: Prismatic blade (Photo by D. Boehme).

A full grooved ax from the Middle Archaic period is shown in figure 4.

The bannerstone is thought to have evolved from a weight used on an atlatyl throwing stick to an elaborate tool of unknown, presumably ceremonial, function. Figure 5 shows a Southern Notched Ovate bannerstone. Many similar bannerstones were found in Warren County, Georgia, this being one of the more elaborate forms dating to about 3,800 to 4,200 years ago. Five other bannerstone halves or fragments were found in four different styles ranging from 4,200 to 8,000 years ago.

This investigation can be of value to archaeologists in a number of ways. It can provide a base line of data to compare this site with other sites. It may suggest that a site



Figure 4: Full-grooved ax (Photo by D. Boehme).

on land exists in close proximity to this site, which could provide a wealth of information on the peoples inhabiting this area. Researchers on this terrestrial project would have an idea on what to expect, providing comparative information about the assemblage like to be found on land. Analysis of the raw materials on both sites provide information on

trading and procurement patterns of different time

periods. Several of the more unusual artifacts, such as the Southern Notched Ovate bannerstone and the Clovis point, have already been of use to SCIAA researchers in the various research specialty areas.

It may also serve to encourage sport divers who encounter rich archaeological sites to go beyond normal quarterly reports and thoroughly document the site.



Figure 5: Southern Notched Ovate bannerstone (Photo by D. Boehme).