Phase II and Phase III Archeological Database and Inventory

MARYLAND HISTORICAL TRUST

Site Number: 18MO458 **Site Name:** Northwest Branch Rock Shelter

Other name(s)

Prehistoric ☑ Historic ☐ Unknown ☐

Brief Description: Late Archaic (possibly) and Early & Late Woodland rockshelter/short-term camp

Site Location and Environmental Data:

Maryland Archeological Research Unit No. 12 SCS soil & sediment code

Latitude 39.0555 Longitude -77.0177 Physiographic province Eastern Piedmont Terrestrial site ☑ Underwater site ☐

Elevation 79 m Site slope 0 Ethnobotany profile available ☐ Maritime site ☐

Site setting

-Site Setting restricted

-Lat/Long accurate to within 1 sq. mile, user may need to make slight adjustments in mapping to account for sites near state/county lines or streams

Topography

Floodplain	☑	High terrace	☐
Hilltop/bluff	☐	Rockshelter/ cave	☐
Interior flat	☐	Hillslope	☐
Upland flat	☐	Unknown	☐
Ridgetop	☐	Other	☐
Terrace	☐		
Low terrace	☐		

Ownership

Private	☐
Federal	☐
State of MD	☐
Regional/ county/city	☑
Unknown	☐

Nearest Surface Water

Name (if any) Northwest Branch

Saltwater		Freshwater	
Ocean	☐	Stream/river	☑
Estuary/tidal river	☐	Swamp	☐
Tidewater/marsh	☐	Lake or pond	☐
		Spring	☐

Minimum distance to water is 10 m

Temporal & Ethnic Contextual Data:

Paleoindian site		Woodland site		Contact period site		ca. 1820 - 1860	
Archaic site		MD Adena		ca. 1630 - 1675		ca. 1860 - 1900	
Early archaic		Early woodland	Y	ca. 1675 - 1720		ca. 1900 - 1930	
MIddle archaic		Mid. woodland		ca. 1720 - 1780		Post 1930	Y
Late archaic	P	Late woodland	Y	ca. 1780 - 1820			

Unknown prehistoric context ☐ Unknown historic context ☐ Unknown context ☐

Ethnic Associations (historic only)

Native American	☐	Asian American	☐
African American	☐	Unknown	☐
Anglo-American	☐	Other	☐
Hispanic	☐		

Y=Confirmed, P=Possible

Site Function Contextual Data:

Prehistoric

Multi-component	☑	Misc. ceremonial	☐
Village	☐	Rock art	☐
Hamlet	☐	Shell midden	☐
Base camp	☐	STU/lithic scatter	☑
Rockshelter/cave	☑	Quarry/extraction	☐
Earthen mound	☐	Fish weir	☐
Cairn	☐	Production area	☐
Burial area	☐	Unknown	☐

Other context ☐

Historic

Urban/Rural?

Domestic	☐	Furnace/forge	☐	**Military**	☐
Homestead	☐	Other	☐	Battlefield	☐
Farmstead	☐	**Transportation**	☐	Fortification	☐
Mansion	☐	Canal-related	☐	Encampment	☐
Plantation	☐	Road/railroad	☐	**Townsite**	☐
Row/townhome	☐	Wharf/landing	☐	**Religious**	☐
Cellar	☐	Maritime-related	☐	Church/mtg house	☐
Privy	☐	Bridge	☐	Ch support bldg	☐
Industrial	☐	Ford	☐	**Burial area**	☐
Mining-related	☐	**Educational**	☐	Cemetery	☐
Quarry-related	☐	**Commercial**	☐	Sepulchre	☐
Mill	☐	Trading post	☐	Isolated burial	☐
Black/metalsmith	☐	Store	☐	**Bldg or foundation**	☐
		Tavern/inn	☐	Possible Structure	☐

Post-in-ground	☐	**Slave related**	☐
Frame-built	☐	**Non-domestic agri**	☐
Masonry	☐	**Recreational**	☐
Other structure	☐	**Midden/dump**	☐
		Artifact scatter	☐
		Spring or well	☐
		Unknown	☐
		Other context	☐

Interpretive Sampling Data:

Prehistoric context samples		Soil samples taken	N
Flotation samples taken	N	Other samples taken	

Historic context samples		Soil samples taken	
Flotation samples taken		Other samples taken	

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Diagnostic Artifact Data:

Projectile Point Types

Clovis		Koens-Crispin	
Hardaway-Dalton		Perkiomen	
Palmer		Susquehana	
Kirk (notch)		Vernon	
Kirk (stem)		Piscataway	
Le Croy		Calvert	
Morrow Mntn		Selby Bay	
Guilford		Jacks Rf (notch)	
Brewerton		Jacks Rf (pent)	
Otter Creek		Madison/Potomac	1
		Levanna	

All quantities exact or estimated minimal counts

Prehistoric Sherd Types

Marcey Creek		Popes Creek		Shepard		Keyser	1
Dames Qtr		Coulbourn		Townsend		Yeocomico	
Selden Island	1	Watson		Minguannan		Monongahela	
Accokeek	3	Mockley		Sullivan Cove		Susquehannock	
Wolfe Neck		Clemson Island		Shenks Ferry			
Vinette		Page		Moyaone			
				Potomac Cr			

Historic Sherd Types

Earthenware

Astbury		Ironstone		Staffordshire	
Borderware		Jackfield		Tin Glazed	
Buckley		Mn Mottled		Whiteware	
Creamware		North Devon		**Porcelain**	
		Pearlware			

Stoneware

English Brown	
Eng Dry-bodie	
Nottingham	
Rhenish	
Wt Salt-glazed	

Other Artifact & Feature Types:

Prehistoric Artifacts

Flaked stone	3279	Other fired clay	
Ground stone		Human remain(s)	☐
Stone bowls		Modified faunal	156
Fire-cracked rock	3	Unmod faunal	8
Other lithics (all)	1	Oyster shell	☐
Ceramics (all)	5	Floral material	☐
Rimsherds	1	Uncommon Obj.	
		Other ☐	

Prehistoric Features

Mound(s)		Storage/trash pit	☐
Midden	☐	Burial(s)	☐
Shell midden	☐	Ossuary	☐
Postholes/molds	☐	Unknown	☐
House pattern(s)	☐	Other	☐
Palisade(s)	☐		
Hearth(s)	☐		
Lithic reduc area	☐		

Lithic Material

Fer quartzite	☐	Sil sandstone	☐		
Jasper	☑	Chalcedony	☑	European flint	☐
Chert	☑	Ironstone	☐	Basalt	☐
Rhyolite	☑	Argilite	☐	Unknown	☐
Quartz	☑	Steatite	☐	Other	☐
Quartzite	☑	Sandstone	☐		

☐ **Dated features present at site**

Historic Artifacts

Pottery (all)		Tobacco related	
Glass (all)	96	Activity item(s)	3
Architectural	23	Human remain(s)	☐
Furniture		Faunal material	☐
Arms	5	Misc. kitchen	132
Clothing		Floral material	☐
Personal items	2	Misc.	87
		Other ☐	

Historic Features

Const feature	☐	Privy/outhouse	☐	Depression/mound	☐
Foundation	☐	Well/cistern	☐	Burial(s)	☐
Cellar hole/cellar	☐	Trash pit/dump	☐	Railroad bed	☐
Hearth/chimney	☐	Sheet midden	☐	Earthworks	☐
Postholes/molds	☐	Planting feature	☐	Mill raceway	☐
Paling ditch/fence	☐	Road/walkway	☐	Wheel pit	☐
				Unknown	☐
				Other	☐

All quantities exact or estimated minimal counts

Radiocarbon Data:

Sample 1:	+/-	years BP	Reliability	**Sample 2:**	+/-	years BP	Reliability	**Sample 3:**	+/-	years BP	Reliability
Sample 4:	+/-	years BP	Reliability	**Sample 5:**	+/-	years BP	Reliability	**Sample 6:**	+/-	years BP	Reliability
Sample 7:	+/-	years BP	Reliability	**Sample 8:**	+/-	years BP	Reliability	**Sample 9:**	+/-	years BP	Reliability

☐ **Additional radiocarbon results available**

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External Samples/Data:

Collection curated at MNCPPC

☐ Additional raw data may be available online

Summary Description:

The Northwest Branch Rockshelter (18MO458) in Montgomery County, MD is an apparent stratified, multi-component base camp utilized from Late Archaic through Late Woodland times. It has also been used in the modern era as a recreational area for the local community. The site is situated along the floodplain of the Northwest Branch near Wheaton, MD. The rockshelter forms part of the base of a ridge that runs parallel to Northwest Branch. It juts out from the ridge with an overhang angle of slightly less than 45 degrees. The current ceiling height is nearly 3.05 meters (10 ft). The overhang extends about 3.66 meters out from the base of the ridge, sheltering an estimated 9.29 square meters (100 sq. feet). Floor space behind the drip-line is somewhat restricted, however, because of a smaller section of basement material that intrudes into the eastern edge of the shelter. The floor lacks a level surface. The entrance of the rockshelter faces north to northwest and, thus, would have been exposed to Arctic winds during the winter months.

The site was first examined archeologically as part of a long-term Phase I level survey and inventory of prehistoric cultural resources in Montgomery County parks. Once the rock overhang was noted in the field, the decision was made to conduct archeological research to determine if the overhang was used as a rockshelter during the prehistoric period. Archeological investigation of the site began in January of 1997. The Phase I study consisted of a subsurface examination using an excavation of a 45 cm dimension. The rockshelter was initially tested with a small unit size in order to minimize archeological impact until more was known about the potential site. The edge of a rock approximately 46 cm to the northwest served as the unit datum for measuring stratigraphic and artifact provenience. Soils were excavated by natural and arbitrary levels. Arbitrary levels of approximately 2.5 cm increments were invoked when natural soil changes were not observed. A total of 19 excavation levels in 5 major strata were completed with a below surface depth of approximately 56 cm. Excavation ceased at this depth because of the difficulties encountered in working in such a small unit. Soils from the test unit were removed from the site and water screened through 1/16 inch wire mesh. This process was used to insure the recovery of small lithic artifacts and archeobotanical and archeofaunal remains if they were present. Because all of the artifacts were recovered during the water-screening process, provenience recordation was limited to vertical level only.

Since lithics were recovered in the 45 cm test unit, researchers decided that Phase II fieldwork should immediately follow the initial study. As part of the Phase II testing, the Phase I test unit was expanded into a 90 cm X 90 cm unit. The original unit then became the southwest quadrant of the new test square. The same unit datum was employed in the Phase II investigation as in the Phase I. Soils were again excavated according to natural and arbitrary levels with the latter having approximately 2.5 cm increments. Because it was found that the first 18 to 20 cm of soil depth contained modern artifacts, the excavation process was expedited by removing these soils in two levels of a much larger increment. A thin lens of disturbed soils, perhaps related to a historic fire pit located in the southeast corner, was used to separate these two modern levels. Unlike with the initial study, three-point provenience information was recorded in the Phase II investigation. Although most of the recovery was found during the water-screening process, when cultural material was observed in situ both horizontal and vertical provenience measurements were recorded. Soils were water-screened on-site using 1/16 inch wire mesh with water supplied from the Northwest Branch.

Excavation revealed five major strata present within the rockshelter soils. The depth of Stratum I varied from 13 cm to over 23 cm and contained mostly modern historic artifacts. There appeared to be a prehistoric transitional zone near the bottom of the stratum. Stratum II was a lens of overburden soils linked with a pit feature intruding into the southeast corner of the unit. The lens of overburden and pit feature are interpreted as modern because the soils lying directly above and below them contain 20th century artifacts. The depth of Stratum II varied from less than 2.5 cm in the southwest corner to slightly over 5 cm in the southeast corner. Stratum III was the result of rapid alluvial deposition and varied from 2.5 cm in the southeast corner to over 12 cm in the middle of the south wall. The first prehistoric diagnostic artifact (triangular point) recovered from the rockshelter was found in Stratum III. Stratum IV is a buried organic zone. The depth of this stratum varies between 5 and 10 cm. A second diagnostic artifact (triangular point) was found at the transition of Strata IV and V. Stratum V represents a second, more extensive period of alluvial deposition. Stratum V also contained rock connected with ceiling collapse and increasing amounts of alluvial gravel as greater depth was approached. The soils were loosely compacted at the top of the stratum and become increasingly hard-packed at the bottom where age is more of a factor. Stratum depth varied widely because of the presence of the rock fall from 5 cm to as much as 71 cm. Stratum V also marked a change in the type of diagnostic artifact found, with prehistoric pottery (Accokeek and Selden Island sherds) being recovered from Stratum V rather than projectile points. At the completion of the Phase II investigation, excavation depths reached 112 cm below surface. Further excavation was restricted by the presence of immovable rock, perhaps related to either ceiling collapse or basement material.

The Phase I/II combined recovery consists of historic and prehistoric materials. The historic artifacts were generally confined to the first two vertical levels. Historic artifacts of measurable quantity were also found well below these two levels in a pit feature located in the southeast corner of the unit (Feature 15) which extends down to 38 cm below surface. Elsewhere in the unit only traces of historic artifacts were present below Level 2. Their presence was attributed to the effects of bioturbation in sandy soils and the inability of the excavators to keep modern artifacts from falling into the test square from the unit walls. Historic artifacts included 3 activity items (2 balloon fragments and part of a pencil eraser), 23 architectural objects (22 wire nails and a fragment of window glass), 227 kitchen-related artifacts (95 bottle shards, 76 pieces of aluminum can, 1 tin fragment, 53 bottle caps, and 2 fragments of foil), 2 personal items (a white bead and a copper coin), 5 arms-related artifacts (4 .22 caliber shells and a .32 caliber shell), and 87 miscellaneous objects (79 unidentified metal fragments, 1 piece of paper, 1 piece of paper, 5 cellophane fragments, and a piece of melted plastic). This mix of materials is interpreted as evidence that the rockshelter was used in modern times for recreational purposes.

The prehistoric recovery contains over 3,400 items divided between lithic and ceramic artifacts and archeofaunal and archeobotanical remains. The lithic assemblage predominates and the vast majority of that (3,266 items) is debitage. Approximately 86% of the lithic artifacts were made of quartz. Eleven percent of the total was made from rhyolite with lesser quantities of other materials. The composition of the lithic waste indicates that the entire reduction process occurred at the rockshelter. Non-debitage lithic artifacts included 1 Late Woodland Madison point, 1 other triangular point, 1 drill fragment, 4 biface fragments, 1 angular core fragment, 3 flake spalls, 2 retouched flakes, and a soft hammerstone. The drill is interpreted as being of possible Late Archaic vintage. At least 3 fragments of fire-cracked rock were also encountered. In addition to the lithic materials, the inventory includes 5 pottery sherds. These were a possible Keyser ware sherd, 3 Woodland Accokeek body sherds, and a Selden Island rimsherd. Other artifacts were 164 archeofaunal and 46 archeobotanical remains. Among the recovered bones (156 of which were burned) were at least 4 bird bones, 7 turtle shell fragments, 1 snake vertebra, and perhaps 6 white-tailed deer bone fragments. The plant remains consist of 37 seeds, 1 whole acorn, 8 nut shell fragments, and 1 unidentified specimen. The burnt, fragmented condition of the floral material makes species identification difficult without specialized training and no paleobotanical analysis of the specimens has been reported.

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The archeological evidence indicates that the Northwest Branch Rockshelter (18MO458) was occupied on numerous occasions throughout the historic and prehistoric periods. The rockshelter apparently served as a short-term recreation area for the surrounding community over the last forty years or more. The material recovery supports an extended period of prehistoric occupation at the rockshelter. Occupation is thought to have begun in the Late Archaic at ca. 2500 BC and ended in the Late Woodland at ca. AD 1600. Although the occupation period consisted of several distinct cultural episodes, the rockshelter probably functioned similarly over the last 4,000 years. This interpretation is corroborated by the similarity of material remains over time. The ubiquitous presence of lithic waste, representing all stages of the reduction process, and faunal and floral remains indicates that prehistoric groups occupied the rockshelter while procuring local lithics and replenishing tool kits. It also served as an overnight shelter and a place to process game and other food resources. These functions are corroborated by the presence of pottery and burnt faunal remains. Based on the small size of the shelter and the limited food potential of its surroundings, the shelter was probably only utilized by small groups for short stays. It probably served as a small, temporary base camp location, with larger, more permanent settlements strategically situated elsewhere.

Prior to this investigation, little was known about the prehistory of southern Montgomery County. The opportunity to address numerous research questions about the county materialized when the Northwest Branch Rockshelter site was partially excavated. The site is considered to have significant future research potential.

External Reference Codes (Library ID Numbers):

00005259