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THE SEARCH FOR ELUSIVE VIRGINIA COASTAL PLAIN BURIAL MOUNDS: AN EXAMPLE FROM KING WILLIAM COUNTY

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INTRODUCTION

Periodically, archaeologists working in the Virginia Coastal Plain receive reports of possible Native American burial mounds extant in the region. Upon investigation, such reports inevitably are shown to be natural features formed through erosional processes. This has been recently documented, to cite just a few examples, by the VRCA at a reported mound near Bowling Green in Caroline County and by Virginia Commonwealth University archeologists at two supposed mounds, one situated in the Chickahominy Swamp in Hanover County and the other near Ashton Creek in Chesterfield County (Keith T. Egloff and L. Daniel Mouer, personal communication).
Possible mounds noted in publications are restricted to the Pamunkey Indian Reservation environs (Burnett 1914: 7; Richardson 1884: 828; Rountree 1972: 75-76; Speck 1928: 302), although archaeological investigations have never been undertaken to determine their origins. Most noted is a mound on the reservation having a long tradition of containing burials, with both Powhatan and Opechancanough being mentioned as having been interred there. Explanations for the mound's presence range from being built by the Pamunkey as a burial mound to being merely a result of natural erosion and/or nearby railroad construction during the 19th century, with most archaeologists favoring the latter interpretation.

Related, early 17th through 18th century historical accounts for the Powhatan make no mention of mound burials. While such documents provide voluminous information on Powhatan temples and associated mortuary practices of highly ranked individuals within such temples, there is no mention of the temples being on raised earthen platforms (cf. Beverley 1947: 195-198, 213-216; Smith 1910: 75-76; Strachey 1953: 88-89, 94). Likewise more typical burial practices of lesser ranked individuals are described as being in subsurface graves or secondary interments in or near houses of relatives but never in mounds (cf. Glover 1676: 633; Smith 1910: 75; Spelman 1910: cx; Strachey 1953: 95). In short, there simply is no ethnohistorical evidence supporting mortuary mound construction by Native Americans in the region, a position consistent with available archaeological data.

THE MANQUIN MOUNDS

In 1983, two additional examples of possible burial mounds, 44KW10 and 44KW12, were brought to the attention of the VRCA. Both are situated near Manquin in King William County Ca. 100 yards apart in an extremely poorly drained, marshy area adjacent to Moncuin Creek which drains into the Pamunkey River ca. 1.5 miles to the south. Local residents referred to these features as “Indian burial mound&’ and reported that forty or more years ago human bones had been uncovered while digging in one of them (44KW12).

Besides the report of human bones being present, additional information indicated that the two mounds could not be routinely dismissed as being of natural origins. Recently an unsigned and undated map was discovered among Virginia Colonial Records Project microfilms of British Public Records Office documents which depicts portions of the York River and its southernmost branch, the Pamunkey River (McCartney 1984). Subsequent research dated the map to the third quarter of the 17th century. On it one finds in the immediate vicinity of the two mounds a designation entitled “Menmend an ancient seat of Opachancone ye late Emperour”. Of particular significance, the map places Opechancanough’s settlement of Menmend considerably west of the core area of key Powhatan settlements at the confluence of the Pamunkey and Mattaponi rivers where he was known to have resided ca. 1607 during initial English settlement in the region (Smith 1910: 17, 30). Related, at its most likely location based on this map, Menmend would have been in a locale easily defended (being surrounded on all sides by extensive marshes) while at the same time adjacent to the Pamunkey River and with direct access to a wide variety of exploitable flora and fauna as well as good agricultural soils.
Given the absence of known major Powhatan settlements in the historical records for this specific locale during the first two decades of :he 17th Century, it is possible that Opechancanough, a successor to Powhatan as paramount chief of the Powhatan Chiefdom, took up residence here sometime from 1622 to 1646, the period of maximum armed conflict with English settlers which terminated only with his death in 1646. Such a relocation probably also would have involved removal of bodies of esteemed individuals in mortuary temples originally situated farther east to avoid depredations during English raids. The two mounds near Manquin are directly north of the likely settlement attributable to Opechancanough yet are in a remote marshy area decreasing the likelihood of accidental discovery by the English. In spite of the absence of both archaeological and ethnohistorical evidence for the Powhatan partipatirig in mound burials, the reported occurrence of human bones and association of this location with a likely settlement inhabited by Opechancanough prompted the VRCA to investigate the two mounds.

FIELD INVESTIGATIONS

During the initial investigation, worked lithic flakes were found on the surface of both mounds. While it was unclear at that time if such cultural material represented merely small camp sites on elevated mounds of natural origin associated with exploitation of the marshy locale there or rather were in some way related to actual burial mounds of human derivation, each was assigned a state number - 44KW10 to the southernmost mound and 44KW12 to the mound to the north.Both mounds had been cleared previously of most trees and underlying vegetation.

44KW10 measured roughly 75 feet in diameter and 10 feet in height compared with 44KW12 which was roughly 100 feet in diameter and 15 feet in height (Figure 1). Upon initial observation, there was no way to distinguish these mounds from others of similar size and shape in eastern North America previously shown to be man-made prior to European contact.

Man-related disturbances to 44KW10 were minimal, being restricted to one small pit ca. 3 to 5 feet in length/width and ca. 3 feet deep at its summit. In contrast, substantial portions of the top of 44KW12 had been disturbed to a depth of Ca. 3 to 4 feet which according to the landowner was largely caused by digging ca. 40 or more years ago at which time human bones were reported as found. One in-situ tree stump on the side of 44KW10 had approximately 110 growth rings, clearly indicating the mounds did not represent recent earth-moving activities.

Core samples were obtained from both mounds using a 2 1/4 inch bucket auger. 44KW10 was characterized by a yellow to brown sandy soil for approximately the first 6 inches underlain by a yellow to light brown sandy clay with pebble inclusions to a depth of ca. 5 feet at which point the auger test was stopped. In contrast, 44KW12 consisted of a light yellow brown sandy to sandy clay soil to a depth of approximately 2 feet underlain by a very fine white sandy soil, interpreted as possibly diatomaceous earth, to a depth of Ca. feet at which point the auger test was again stopped.

Given the close proximity of the two mounds yet their different stratigraphy, advice was requested from two agronomists with the U.S. Soil Conservation Service - Richard L. Googins and Lawrence A. Gorman. Following a subsequent investigation of the sites during which time additional core samples were taken (Figure 2), Googins and Gorman indicated that:

1) The soil profile for 44KW10 was consistent with what one would expect if the mound was of natural origin.

2) The soil profile for 44KW12 likewise was consistent with what one would expect if the mound was of natural origin. Also, soil earner interpreted as possibly diatomaceous earth was shown to actually be a heavily leached zone of white silty fine sand overlain by a good B horizon of yellow sandy clay with some mottling.

3) Profile differences between the two mounds were likely the result of differential lensing of natural deposits over the locale.

4) Given the marshy, low-lying land and stream adjacent to the mounds, they were most likely caused by erosion. This view was further confirmed when a nearby terrace edge adjacent to the marshy area and within 1/4 mile of the mounds was augured and shown to have a profile identical to 44KW12.

The two mounds near Manquin thus are viewed as yet one more example for the Virginia Coastal Plain of natural features formed through erosional processes erroneously identified locally as man-made Indian burial mounds. The occurrence of worked lithic flakes on the surface of the mounds is not unexpected since such elevated locations within a marshy locale would be excellent for small camp sites for sporadic exploitation of available resources here. While human bones were reported as being found in 44KW12, none were noted on the surface or from the limited core samples taken during the two field investigations in 1983. This is not unexpected since no extensive subsurface testing was undertaken. Only subsequent excavations can determine if evidence of human burials is still present at 44KW12 and if so whether these burials represent historic or prehistoric interments within this elevated natural feature.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

While examples of various forms of Native American mounds have been identified archaeologically in Virginia's Piedmont and Appalachian Mountain provinces, such simply is not the case for the Coastal Plain region. All known examples investigated by archaeologists in this latter region have been shown to be of natural origin. Similarly, there is absolutely no evidence in the extensive ethnohistorical accounts available for the Virginia Coastal Plain to indicate their existence. While specialized mortuary practices related to social rank are mentioned, mound burials are never noted as part of the region's cultural tradition.

The two mounds near Manquin recently reported to the VRCA proved to be no exception. In spite of shapes and dimensions consistent with documented burial mounds elsewhere, the reported presence of human bones, and historical documentation supportive of occupation nearby during the second quarter of the 17th century by Opechancanough, the last paramount chief of the Powhatan Chiefdom before its disintegration, pedological evidence for the mounds being man-made did not materialize. Rather, each mound was shown to be of natural origins.

Both the archaeology and ethnohistory for the region thus are consistent in refuting the likelihood of Native American burial mounds ever being associated with local religious beliefs. Indeed, available data strongly suggest that in searching for elusive Native American burial mounds in coastal Virginia, such mounds are likely to remain just that -- elusive.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Manquin mounds were brought to our attention by Kenneth Carter and Gregory H. Moser, both with the U.S. Soil Conservation Service, who aided us during all fieldwork and to whom we are very appreciative of their help. Carlyle Clements, the landowner, was extremely cooperative during our two trips to the mounds and was most helpful in providing us with background information on them. We also thank Richard L. Googins and Lawrence A. Gorman, both' with the U.S. Soil Conservation Service, for responding to our request to visit the mounds and provide advice on interpreting the soil profiles

which proved to be extremely valuable. Finally, Keith T. Egloff, with the VRCA, and L. Daniel Mouer, at VCU, were most helpful in providing us with unpublished data in their possession on other Virginia Coastal Plain mounds viewed as possible burial mounds but subsequently shown to be of natural origin.

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VIRGINIA RESEARCH CENTER FOR ARCHAEOLOGY
SITE SURVEY FORM
Name of site: Site number: 44KW12
Type of site: Cultural affiliation: Prehistoric
Map reference: Manquin Quad (USGS 7.5' Series)
Latitude o " north. Longitude o " west.
U.T.M. Zone 18 Easting 310910 Northing 4174220 .
(or distance from printed edge of map: bottom edge _: right edge)
Owner/address: Carlyle Clements, Manquin, VA
Tenant/address:
Attitude toward investigation: Favorable,
Informant/address:
Surveyed by: Herb Fisher E. Randolph Turner, and. Date: 10/17/83 Greg Moser (scs)
General surroundings: Site is possible mound in marsh dry enough to walk through, Mound has been timbered within last year; tree stumps bigger than on 44KWl0 but growth rings not counted on any.
Nearest water: nature, direction and distance: Monquin Creek is ca. 25 yards to east.
Dimension of site: Mound is roughly 100 feet in diameter and 15 feet in
Description: height, depth, soil, collecting conditions: Four tests with 2+ bucket auger performed at various levels on mound. All encountered light yellow brown sandy soil from the surface to two feet below with uniform material identified as diatomaceous earth from two to five feet below the mound's surface. Auger test on f1odplain encountered completely different stratigraphy. N0B, stratigraph5r in 44KA12 mound is different to that in 44KW10 mound.
Specimens collected: kinds, quantities, materials: All observed artifacts (1 quartzite flake and 1 possible flake of unidentified material) collected. See VRCA specimen catalog sheet, All artifacts came from mound surface.
Specimens reported, owners, address:
Other documentation: reports, historical data: See site form for 44KW10.
Condition: erosion, cultivation, excavation, construction: Substantial portions disturbed on top of mound to depth of ca. 34 feet; according to owner, supposedly caused by digging ca. 40+ years ago at which time human bone was reported as found.
Recommendations: More intensive testing warranted to determine if mound is man—made.
Photo: See VRCA files. Map:
Recorded by:. Herb Fisher and E. Randolph Turner Date: 10/24/83
See Addendum to 44KW1O form on subsequent 11/16/83 field inspection.
(Use reverse side of sheet and additional pages for sketches of site and artifacts)

VIRGINIA RESEARCH CENTER FOR ARCHAEOLOGY
SITE SURVEY FORM
Name of site: Site number: 44IKW10
Type of site: Cultural affiliation: Prehistoric
Map reference: Manquin Quad (USGS 7.5' Series)
Latitude o '" north. Longitude o '" west.
U.T.M. Zone Easting 310940 Northing 4174100
(or distance from printed edge of map: bottom edge _: right edge _)
Owner/address: Carlyle Clements, Manquin, VA
Tenant/address:
Attitude toward investigation: Favorable
Informant/address:
Surveyed by: Herb Fisher, E. Randolph Turner, and Date: 10/17/83 Greg Moser (sos)
General surroundings Site is possible mound in marsh dry enough to walk through. Mound has been timbered within last year; one tree stump had ca. 110 growth rings0
Nearest water: nature, direction and distance: Monquin Creek is ca. 25 yards to east.
Dimension of site: Mound is roughly 75 feet in diameter and 10 feet in height. Sides are less steep than .possible mound at 44KW12.
Description: depth, soil, collecting conditions: Two tests with 2+ inch bucket auger performed. First auger test: dark brown silty soil from the surface to 6 inches below; from 6 inches to 5 feet down encountered mottled silty clay with pebbles. Second auger test placed on mound slope and found same stratigraphy but with less pebbles; went to depth of 4 feet.
Specimens collected: kinds, quantities, materials: All observed artifacts (3 possible quartz flakes) col1ected See VRCA specimen catalog sheet. All artifacts came from mound surface.
Specimens reported, owners, address: — Other documentation: reports, historical data: —
Condition: erosion, cultivation, excavation, construction: Very small disturbance at top (small pit ca 3—5 feet in length/width and ca. 3 feet deep).
Recommendations: More intensive testing warranted to determine if mound is man—made.
Photo: See VRCA files. Map:
Recorded by: Herb Fisher and E. Randolph Turner Date:. 10/24/83
See Reverse Side for subsequent 11/16/83 field inspection. (Use reverse side of sheet and additional pages for sketches of site and artifacts)

44KW10 and 44IWl2 were reexamined on 11/16/83 by R. Turner, H. Fisher, and K. Egloff (VRCA) as well as Ken Carter, Gregg Moser, Richard Googins, and Larry German (ses). Based on augering by R. Googins and
L. German, they indicated:
44KW10 profile is consistent with what one would expect if mound is of natural origin (yellowish sandy soil underlain by yellow sandy clay with pebbles).
44KW12 profile was interpreted in same way. Diatomaceous earth actually was heavily leached zone of white silty fine sand. (yellowish sandy soil underlain by yellow sandy clay with some gray mottling (good B horizon) underlain by white silty fine sand (extensive leaching)).
(3) Profile differences between the two mounds were likely the result of differential lensing of deposits over the locale.
Auguring on a terrace to the NW of 44KW12 resulted in an identical profile when compared to 44KW12.
(5) The two mounds are most likely natural features caused by erosion — based on low—lying land around mounds and adjacent stream.

VIRGINIA RESEARCH CENTER FOR ARCHAEOLOGY
SITE SURVEY FORM

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(or distance from printed edge of map: bottom edge ___: right edge ___)

Owner/address: Carlyle Clements, Manquin, VA
Tenant/address:
Attitude toward investigation: Favorable
Informant/address:
Surveyed by: Herb Fisher, E. Randolph Turner, and Greg Moser (SCS) Date: 10/17/83
General surroundings: Site is possible mound in marsh dry enough to walk through. Mound has been timbered within last year; one tree stump had ca. 110 growth rings.

Nearest water: nature, direction and distance: Monquin Creek is ca. 25 yards to east.

Dimension of site: Mound is roughly 75 feet in diameter and 10 feet in height. Sides are less steep than possible mound at 44KW12.
Description: depth, soil, collecting conditions: Two tests with 2¼ inch bucket auger performed. First auger test: dark brown silty soil from the surface to 6 inches below; from 6 inches to 5 feet down encountered mottled silty clay with pebbles. Second auger test placed on mound slope and found same stratigraphy but with less pebbles; went to depth of 4 feet.

Specimens collected: kinds, quantities, materials: All observed artifacts (3 possible quartz flakes) collected. See VRCA specimen catalog sheet. All artifacts came from mound surface.

Specimens reported, owners, address: -

Other documentation: reports, historical data: -

Condition: erosion, cultivation, excavation, construction: Very small disturbance at top (small pit ca. 3-5 feet in length/width and ca. 3 feet deep).

Recommendations: More intensive testing warranted to determine if mound is man-made.
Photo: See VRCA files. Map:
Recorded by: Herb Fisher and E. Randolph Turner Date: 10/24/83

See Reverse Side for subsequent 11/16/83 field inspection.

(Use reverse side of sheet and additional pages for sketches of site and artifacts)

County King William
Map Sheet Manquin
Site Number 44KW10

44KW10 and 44KW12 were reexamined on 11/16/83 by R. Turner, H. Fisher, and K. Egloff (VRCA) as well as Ken Carter, Gregg Moser, Richard Googins, and Larry Gorman (SCS). Based on augering by R. Googins and L. Gorman, they indicated:

(1) 44KW10 profile is consistent with what one would expect if mound is of natural origin (yellowish sandy soil underlain by yellow sandy clay with pebbles).

(2) 44KW12 profile was interpreted in same way. Diatomaceous earth actually was a heavily leached zone of white silty fine sand. (yellowish sandy soil underlain by yellow sandy clay with some gray mottling (good B horizon) underlain by white silty fine sand (extensive leaching)).

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(4) Auguring on a terrace to the NW of 44KW12 resulted in an identical profile when compared to 44KW12.

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VIRGINIA RESEARCH CENTER FOR ARCHAEOLOGY
SITE SURVEY FORM

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Type of site: Cultural affiliation: Prehistoric

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Description: depth, soil, collecting conditions: Four tests with 2¼ bucket auger performed at various levels on mound. All encountered light yellow brown sandy soil from the surface to two feet below with uniform material identified as diatomaceous earth from two to five feet below the mound's surface. Auger test on floodplain encountered completely different stratigraphy. N.B. stratigraphy in 44KW12 mound is different to that in 44KW10 mound.

Specimens collected: kinds, quantities, materials: All observed artifacts (1 quartzite flake and 1 possible flake of unidentified material) collected. See VRCA specimen catalog sheet. All artifacts came from mound surface.

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Other documentation: reports, historical data: See site form for 44KW10.

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Recommendations: More intensive testing warranted to determine if mound is man-made.
Photo: See VRCA files. Map:
Recorded by: Herb Fisher and E. Randolph Turner Date: 10/24/83

See Addendum to 44KW10 form on subsequent 11/16/83 field inspection.

(Use reverse side of sheet and additional pages for sketches of site and artifacts)

County King William Map Sheet Manquin Site Number 44KW12