

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SALVAGE
OF THE
JARRETT'S POINT OSSUARY, On^v304

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At the end of January, the Research Laboratories of Anthropology were notified by Mr. Julian Wooten, Director of Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs Branch, Camp Lejeune, that human bone was eroding from the profile of a cut through a relic sand dune. The dune is located in an active training zone north of Jarretts Point and immediately south of N.C. 172 (Figure 1).

On February 10, Research Lab personnel visited the site and determined that the bone was eroding from the remnant of a prehistoric Indian ossuary. It appeared in a saucer-like lens approximately 9' long and as much as 1' thick in the middle (Plate I). From the hardened and bleached exterior appearance of the bone, it had been exposed for a considerable period of time. By digging a small test pit north of the exposed bone layer, the determination was made that it did not extend more than 3' into the side of the cut.

On April 20, the author and Jack Wilson, Jr. returned to the site and began preparing the area for excavation. The strategy was simple. First, all vegetation was cleared from the top of the old dune immediately above the bone matrix. Next the sand overburden was shoveled off leaving a .2' layer to protect the bone. The perimeter of the matrix was defined, and small hand tools, primarily brushes and grapefruit knives, were used to clean and expose as much as possible of the bone. The cleaning operation was done with the assistance of Dr. Michael Trinkley, archaeologist with the S. C. Highway Department, and Ms. Homes Hogue, UNC graduate student in physical anthropology.

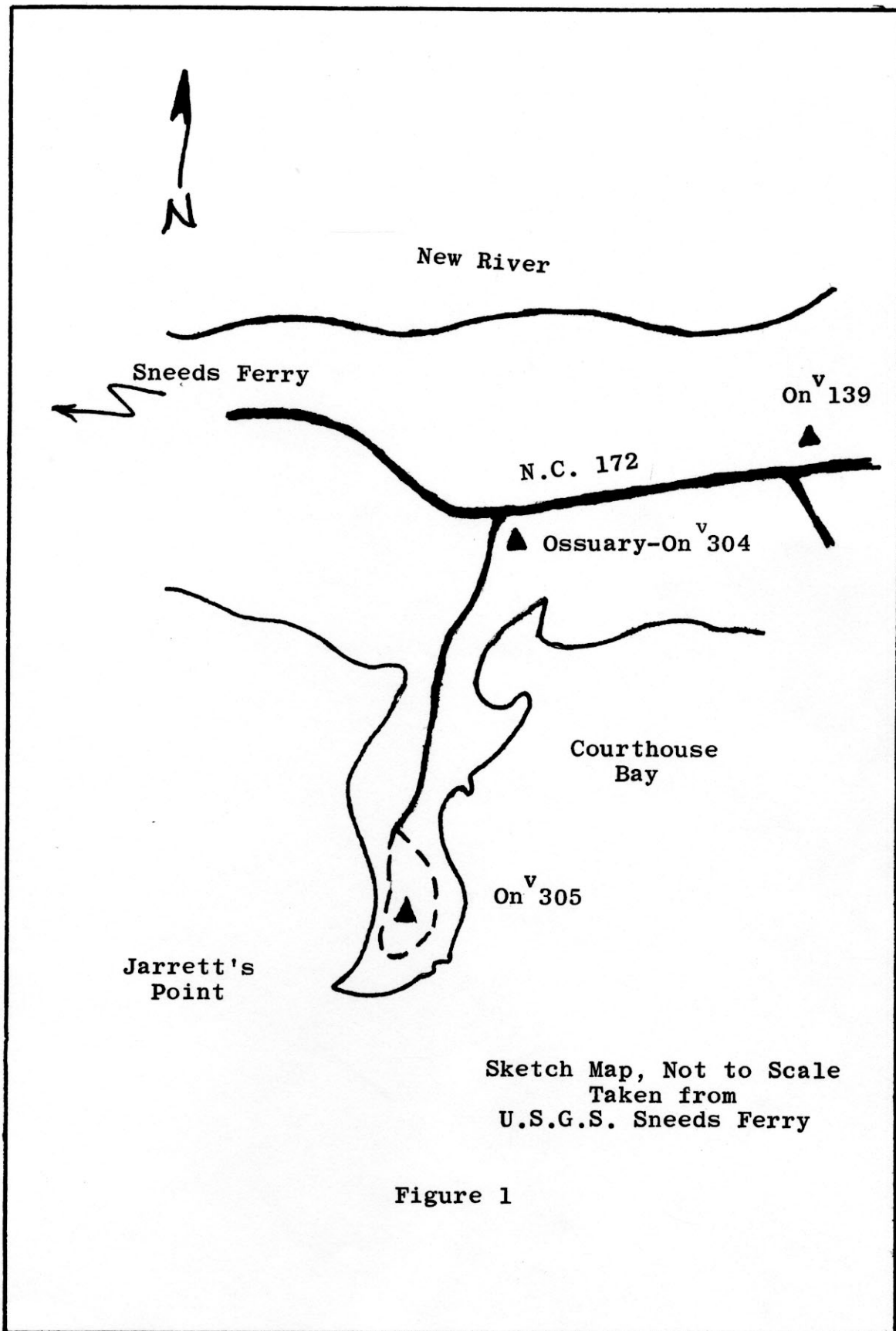


Figure 1

As the bone was cleaned and exposed, it became evident that definite bundles or clusters were present. These consisted mainly of long bones and crania. Once the surface of the bone layer was uncovered, a bucket crane was brought in so that vertical black and white and color photographs could be taken. After the ossuary remains were photographed in situ, the different bone concentrations were separated by outlining each with surveyor's tape. These were labeled numerically to facilitate identification once the clusters were removed. The bone mass was then re-photographed (Plate II).

After photographing, the bone layer was removed in 15 separate units corresponding to the clusters identified during the cleaning process and isolated in the photographs.

Since root infiltration was extensive, an effort was made to remove as much of the supporting sand with the bone units as possible. Experience has shown that if the bone is taken out in blocks, the removal and cleaning of individual elements can be done much more effectively in the laboratory. After removal, the blocks were placed inside large plastic bags that were, in turn, placed in banana boxes. Additional sand was added as needed for support. All the skeletal material was returned to Chapel Hill where it is currently being cleaned and preserved.

Because the material is still in the processing lab, only a few very general and tentative remarks can be made concerning the make-up of the bone matrix, its genetic characteristics, pathologies, etc. These remarks are based entirely on causal observations in the field and should, by no means, be taken as definitive.



Figure 1
Ossuary eroding from bank--delimited by dark band of roots and stain



Figure 2
Bone units numbered and outlined with surveyor's tape

Based on the size and circumference of the intact bone layer, it is estimated that no more than 25 percent of the ossuary was left. Although no artifacts were found with the bone, ceramics from On^V305 south of the ossuary indicate an extensive occupation during the middle and late Woodland periods. Cape Fear and Oak Island sherds were observed, although the latter occurred more frequently. The small site east of the ossuary, On^V139, produced a light scatter of Woodland ceramics with late Woodland types being in the majority. This, albeit tenuous, evidence in conjunction with an ossuary excavation in New Hanover County where Oak Island ceramics were found associated with the bone (Coe, et al. 1982) indicates a late Woodland or early late Woodland (ca. 1000 A.D.) affiliation. While the New Hanover County ossuary, Nh^V28, contained skeletal material morphologically similar to the Siouan populations, Phelps (1980) has defined a similar late Woodland ossuary complex for the Algonquian populations of the northeast North Carolina coast.

As stated earlier, the skeletal materials have not been studied intensively. Consequently, information concerning age, sex, mortality, nutrition, pathology, etc. are not yet available. But based on field observations, most of the bone represents the remains of adults. The only question concerns one cremation found in the center of the matrix. The most frequently occurring elements were long bones. The small bones of the hand and feet, as well as ribs, were scattered. Skulls were represented primarily by crania, although mandibles and maxilla were encountered. The long bones were bundled together in groups with usually

one or more crania also present. A rough guess would be that the remains from 15 individuals were present. Based on size, robustness, and general conformation of the bone, it appears more similar to the Algonquian material from the northeast coast than the Siouan populations to the south.

Again, I cannot stress too much that these observations are by no means conclusive. They are nothing more than intuitive assessments based on casual field inspections by someone who is not an expert in the area of paleo-osteology or human skeletal biology. What can be said with certainty is the skeletal remains represent the re-deposition of the accumulated dead probably from a multifamily social unit. These remains were simultaneously interred in a saucer-like pit. The exact size of the ossuary cannot be determined, but based on the width and circumference of the intact layer, it was probably around 15 feet in diameter and may have contained as many as 60-70 individuals. Its size, the number of individuals, the bundling of the bone, and lack of associated burial goods closely resembles the Algonquian pattern defined by Phelps (1980). Once paleo-osteological analysis is completed, the genetic and cultural affinity of the ossuary can be more firmly established, and detail concerning mortality, pathology, nutrition, as well as a host of other data, should be forthcoming.

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