

## A MIDDLE WOODLAND COMPONENT ON WHITEFISH ISLAND

### AT SAULT STE. MARIE

by Thor Conway and Nick Adams

An extensive Middle Woodland component was located on Whitefish Island in 1977. A sample area has been excavated, but only one boundary of the site is established. Much work remains to be done before the site is fully understood.

Essentially the site is a village midden. Prehistoric refuse from Middle Woodland occupations, spanning a period of time around the second and third centuries A.D., has built up a rich soil layer covering the natural water rolled boulders that form the island.

Despite controlled excavation techniques, no chronological sequence could be detected within the deposit. Middle Woodland sherds were frequently found near the surface, and sherds from a sparse Late Woodland component occurred at the lowest levels. Presumably heavy use of the site destroyed any stratified sequences that originally occurred. Since the village lies on boulders, features and settlement patterns are almost non-existent.

Ceramics form the largest single group of artifacts excavated from Whitefish Island. Approximately 420 individual vessels have been recognized so far, and the total may well be higher. The extensive Middle Woodland component has been identified as the earliest occupation of Whitefish Island. Laurel psuedoscallop shell, Naomikong Point variety psuedo-scallop, Laurel dentate and incised pottery vessels are all present in frequencies comparable to those found at the Naomikong Point site, not far away, in Michigan.

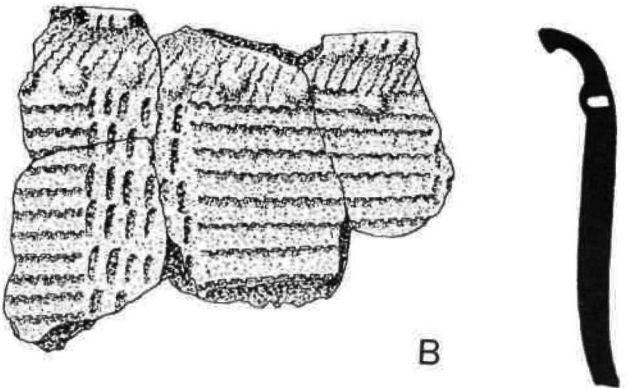
Large percentages of the pottery, however, are banked stamp wares more similar to those found in abundance at the Summer Island site in Lake Michigan. A representative group of Middle Woodland rims are shown in Figure 1.

As other archaeologists have noted, snub nosed end scrapers are particularly common on Middle Woodland sites in the Upper Great Lakes. Whitefish Island is no exception. The predominant raw material used is a grey chert from Michigan, although other cherts more common to northern Ontario are also represented. Flake tools also seem to be in abundance. Net sinkers and large roughly formed slate knives appear on occasion and point to a fishing based economy.

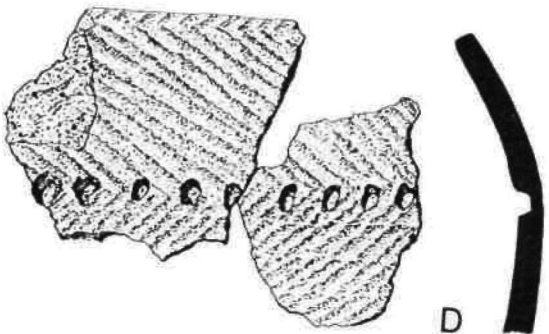
Projectile points are not too common in the Middle Woodland midden. Those that are known show strong affinities to side-notched projectiles from the Naomikong Point site on Lake Superior (Figure 2). This creates a strange situation since the ceramics show more parallels to the Summer Island site on Lake Michigan. The projectiles from Summer Island don't have much in common with the Whitefish Island sample.

Many of the notched projectiles from Whitefish Island are more properly interpreted as hafted knives judging by their wear patterns and shapes.

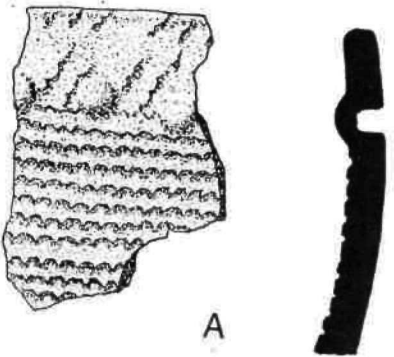
One of the more unusual artifacts recovered from the Middle Woodland Occupation of Whitefish Island is a rectangular or butterfly shaped gorget (Fig.2).



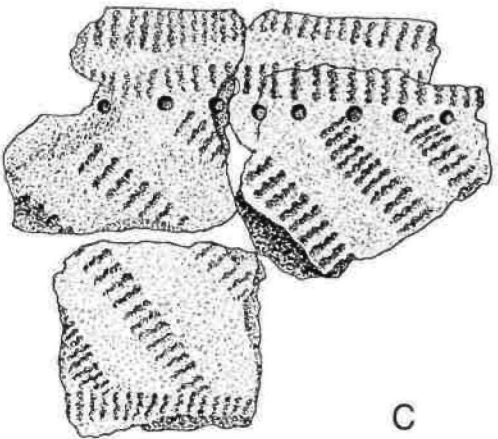
B



D



A



C

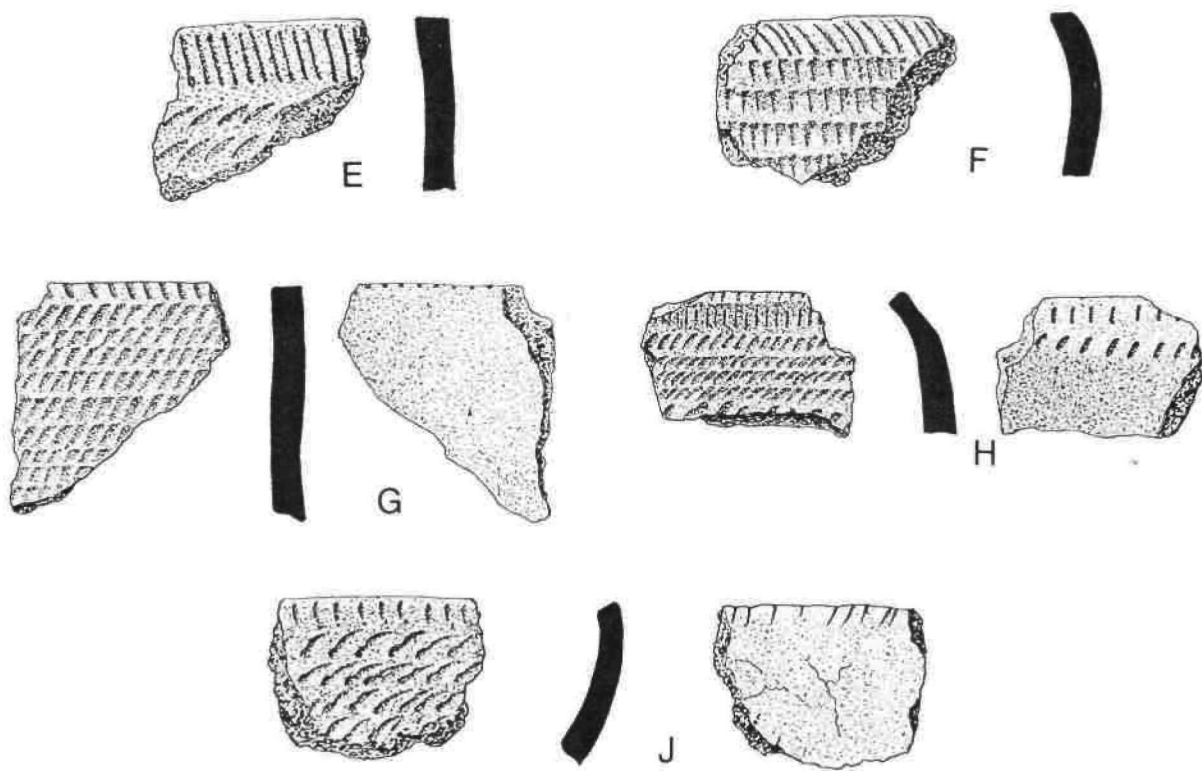


Figure 1

Middle Woodland Pottery from Whitefish Island.  
 A-C, Laurel Pseudo Scallop Shell; D, Laurel Pseudo Scallop Shell, Naomikong Point Variety; E-J, Banked Stamp (Upper Peninsular) impressed sherds.

Although it is fragmentary, this probable potters' tool shows fine polishing and two drilled holes. The raw material is limestone with siltstone banding.

Native copper tools are found throughout the site. There are awls, a small round copper bead and miscellaneous tools in the assemblage. The presence of native copper scrap and hammered fragments indicates the proximity of Whitefish Island to primary copper sources on Lake Superior. One doesn't usually discover copper waste and production by products at contemporary sites further away along trade networks.

Fortunately bone preservation is good, in contrast to many northern Ontario sites, and a considerable quantity of fish, mammal and bird bone has been recovered. A preliminary study of this material indicates a tremendous variety and diversity of diet. A full study of this faunal collection will add considerably to our knowledge of the Middle Woodland economy.

Bone tools are not frequent in Middle or Late Woodland components on Whitefish Island, despite excellent bone preservation. There are conical ends of two toggle-head harpoons and a damaged bone object from the Middle Woodland midden.

Pigments appear with some frequency and several fragments of red ochre were excavated from the midden. We found an unexpected number of Middle Woodland pots at this site with an ochre paint or wash on their lips.

Full analysis of the Middle Woodland material from Whitefish Island is forthcoming. It will add significantly to our understanding of the Upper Great Lakes during the Middle Woodland (Initial Woodland) era. The geographical location of Whitefish Island places it at the centre of the Upper Great Lakes. The resource wealth and existence of present day Sault Ste. Marie testifies to the suitability of this area as a trading and settlement centre. Obviously the presence of a major fishery in the rapids, beside Whitefish Island would have been the main reason for regular settlement.

One of the more intriguing results of the final site analysis will be a consideration of artifacts ratios. A glance at Table 1 will reveal interesting artifact frequencies. For comparison, one of the Late Woodland components on Whitefish Island has 65 projectiles and 45 scrapers. This hints at a different pattern than the Middle Woodland midden where there are 18 projectiles, including bifacial knives, and 332 scrapers. Someday we should be able to interpret these differences and learn more about the adaptations that served the ancient inhabitants of northern Ontario.

TABLE 1

Preliminary Artifact Count for the Whitefish Island Middle Woodland Component

Chert flakes	6057	Ceramic vessels	420
Cores	181	Quartz flakes	161
Projectiles (bifaces)	18	Ochre	10
Scrapers	332	Native copper	19
Utilized flakes	140	Net weights	3
Preforms	5	Gorget	1
		Bone tools	4

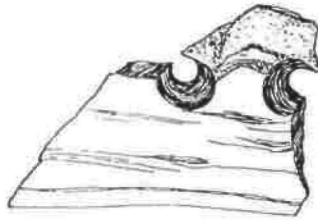
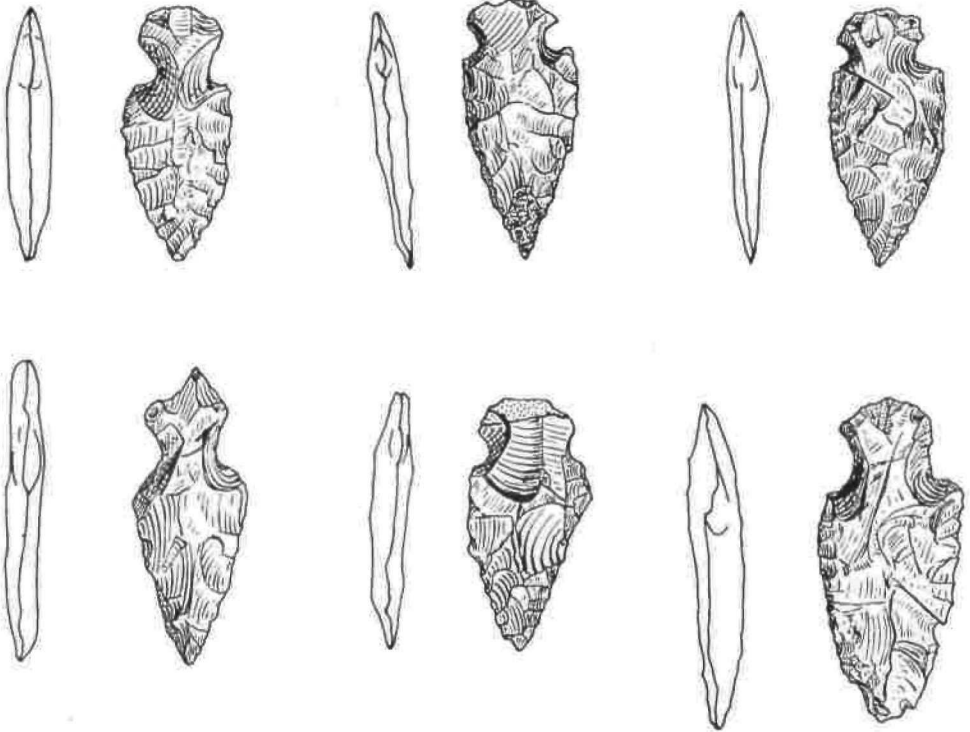


Figure 2

Typical Middle Woodland KNIVES, PROJECTILE POINTS AND A GORGET FROM WHITEFISH ISLAND.



\* \* \* \* \*