Yellow Banks Park Native American Artifact Collection - Pictures and Descriptions

Stand in the tent camping area at Yellow Banks Park in Southeast Polk County and you'll quickly realize why it was routinely used as a campground by Native Americans. Long before it was called "Yellow Banks", this magnificent area sustained nearly 10,000 years of Native American cultures.

Overlooking the Des Moines River, Yellow Banks Park was an ideal spot for Native Americans to hunt, fish, and garden. This area provided all the necessary resources. Today, with the exception of the Des Moines skyline, the breathtaking view from the tent camping area is relatively the same as it was when Native Americans called it home.

Arrowheads or projectile points of these early groups have been found in the park. Archeologists have been able to date these points, thus providing a prehistory of the area. There were four prehistoric Indian groups that lived in Yellow Banks Park: the Paleo-Indians (9,500-7,500 BC), the Archaic Culture (7,500-500 BC), the Woodland Culture (500 BC – AD 1000), and the Oneota (AD 1050 - 1700).

Paleo-Indians (9,500-7,500 BC)

Paleo-Indians were wandering buffalo hunters. They followed big game through a cool, wet, forested post-glacial landscape. These people left behind leaf-shaped spear points, stone knives, and hide scrapers. These tools were used in hunting, butchering game, and dressing hides.

Clovis Projectile Point (Paleo-Indian):

- Oldest style of point in the collection
- Used as a spear point
- Crude shape without notching

Clovis Point (Paleo-Indian)

Broken Paleo Knife:

- Base half

Broken Point (Paleo-Indian)

Archaic-Indians (7,500-500 BC)

The Archaic people were hunters and gatherers. They hunted buffalo and smaller game animals. In wooded river valleys the archaic people collected hickory nuts and hackberries. Lamb's quarters, sunflower, and marsh elder seeds were also gathered. Grinding stones for processing seeds and nuts have been found in Yellow Banks Park. They also manufactured stone axes for cutting trees and doing woodworking. The Archaic people invented the atlatl or spear thrower. It was a two foot long stick with a hook on the end. The atlatl helped hunters throw their spear harder and further. A very rare banner stone or counter weight for an atlatl was found in the park.

Dart Points:

- These are not arrowheads
- Probably atlatl points
- Archaic point display side notching

Archaic Points

Archaic Point:

- Atlatl point

Archaic Point

Three-Quarter Grooved Axe:

- Notching around ¾ of the axe
- A willow branch would be wrapped around the groove to be fashioned as a handle

Archaic Three Quarter Grooved Axe

Butterfly Banner Stone:

- This is an unfinished piece. Should have a hole through the center
- This is a weight for a spear thrower (atlatl)
- Anything could be used for a weight, but this is very well crafted. This piece is very rare.

Butterfly Banner Stone

Woodland-Indian (500 B.C. – 1000 A.D.)

The Woodland people were hunters, gathers, and gardeners. In small garden plots they grew sunflowers, pigweed, goosefoot, and marsh elder for their edible seeds. Later, the woodland people grew corn, beans, squash and tobacco. These crops were imports from Mexico. Woodland hunters used spear points with corner notching at the base. About 400 AD the bow and arrow was developed. Hunters began killing game with arrows tipped with one inch long triangle points.

The Woodland people made the first pottery in this area. Pots were made with clay that had grit or sand added to it as a tempering agent. A tempering agent helps to keep pottery from cracking while it is air drying. Later the pots were "fired" in a wood fire. The outside of the pots were often decorated with cord markings.

Indian mounds were built by the Woodland people. These large earth monuments were built on bluff tops overlooking a major river. They were often circular in shape. Human burials, stone tools, and pottery were often placed in Indian mounds. Yellow Banks Park has an Indian mound. The trail starts near the tent camping area and leads directly to the mound.

Woodland Dart Point:

- Probably an atlatl point

Woodland Dart Point

Woodland Projectile Point:

- Probably an atlatl point
- To big to be an arrow head

Woodland Projectile Point

Stone Knife:

- Used for general cutting and skinning hides
- This piece is unique because there are fossils found in the rock

Stone Knife

Oneota (AD 1050-1700)

The Oneota people spent their time hunting, fishing, plant collecting and farming. They lived in villages of bark covered longhouses located along major rivers. In small fields on the floodplain the Oneota grew native varieties of corn, beans, squash, and sunflowers. After the crops were started and hoed a few times, the people would leave on seasonal buffalo hunts. They also collected edible wild plants.

The Oneota people left behind some characteristic artifacts such as celts or grooveless axes, clay pots made with ground clam shell tempering, and one-inch triangular arrow points. Grinding slabs for processing corn have also been found. This group of people lived in Iowa into the historic period where they were known as the Ioway Indians.

Oneota Celt:

- A Celt is a triangular groovless axe
- Instead of tying the Celt to a stick handle, a hole would be bored or burned through a stick and the narrow end of the Celt would be put through the hole
- What the early French probably referred to as a tom-a-hawk

Oneota Celt

Hide Scraper:

- Used to remove hair and tissue from the hide
- Probably attached to an antler or stick handle

Hide Scraper

Other Interesting Artifacts

Mano & Metate (grinding slab):

- Used to grind corn or acorn into flour
- They would generally leave them behind at a campsite instead of packing them along
- When they are found, they are usually found upside down.
- This was done as attempt to disguise them as an ordinary rock

Grinding Slab

Grinding Slab

Grinding Slab

Full Groove Axe:

- Oldest of the axes. Used for chopping
- Native American probably didn't "drop" a tree with these axes
- A fire would be started at the base of a tree and use the axe to gradually chop away at the charred tree

Full Grooved Axe

Hammer Stone:

- Tool for making tools
- On top (unable to see in photo) there is a very comfortable notch for your thumb.

Hammer Stone

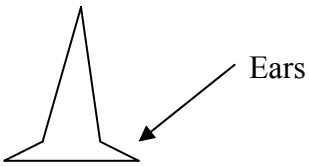
Maul:

- Used as a pounding tool
- Also used for grinding food, like a food processor

Maul

Drill:

- This drill is broken. There would have been "ears" at the base
- Used to drill pipes or to drill through wood



Drill

Knife:

- This knife is unique because it is sharpened on all four sides

Knife

Obsedian Scraper:

- These are unique because obsedian is not found in Iowa
- This material came from the Yellow Stone Park area in Wyoming about 2000 years ago

Obsedian Scraper

Arrowhead:

- This is actually an arrowhead
- One of few actual arrow heads in the collection
- Often referred to as bird points, but these were actually used to kill buffalo and elk

Arrow Head

Dart Point:

- This is not an arrowhead
- Probably an atlatl point

Dart Point