

The Seat of Justice : 1815 - 1830

An Archeological Reconnaissance of Davidsonville, 1979

by

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ABSTRACT

As a part of development planning for Old Davidsonville State Park, in Randolph County, Arkansas a short project was carried out by the Arkansas Archeological Survey in March 1979, to assess the archeological record on the site of the county seat town of Davidsonville (3RA40). The town was founded by Anglo-Americans in 1815 and abandoned as a settlement about 1830. The archeological work indicated that the site is relatively intact and contains a wide variety of information about life in the early 1800s. The town of Davidsonville, in spite of its early date in the region and its location on the western edge of the nation, was integrated into the transportation network that tied the Mississippi Valley to the production of goods and ideas on the eastern seaboard and across the Atlantic. This integration is indicated by the presence of expected pearlware ceramics and window glass across the entire town site, by archeological evidence confirming a brick courthouse on a substantial limestone foundation, and by the formal nine block "Shelbyville Square" town plan itself.

published secondary information on buttonhooks is not readily available. Although the period 1880-1910 saw the most popularity for ladies' buttoned shoes, the forerunner of high button and high lace shoes appeared in Europe in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. This was the gaiter or gaiter boot, made of morocco or other leather with cloth tops. The style was mentioned in a Paris fashion magazine in 1822, for example. The style was particularly popular in the U.S. between 1835 and 1870, with published illustrations showing male and female children wearing gaiters in the 1830s and 1840s (McClellan 1969: vol. 2:391, 521). The use of button shoes and therefore possibly buttonhooks before 1836 is underscored by the invention of gored boots using elastic insets to retain fit, done for Queen Victoria in 1836 to obviate the need for shoe buttoning (Wohl n.d.:28).

The archeological context for this buttonhook at Davidsonville suggests a manufacture date of about 1815 to about 1835, stretched to perhaps 1845 when the porcelain button find is included. According to the above discussion this date is compatible with the earlier range of use for buttonhooks, although this date does imply the presence of relatively sophisticated clothing well beyond that previously expected for a frontier town. As one costume expert has said

Unless extremely poor or isolated, there was no reason any American woman could not dress in some version of the latest mode within a year of its introduction or within a season in most places (Severa 1979).

The Black River and the Southwest Trail meant that Davidsonville was not isolated.

Glass Bead

One glass bead was found in Test Pit 1 below the rock stratum of Feature 2 (Table 1). This bead is royal blue, round, translucent mandrel-wound, and of simple construction. Munsell color is purplish Purple Blue 7.5B 3/10. It measures 7.7 mm in diameter, 4.6 mm in length, and has a hole diameter of 2.2 mm (Figure 13i). According to the classification system proposed by Kidd and Kidd, this bead is W1b16 (Kidd and Kidd 1970; cf. Spector 1976).

This type of bead has been found on sites across much of the United States, from western New York to eastern Tennessee to northeastern Texas, with a date range of approximately 1720 to 1830 (e.g., Olson 1977:52 no. 40; Quimby 1966:87-89). Among these finds is a published description and color illustration of an identical

specimen at the Kaskaskia Indian village site in western Illinois (Good 1972:112, color plate 4:46). Three similar ones were found during excavations at Arkansas Post in an area occupied primarily in the first quarter of the nineteenth century (Martin 1977:24, Category 21; Figure 6:bb-dd).

While the bead may have been part of the wearing apparel of French or Anglo-Americans at Davidsonville, it is interesting to note that blue beads were among the most popular among the Native Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Erikson 1969:47; Mary Elizabeth Good 1979, personal communication). Blue bead finds in Arkansas include three "small blue seed beads" of glass found at the Menard site (3AR4), a late seventeenth or early eighteenth century Quapaw village site near Arkansas Post (Ford 1961:158-159). Further, controlled surface collections by the Pine Bluff station of the Arkansas Archeological Survey at the Noble Lake site (3JE19) produced two blue glass beads. These were round, opaque, and wire drawn, simple construction, 5.9 and 7.0 mm in diameter, Munsell purplish Blue 7.5B 4/6, and Kidd and Kidd type IIa31 or 44. This site is a Quapaw village occupied apparently during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The Davidsonville bead may well have belonged to or have been intended for trade to any of the Shawnee, Delaware, Cherokee, or Osage who were in northeast Arkansas and southeastern Missouri in the latter eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries.

MISCELLANEOUS

Ammunition

Six artifacts indicating ammunition were identified, of which half postdate town life at Davidsonville and the other half also might postdate the main occupation (Table 1). Two items were found in Unit S80E6, a lead shot smashed flat, and a large cartridge mounted lead rifle bullet, about 45 caliber. The rifle bullet is undistorted and measures 16.1 mm long by 8.9 mm in diameter. In Unit S19W105 a single lead shot was recovered. Relatively undistorted, it is 6.3 mm in diameter. In Unit S55E72 a brass rimfire .22 cartridge was found with a diamond stamped on the base. Two items were also found in Test Trench 2. One is a small cartridge mounted lead rifle bullet, 7.8 mm long (slightly distorted on impact) by 5.4 mm diameter. The second is a lead bullet approximately 7 mm in diameter that mushroomed to 13 mm in diameter on impact.

The primary firearms probably present at Davidsonville were flintlock rifles, pistols, shotguns, and perhaps a few percussion

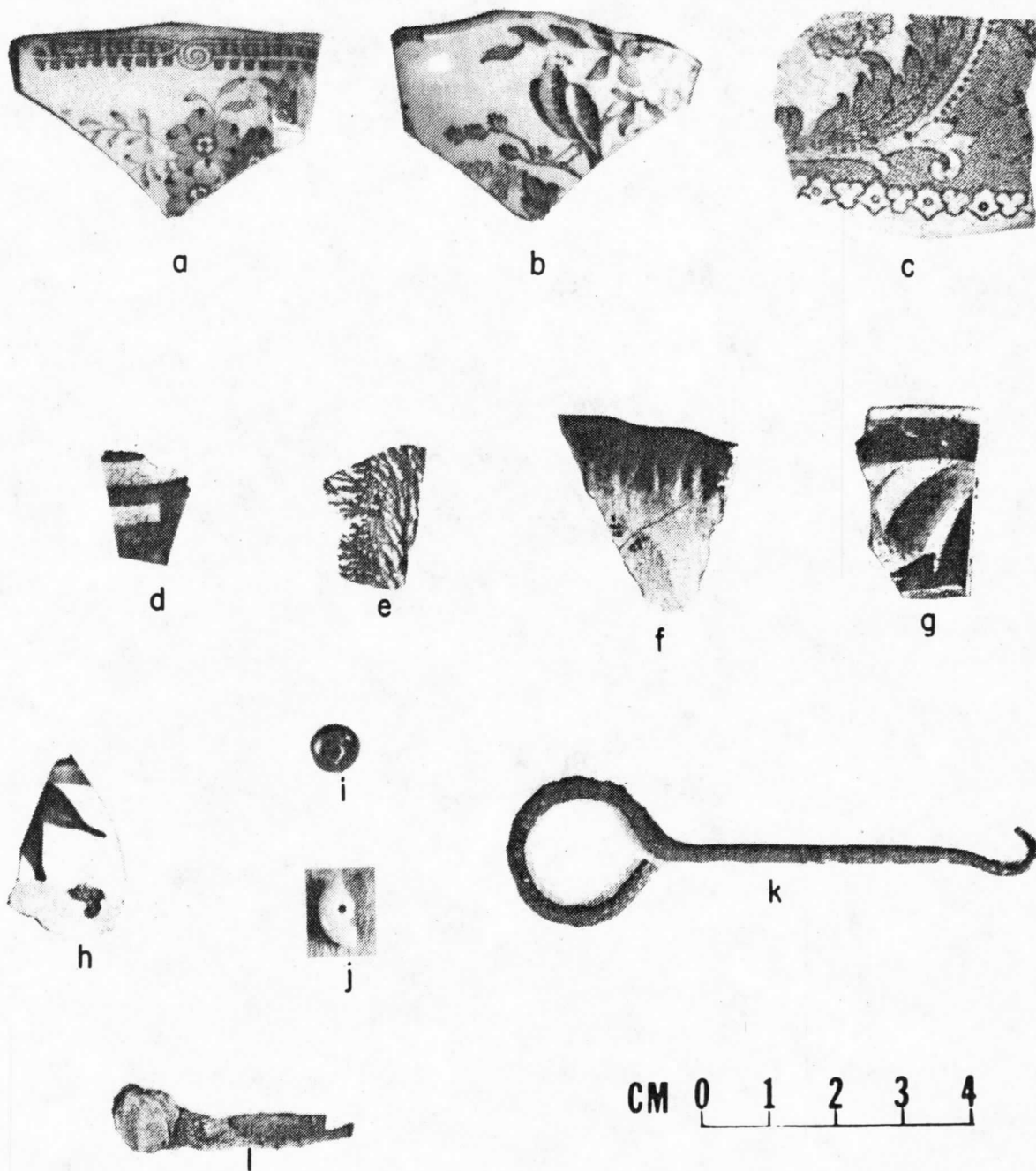


Figure 13. Historic artifacts. a. interior of a hollow ware vessel of blue transferprinted pearlware; b. exterior of same vessel; c. brown transferprinted plate marl and rim; d. exterior of mug with mocha decoration; e. exterior of mug with mocha decoration; f. blue shell edge plate rim; g. polychrome handpainted bowl wall and rim; h. monochrome blue handpainted bowl wall; i. blue glass bead; j. porcelain button; k. iron shoe buttonhook; l. unknown metal object. All full size.