
NEW EVIDENCE FROM THE FISHER SITE

JOHN WALLACE GRIFFIN
University of Chicago

The Fisher site has occupied an important position in discussions of Midwestern archaeology since Langford's article appeared in 1927 (Langford, 1927). He published further data on the site in two papers in these *Transactions* (Langford, 1928 and 1930). Two more papers resulted from researches carried out by the University of Chicago (Krogman, 1931 and Eggan, 1932). Despite this published work and the careful notes which Langford graciously placed at the disposal of the Department of Anthropology of the University of Chicago, there remained unsolved problems. With the aim of excavating to solve certain of these problems, a joint expedition of the Illinois State Museum, the University of Chicago, and the W. P. A. spent approximately nine months at the site in 1940 and 1941. The field work was under the direction of Mrs. Gretchen Cutter Sharp. Only a brief note of the results has so far appeared in print (Deuel, 1940). James B. Griffin in his recent summary (Griffin, 1943) was forced to rely on the older data.

The Fisher site is located on the banks of the Des Plaines River, one mile above its confluence with the Kankakee, in Will County, Illinois. It is about thirty feet above the river and about two hundred feet from the old bank. The site is a glacial limestone gravel deposit overlain by a

vener of dark topsoil. On the site about twelve mounds and fifty house pits are found.

Four components have been recognized from the site. The earliest is not too well known, and consists of dolichoeranic burials deep in the gravel, mostly unaccompanied by grave goods. Second, the Upper Mississippian component is found. This occupation is responsible for the two large mounds and the house pits, and is the manifestation from which the Fisher focus has been set up. Third, there is a Woodland component associated with the smaller mounds. And, finally, there is an historic component, the tribal identification of which presents several interesting ethno-historical problems. The present paper is concerned solely with the Upper Mississippi component.

Two basic types of Upper Mississippian pottery have been found at the site. One is shell-tempered, the other grit-tempered. Aside from this difference in tempering, however, the two types are very much alike. Both occur in a smooth surface variety and in a quite distinctive cord-wrapped paddle treatment. Similar treatment in the matter of decoration is accorded both. James B. Griffin has recently remarked: "Despite the differences between grit- and shell-tempered types they are remarkably homogeneous in certain respects—

vessel shapes, appendages, rim shapes, surface finishes, and certain decorative ideas and techniques." (Griffin, 1943, p. 279). A problem is raised as to whether these two types represent a sequence, or whether they were contemporaneous in whole or in part. The answer seems to be that they were contemporaneous at least in part; sherds of the two types have been found together in such a position as to indicate this as a practical certainty. Beyond that, however, Deuel (1940, p. 7) feels that perhaps the grit-tempered started earlier, while Langford's data (as used by J. B. Griffin, 1943, p. 279) would seem to indicate the opposite interpretation. Any final decision must await a more complete analysis than has been attempted so far.

One of the major projects of the latest researches at the Fisher site was the complete excavation of one of the house pits. From this we are in a position to state for the first time, with certainty, the house type of the Upper Mississippi peoples at the site. That the house actually does belong to the Upper Mississippi component seems adequately attested. Only Upper Mississippi sherds were found within the house, in the wall trenches, and in the postholes.

We have referred several times to the house pits at the site. These must not be confused with such architectural types as the Southwestern pit house or the semi-subterranean lodge of the eastern Plains. As a matter of fact the house pits at Fisher merely represent the clearing away of the topsoil in order to obtain a clean floor. The topsoil and underlying gravel was scraped away to perhaps the depth of a foot or more, and this material was piled around the excavated area, thus forming a ridge around the shallow depression, and giving an apparent

depth greater than the actual. This feature is not new; the Middle Mississippian houses of Fulton County have it. In this latter area the topsoil was removed to provide a clean loess floor for the house.

The house which was discovered at the Fisher site was a rectangular structure approximately thirty-five by twenty-five feet in size, with its long axis roughly north-south. This is a relatively large structure for the region. The average Middle Mississippi house in Fulton County is about sixteen feet square. Dwellings up to thirty-five feet in length are reported from the Kincaid site in southern Illinois, but the average at the site is much less than this (Bennett, 1944). The majority of the houses at the Fisher site probably more nearly approximated the standard Middle Mississippian size. The pit in which the house was found was one of the largest at the site; the majority suggest a house between sixteen and twenty feet in size.

The posts which formed the walls of the structure were set in trenches. There were two of these trenches, roughly parallel, one inside the other. The inner trench is consistently shallower than the outer. There seems to be no evidence of open cornered trenches such as are found in some Middle Mississippi houses. On the contrary, on at least two corners of the outer wall, where the evidence is best, there are definite indications that the trench was closed. The posts themselves were set in the trenches, and extended below them for some distance into the gravel. On the average they were .35 of a foot, or roughly four inches, in diameter. In the outer wall the posts average about four to eight inches apart; the inner line shows a consistent tendency to be more widely spaced. The two lines of posts are about two feet

apart. The shallower inner trench and the more widely spaced posts within it unite to emphasize the structural pre-eminence of the outer wall.

Whether the double line of posts indicates a double walled structure, built so for the preservation of heat on the thermos bottle principle, or whether it indicates that a bench entirely encircled the wall on the inside, is a question which cannot be answered at present.

Another feature must be noted. On the east wall of the house, and almost in the middle of that wall, breaks are seen in both the inner and outer lines of posts. Presumably this was the doorway. In front of this doorway, about two feet away and parallel to the walls of the house, is a short shallow trench containing postholes. We may probably interpret this as a wind-break or screen protecting the doorway.

The doorway faces east, towards the Des Plaines river. Also, in relation to the other house pits it faces a roughly rectangular area about four hundred by two hundred and fifty feet in size, about which the house pits are grouped. The house under consideration is on the west side of the area, near the north-west corner. Within the rectangular area were located Langford's two large mounds, from which the cultural stratigraphy of the site was first noted. This arrangement suggests the plaza arrangement which we know from Middle Mississippi sites. The mounds at Fisher, however, are burial mounds and not the familiar Middle Mississippi truncated pyramid.

The wall covering of the house is at present unknown, although ethnobotanical study of some of the charred material found adjacent to and

above the wall trenches may provide some clue, when the material is analyzed.

Of the roof structure nothing is known at present. The occasional postholes found within the house do not suggest any interior support, but at the same time a span of thirty-five feet, with the materials available to the Indian, would present structural difficulties of the first order. Both domed roofs, made by bending the green wall poles inward and lashing them in place, and gable roofs have been found at Kincaid (Bennett, 1944). Either of these types are possibilities for the Fisher site.

Both within the house and outside it aboriginal pits were found. The contents of these pits have not been completely analyzed as yet. A firepit was discovered towards the center of the house. This pit begins at about six inches below the present surface of the ground, and indicates once again the essential shallowness of the house pit. The firepit itself disclosed laminations of soil, charcoal, and cultural debris. In the pit was found a considerable quantity of Upper Mississippi sherds, both shell- and grit-tempered types, with the shell-tempered predominating.

Other cultural objects found within the house include small triangular projectile points, deer cannon bone beamers, antler and stone celts, scalloped shell spoons, and bone fish hooks.

Anyone familiar with Middle Mississippi culture will immediately note the great similarity between the house described above and those from Middle Mississippian sites. So far as the author knows, only one other house from an Upper Mississippi site has been described. A rectangular house, about nineteen and a half by seventeen and a half feet,

was found at the Turpin site in Ohio (Griffin, 1943, p. 146). The Turpin site belongs to the Madisonville focus of the Fort Ancient aspect. Thus, both instances of Upper Mississippi houses indicate a rectangular floor plan, very similar to that of Middle Mississippi dwellings.

It is not surprising that the house type of this Upper Mississippi site should be so like that of Middle Mississippi sites. Although several hypotheses have been suggested to explain the origin of Upper Mississippi, all of them have recognized the strong Middle influences on Upper.

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