

# Curator's Choice

## Copper Points from the Posey Site

By: Sara Rivers Cofield,  
Federal Curator, MAC Lab

**T**he Posey site is a circa 1650 to 1680 settlement that was probably the year-round home of a few American Indian families (Harmon 1999). Although not a large village, the Posey site affords archaeologists the opportunity to study how interaction with European colonists changed the material culture of Maryland's Indians in the 17th century.

**A**rtifacts recovered at the Posey site indicate that pottery and shell beads were being made there for personal use, and possibly also as goods for trade with the Europeans who lived in the surrounding area. The families who lived at the Posey site had access to a global trade network when interacting with the colonists. Stoneware ceramics from Germany, glass beads from Italy, tin-glazed ceramics from the Netherlands, and utilitarian ceramics from England were regularly shipped to Maryland by the 1650s, and these types of artifacts were recovered at the Posey site. Though Posey's inhabitants certainly did not abandon their traditional practices of pottery-making, shell bead work, and stone-tool usage, the introduction of European goods expanded the range of materials they could incorporate into these practices. For example, metal tools could be used to drill the tiny holes needed for shell beads, and decorations might be applied to clay pipes with metal stamps (Harmon 1999).

**T**he most striking example of material culture change at Posey, however, is the appearance of projectile points made from copper as opposed to stone. Chesapeake Indians had access to natural



The copper points recovered by archaeologists at the Posey site show that the people who lived there experimented with different point shapes and styles.

Photos Courtesy of Naval District Washington, Naval Support Activity South Potomac, Naval Support Facility, Indian Head.

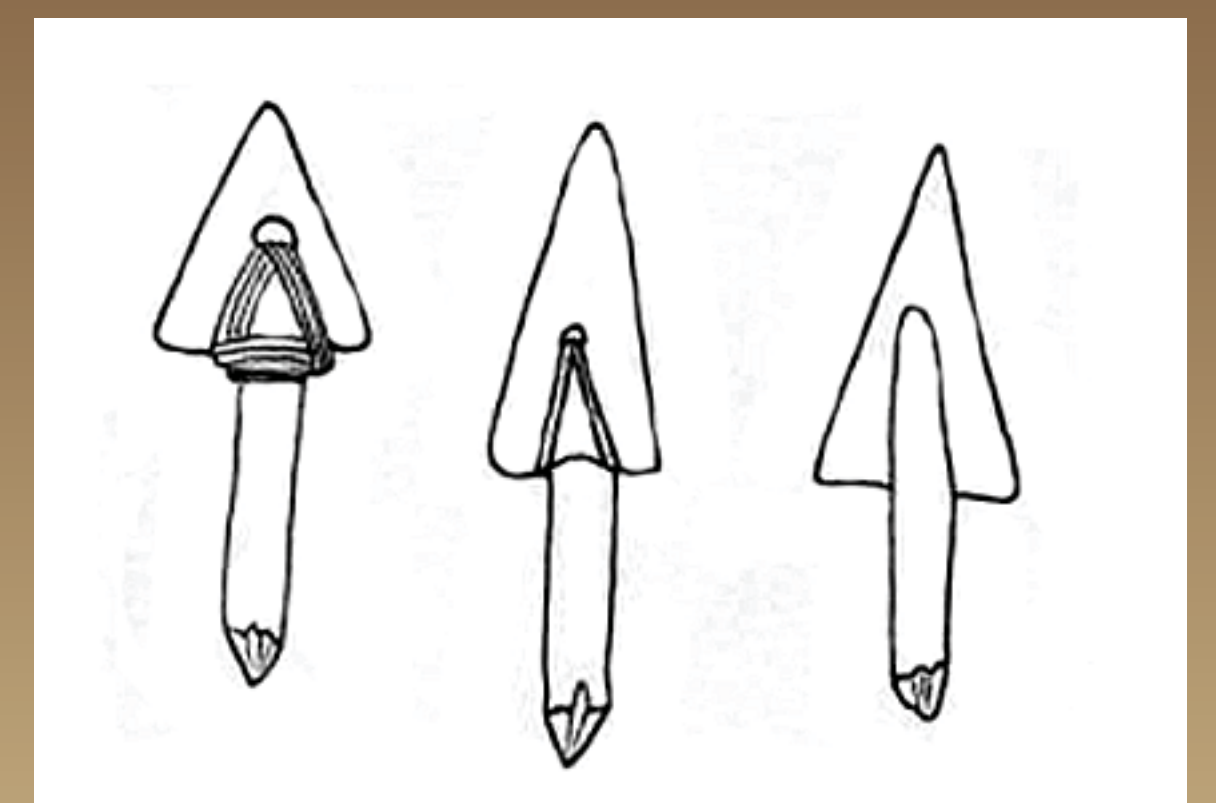


Artifacts from the Posey site show the presence of European items, traditional Indian goods, and artifacts that were made by Indians using materials from Europe. Top row: Copper points, stone points and ceramic rim sherds made by Posey's inhabitants. Middle row: Copper scraps, imported white clay pipes, locally made pipe, shell beads, nails, and copper cones. Bottom row: German stoneware ceramics, iron knife fragment, European-style bone comb, and two bone needles or awls.

copper traded from areas such as the Great Lakes and western North Carolina long before they could obtain it from Europeans, but the amount of copper that could be obtained was limited, and it was generally reserved for the adornment of society elites (Mallios and Emmett 2004). The special status of copper made it very desirable as a trade item, and Europeans quickly realized that they could trade their old copper kettles and scrap copper for furs, food, and hospitality. As copper became more readily available, its special status with the Chesapeake Indians diminished, and its use for making utilitarian tools such as points increased.

**T**he variety of copper point types recovered at the Posey site indicates that there was some experimentation going on in terms of how best to make copper sheets or scraps into points. In one case, two scrap fragments were folded over each other to make a barbed point. Other points were made by snipping sheet copper into isosceles triangles or small equilateral triangles. Some of the points have holes in them while others do not. Archaeological examples from Pennsylvania indicate that once completed, these copper points were probably attached to hardwood arrow foreshafts with fine sinew and glue, though the possibility that they were used to decorate clothing or other goods cannot be ruled out (Kent 1984). It is unclear whether hafted points were strictly

utilitarian and available to all, or if they carried on the tradition of special status afforded to copper, and were used primarily by elites for certain purposes. What is clear, is that these points rose in popularity in the 17th century and have been found at numerous sites that date into the 18th century (Curry n.d.; Kent 1984).



At least two sites in Pennsylvania yielded points that were still hafted to hardwood foreshafts. This sketch illustrates three different styles of attachments. Drawing after Kent (1984: 190).

**F**or 12,000 years, Maryland's inhabitants had made tools from various kinds of stone, but the use of certain stone tools such as points and knives decreased as metal tools gradually replaced them after European contact. The new trade goods marked the decline of one technological era in Maryland and the beginning of another. As interaction between Maryland's Indians and European colonists continued in the late 17th and 18th century, another hunting tool increased in popularity among the Indian population at Posey and elsewhere; the firearm. But that is a story for another Curator's Choice...

#### References Cited

Curry, Dennis C.  
n.d. "We have been with the Emperor of Piscataway, at his fort:" Archaeological Investigation of the Heater's Island Site (18FR72). Draft manuscript (in preparation), Maryland Historical Trust, Crownsville, Maryland.

Kent, Barry C.  
1984 Susquehanna's Indians. Anthropological Series Number 6. Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission.

Harmon, James M.  
1999 Archaeological Investigations at the Posey Site (18CH281) and 18CH282, Indian Head Division, Naval Surface Warfare Center, Charles County, Maryland. Draft manuscript on file, Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory, Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum, St. Leonard.

Mallios, Seth, and Shane Emmett  
2004 Demand, Supply, and Elasticity in the Copper Trade at Early Jamestown. The Journal of the Jamestown Rediscovery Center, Vol. 2.



10515 Mackall Road  
St. Leonard, Maryland 20685  
410-586-8501 www.jefpat.org



Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum is part of the Maryland Historical Trust, an agency of the Maryland Department of Planning, Baltimore.

