

# Curator's Choice

## "What's the Point"

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Copper was an important resource for Native Americans in North America well before the arrival of Europeans. Native populations in the Chesapeake region obtained natural copper via trade with tribes in the Great Lakes and western North Carolina regions. Access to this copper was limited. This rarity, coupled with the metaphysical association of the metal, made the possession and display of copper indicative of elevated social status in native communities throughout the Chesapeake (Miller and Hamell 1986:325; Potter 2006:218). Numerous ethnohistorical accounts discuss the social value of copper items held in native society. The significant place this metal held in native Chesapeake cultures has also been confirmed archaeologically with the presence of copper gorgets and rolled copper beads in high-status burials in the region (Flick et al. 2012:148; Potter 2006; Potter 1993:217-219).

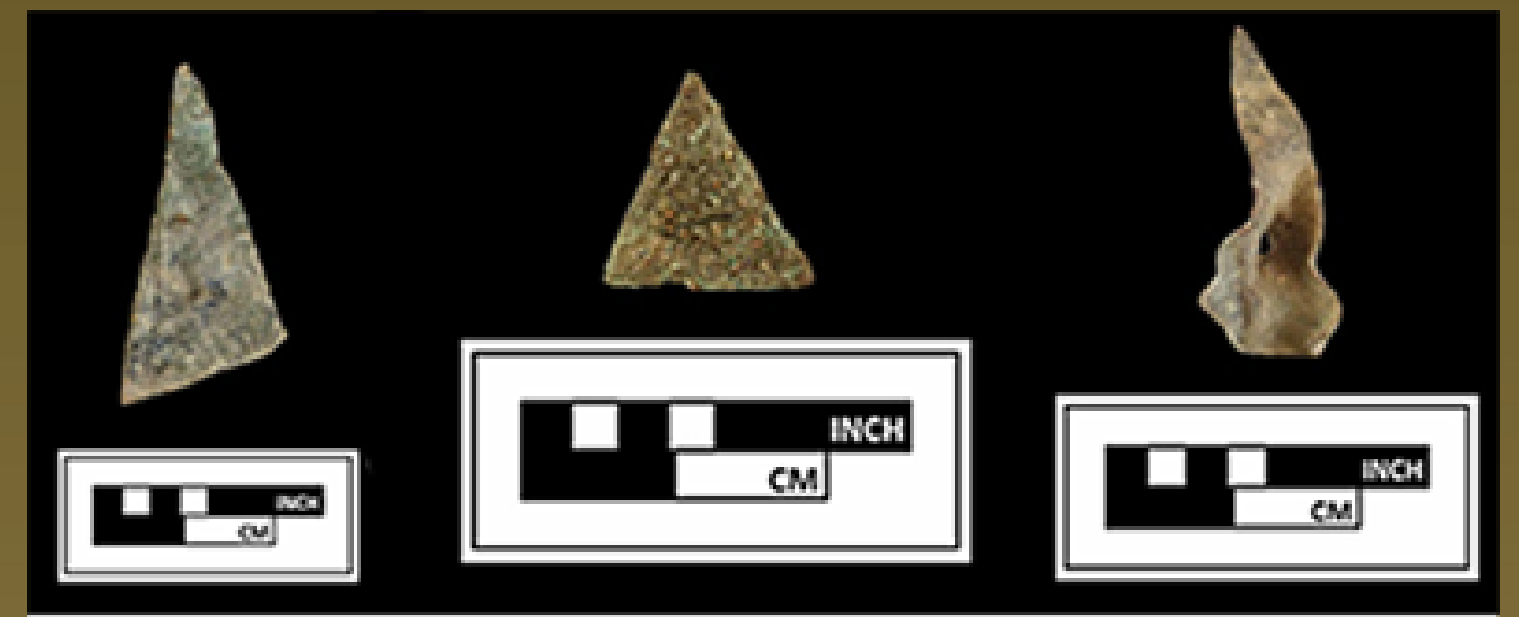


Figure 1. Copper triangles from the Posey Site (18CH281).

The Heater's Island site (18FR72) was first identified on an aerial photograph in 1965, and archaeological investigations were undertaken in 1967 and 1970. Investigations revealed a fortified Piscataway settlement occupied from approximately 1699-1712. Numerous European trade goods were recovered from the archaeological investigations including ceramics, pipe fragments, glass beads, shot, gun flints, and 35 copper/brass triangular points (Figure 3), many of which are believed to be projectile points (Curry n.d.: 1, 9, 23).

The material assemblages from these three sites include both European and native manufactured items. However, these items are differentially represented in each site. At the Posey site, while items of European manufacture were present, recovered artifacts were predominantly native in material and manufacture. By the 1680s, at Zekiah Fort, European manufactured goods were far more frequent. At Heater's Island, dating to the end of the 17th and beginning of the 18th century, the material assemblage was overwhelmingly European (Frick et al. 2012:194). These differences give us some insight into the changing use of European goods, including copper, in native societies during the 17th and 18th centuries.

As Europeans realized the value of copper objects to native peoples, native trade systems saw an unprecedented influx of copper in the form of European pots, kettles, and scrap (Flick et al. 2012:148; Rivers Cofield 2009). These European trade items would have been repurposed by the Chesapeake Indians and cut into ornaments and eventually utilitarian items such as projectile points (Bradley 1987:130-5; Potter 1993:209). Ready access to copper by larger segments of native society devalued the commodity, diminishing its value as an item of prestige and distinction through time. Wider access, and increased supplies, of copper, ultimately impacted cultural and political institutions of the native tribes, leading to the weakening of the political authority of tribal leaders through the mid to late 17th century (Harmon et al. 1999: 150; Potter 2006). As copper became more readily available its use within native culture shifts from predominantly ornamental to more utilitarian applications (River Cofield 2009).

The Maryland Archaeological Conservation Lab has three collections containing copper projectile points; the Posey, Heater's Island, and Zekiah Fort sites. The Posey Site (18CH281) is a Native American settlement occupied between 1650 and 1680. Archaeological investigations recovered faunal remains, and large amounts of ceramics, lithics, hand-wrought nails, bottle glass, shell and glass beads, and brass and metal fragments including at least seven copper projectile points (Figure 1). Investigators believe the assemblage points towards a single occupation, with onsite activities including trade good manufacture and the repurposing of materials acquired through trade with Europeans (Harmon 1999:iii, 111, 144).

Zekiah Fort (18CH808), a fortified Piscataway settlement, was occupied from 1680 until c. 1695 (Flick et al. 2012:i). Archaeological investigations in the area began in the late 19th century. Modern investigations began in the 1950s and continued intermittently through 2011 when the Zekiah Fort site itself was located.

The site's assemblage includes native lithics and ceramics, and numerous European trade goods including ceramics, pipe fragments, glass beads, shot, gun flints, bottle glass, wrought iron nails, and 65 copper alloy artifacts (Figure 2) including four projectile points (Flick et al. 2012:i, 76-86, 149, 194-195).

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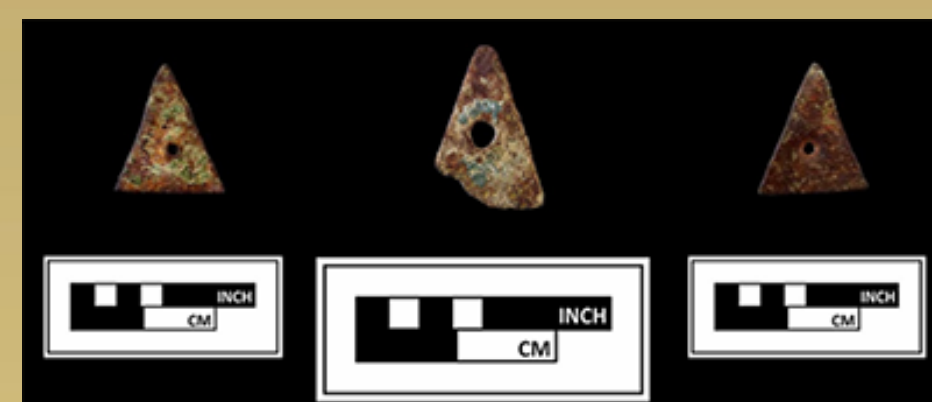


Figure 2. Brass triangles from the Zekiah Fort (18CH808).

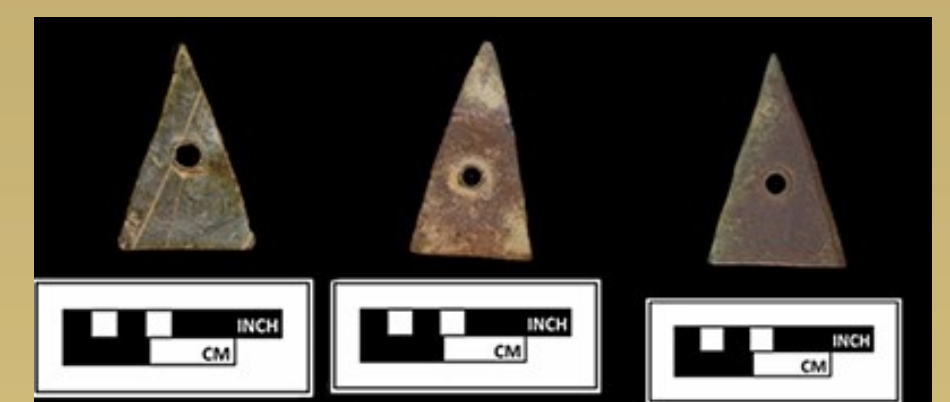


Figure 3. Copper triangles from the Heater's Island site (18FR72).



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