

# A Prehistoric Native American Ceramic Vessel from Lake Champlain

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## Abstract

A prehistoric Native American ceramic vessel was discovered in 1997 by two sport divers in Lake Champlain off Thompson's Point in Charlotte, Chittenden County, Vermont. Acting responsibly, the divers immediately transferred the water-logged vessel to the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum where it is currently awaiting conservation and stabilization on behalf of the State of Vermont. This vessel can be cross dated to about 2000 years ago, or A.D. 1, and is assignable to the early portion of the so-called Middle Woodland period on the basis of its form and decoration. Although other fragmentary ceramic vessels from this period are known locally and regionally, this is the first intact vessel of this period ever found in Vermont and much of the broader region of northeastern North America. The details of this highly significant archaeological discovery are discussed in this paper, along with some of its broad-scale implications.

## Introduction

As is the way with most significant archaeological discoveries, the recent recovery of an intact prehistoric Native American ceramic vessel some 2000 years old in Lake Champlain is due to a combination of rare conditions of favorable preservation, conscientious field workers and good luck. When two local sport divers, William Jennison and David Knight, were exploring the bottom of Lake Champlain in the spring of 1997, they made an extraordinary discovery in about 12.3-15.3 m (40-50 ft) of water off Thompson's Point in Charlotte, Chittenden County, Vermont. The two divers noticed an unusual object on a ledge along the rocky point sitting in a few centimeters of fine sediment, and after looking more closely they recognized it as a complete, intact jar (see cover illustration). They then retrieved and transported the jar immediately to

the Lake Champlain Maritime Museum (LCMM) in nearby Ferrisburgh. Recognizing the rarity and potential fragility of this discovery, the staff of the LCMM briefly documented the ceramic vessel and thereafter have kept it in a tank of water. Moreover, the LCMM staff recognized that the location of the ceramic vessel underwater in Lake Champlain makes it the property of the state of Vermont and so they contacted the Vermont Division of Historic Preservation (DHP) the same day.

Based on the description provided by the LCMM staff, the DHP confirmed the initial suggestion that the ceramic vessel was very likely of prehistoric Native American attribution, but its age remained uncertain. Soon thereafter, the author was contacted in Maine (where he was then working at the University of Maine at Farmington Archaeology Research Center), and he corroborated the initial assessment of this discovery on the basis of a verbal account. Although difficult to fully see, the LCMM staff reported that the decoration on the exterior surface of the vessel seemed to be some type of tool stamping, leading the author to suggest a Middle Woodland period age, ca. 2200-1000 years B.P., or roughly 200 B.C. to A.D. 1000, using previously dated finds from the broad region of northeastern North America (or the Northeast). The LCMM staff then kindly sent the author a photograph of the vessel, and its age was tentatively narrowed down based on several factors, specifically, the type of stamping tool, as first described, the usage of a combination of techniques in applying the decoration and the fact that the decoration is confined to the upper portion of the exterior surface. This combination of characteristics led the author to first suggest a later Middle Woodland period attribution, ca. A.D. 600-800, or even later. Shortly after this initial assessment, word of this find was released to the newspapers, and it generated a lot of excitement in local and regional contexts.

More recently still, the author visited the LCMM and met with Scott McLaughlin, a long-term staff member of the

LCMM, and Anne Lessmann, the new conservator there, both of whom have been handling matters related to the prehistoric ceramic vessel since its discovery. He learned from McLaughlin and Lessmann that a grant proposal had been recently prepared and submitted to secure funds to properly conserve and stabilize the ceramic vessel, but in the meantime it was being kept wet in a large tank of water; when secured, the grant will allow conservation as well as absolute dating of the pot through the accelerator mass spectrometer (AMS) technique. Certain handling guidelines suggested by several concerned parties, both local Native American Abenaki and non-native, were then being followed by the LCMM, given that the newspaper articles had led these individuals to come forward and claim that the vessel was perhaps burial or otherwise ritually related, and that it should be repatriated to the Abenakis as such. As with the conservation details, this matter of ownership and long-term disposition of the ceramic vessel remains to be worked out by the LCMM, the state of Vermont and other interested parties.

In any case, the author only observed the ceramic vessel in water through the glass tank where it was then stored awaiting conservation. Thus, precise measurements and other close observations are not yet possible, and this assessment must be considered somewhat preliminary in terms of some details. This account is based on this examination, available photographs, information provided by McLaughlin and Lessmann, and a short account published by the Vermont Archaeological Society (McLaughlin 1997).

One thing immediately became obvious to the author upon preliminary inspection of the ceramic vessel from Thompson's Point: it exhibits so-called "pseudo scallop shell" decoration made with a carved sinuous tool of some kind, rather than the closely related "dentate" (or toothed tool) decoration previously suspected. Pseudo scallop shell decoration was made by prehistoric Native American potters largely, if not solely, during the earliest portion of the Middle Woodland period, that is, back around 2000 years ago, or ca. 2200-1700 years B.P. (200 B.C.-A.D. 300), making the ceramic jar even older than first suspected. As described further below, this more precise assessment of the Thompson's Point jar has local and broad regional implications.

### Context and Description

Discovery of the Thompson's Point ceramic vessel is extraordinary for a number of reasons, not the least of which is

that it was readily discovered on a narrow ledge some 12.3-15.3 m (40-50 ft) below the surface of Lake Champlain. As noted above, the vessel was easily spotted by the two divers, William Jennison and David Knight, and must have lain there ever since it was deposited, with little, if any, deposits washed in over it. In fact, it may have been regularly kept clear of sediments and organics, which might have washed down on it, by its very position, perhaps subjected to some minor current or other regular cleaning factor. Also remarkable is the fact that the relatively fragile hand-built ceramic jar survived intact during its deposition in the first place, suggesting that it was dropped into the water, whether intentionally or unintentionally, and then settled downward to the ledge without breaking, or falling into deeper water. Although highly unlikely, it is even possible that this jar was intentionally carried down this deep by a prehistoric diver and carefully set on the ledge.

The most likely scenario seems to be that the ceramic vessel was accidentally dropped into the lake by prehistoric Native Americans, either lost overboard from a watercraft of some sort which was landing on, leaving, or passing by Thompson's Point, or perhaps dumped into the lake during some mishap, such as when a watercraft tipped over, for example. Although very rare given difficult conditions of discovery underwater, comparable circumstances are known from Charleston Lake in eastern Ontario. Variably broken ceramic vessels are known from a lakeshore setting as the probable result of being lost in water adjacent to a portage site when watercraft tipped over at different times. Of note, at least 39 fragmentary vessels were recovered there and at least one may be contemporaneous with the Thompson's Point vessel on the basis of common pseudo scallop shell decoration. However, most of the other Charleston Lake vessels are clearly later than the Thompson's Point example, cross dated to the later Middle Woodland and Late Woodland periods on basis of various characteristics (P. Wright 1980).

It is also certainly possible that the Thompson's Point vessel was ritually deposited into the lake for some reason, but this is not necessarily supported by the available evidence. The few other prehistoric Native American vessels previously recovered from obvious ritual/ceremonial contexts in Vermont, such as human burials, had been typically broken before interment, with the pieces then carefully included in the grave, as best known from the Boucher cemetery dated to the Early Woodland period, ca. 800-100 B.C. (Heckenberger et al. 1990). This does not completely rule out the use of intact, unbroken ceramics in ritual/ceremonial contexts by local native groups, however, especially since one vessel may have been interred intact at Boucher,

and other intact vessels are known from late prehistoric/contact period burials elsewhere in New England and the broader Northeast (e.g., Bourque and Cox 1981; Goodby 1994; Petersen and Sanger 1991; Willoughby 1909).

It should be noted that the divers who discovered the Thompson's Point ceramic vessel subsequently searched the area around the find spot carefully, but they did not identify any additional evidence obviously related to the jar. Thus, important questions about how and why the ceramic vessel was deposited in Lake Champlain cannot be definitively answered at this point.

Preliminary description of the Thompson's Point ceramic vessel itself is limited by the fact that the author has not directly handled it yet. The vessel has been reportedly incorrectly as measuring "7 inches" (17.8 cm) in diameter and "11 inches" (27.9 cm) in height. Provisional measurements of the vessel suggest an outer rim diameter of about 15.4 cm (6.1 inches), a maximum body diameter of about 17.5 cm (6.9 inches), and an overall height of about 16 cm (6.3 inches). Regardless of the precise size of the vessel, it is relatively small, with a maximum diameter nearly equal to or greater than its height, and a slightly constricted oral diameter at the rim. The vessel clearly has a pointed bottom, giving it an overall cone-like, or conoidal, shape, with relatively thin walls, especially near the rounded-squarish lip on the upper edge of the rim. There is one small crack or nick in the rim of the vessel, but it is otherwise complete, as far as could be determined without handling it. Conoidal vessels were characteristic of the Middle Woodland period generally in the broad Northeast and less common Early Woodland period vessels were often conoidal too (e.g., Fowler 1966; Petersen and Newcomb 1986; Petersen and Sanger 1991; Ritchie 1965).

The characteristics of the Thompson's Point vessel closely match other more fragmentary but partially reconstructed vessels with comparable pseudo scallop shell decoration and others still with closely related dentate decoration as well. In the local area, such ceramics are best known from the early Middle Woodland period occupation at the Winooski site, where they have been dated ca. A.D. 160 and A.D. 170 (Petersen 1980; Petersen and Power 1983, 1985). Many other examples are known from the broader Northeast and generally have been dated most accurately to the early Middle Woodland period, at most ca. 200 B.C.-A.D. 300 (Petersen 1988; Petersen and Sanger 1991; Ritchie 1965; J. Wright 1967; P. Wright 1980).

Details about the decoration on the Thompson's Point

ceramic vessel are still incomplete as well, but it is clear that it is decorated on about the upper half of the exterior, or to about 8.5 cm (3.3 inches) below the lip. The decoration appears to include two techniques of application, perhaps done using the same tool: simple stamping, where the tool is more or less vertically applied on the vessel surface forming discrete individual elements, and trailing (or channeling), where the tool is scraped straight across the vessel surface producing continuous parallel elements. At least the simple stamped elements represent use of pseudo scallop shell decoration produced with a sinuous, toothed tool, while the trailed elements may or may not have been done with the same tool. Pseudo scallop shell decoration was apparently first defined by the late William A. Ritchie, a former state archaeologist of New York State, who, together with Richard S. MacNeish, defined the formal diagnostic ceramic type, "St. Lawrence Pseudo Scallop Shell," as one hallmark of the Point Peninsula ceramic series and attributable to the Middle Woodland period. At the time, they noted that this "evidently is a northern New York, eastern Canadian, and northern New England-type which may tie the various areas together. Prototypes are unknown." (Ritchie and MacNeish 1949:103).

In any case, the two techniques of application and one or two tools were used to produce a complicated zoned motif around the upper circumference of the Thompson's Point vessel. The motif includes two exterior horizontal design units; the upper one is narrow and consists of right obliquely oriented simple stamped elements of pseudo scallop shell for a short distance below the lip. The second design unit combines broad vertical zones of horizontally oriented simple stamped pseudo scallop shell elements with narrower vertical zones of vertically oriented trailed elements, forming a symmetrical and highly regular band of decoration around the jar. The lower portion of the exterior surface is undecorated, and the lip and the interior may be undecorated as well, but this awaits closer examination.

The pseudo scallop shell decoration found on the Thompson's Point ceramic vessel is highly diagnostic of the early Middle Woodland period and elsewhere is found with and without co-occurring dentate decoration. Pseudo scallop shell decoration was used only over a relatively brief time span, specifically Ceramic Period 2 in a broad ceramic chronology for northern New England and portions of adjacent Canada; this period is dated ca. 200 B.C.-A.D. 300, as reported above (Petersen and Sanger 1991). Also notable is the fact that this type of decoration was confined to non-Hopewellian prehistoric groups across a broad swath of central-northern North America, especially centered on the Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River drainage,

much like Ritchie and MacNeish recognized nearly 50 years ago, but even broader than they alluded to. It is little known, if known at all, to the south of this region, making it a clear cut horizon style in Northeastern prehistory (Petersen 1988). A similar but distinctly different decoration, "wavy line" stamping, is known from later in the Middle Woodland period, but it is confined to a small area in the upper Hudson River Valley and the Lake Champlain drainage (Petersen 1980; Petersen and Power 1985).

Dentate decoration is less temporally sensitive because of its long-term usage during the Middle Woodland period in general, or what have been elsewhere designated as Ceramic Periods 2, 3 and 4 (Petersen and Sanger 1991). In addition, dentate decoration was employed both by widespread Hopewellian prehistoric groups all across eastern North America as well as among non-Hopewellian groups, especially to the north of the Hopewellian groups, as in Vermont and the broader Northeast, making it less diagnostic of local groups.

Curiously, the use of drag (or push-pull) and rocker stamping techniques of application are absent on the Thompson's Point vessel; these two techniques were often applied in conjunction with simple stamping on the same vessel, whether done with a pseudo scallop shell or dentate tool, sometimes with trailing as well (Petersen and Sanger 1991). Perhaps in the present case the use of just simple stamping and trailing is suggestive of a later placement within the span of the early Middle Woodland period. Alternatively, it may represent a local group-specific variation, or it may merely represent an individual idiosyncratic variation. In any case, it has been elsewhere demonstrated that distinctive combinations of these different techniques of application on the same vessels are based on geographic (and cultural?) and temporal factors, certainly within the broad Middle Woodland period and perhaps during the early portion thereof, when pseudo scallop shell decoration was employed by native potters (Petersen 1988; Petersen and Sanger 1991).

### Local and Regional Implications

As introduced in the preceding comments, the Thompson's Point ceramic vessel is significant on a number of levels. First, it again demonstrates the profound scientific riches which lie awaiting discovery underwater all across northern New England, including both prehistoric and historic cultural resources (Crisman and Cohn 1994; Crock et al. 1993; Petersen et al. 1994). Secondly, it provides a critical slice of information about the early Middle Woodland peri-

od in the Lake Champlain drainage of Vermont, New York and Quebec, specifically the first whole ceramic vessel that the author knows of for this entire drainage area and a much larger region beyond the Champlain drainage. This specimen thus provides a useful point of comparison for the more fragmentary contemporaneous specimens known from local contexts, such as the Winooski site, and elsewhere over a much larger region as well. In fact, as a complete intact vessel, this specimen is seemingly unique among the six or seven other more or less intact vessels for all periods of Native American prehistory and early history known from the entire state, some of which are older and some younger in age. None of the others are as intact as the Thompson's Point vessel, however (Haviland and Power 1991; Heckenberger et al. 1990; Howes 1960; Petersen 1990; Perkins 1909; Willoughby 1909).

Beyond these obvious points, the Thompson's Point ceramic vessel represents an important example of the broad-scale style sharing characteristic of Native American prehistory in northeastern North America. Recognizing the immense distribution of comparable, if typically less well preserved, ceramics of the early Middle Woodland period at about 2000 years ago, the Thompson's Point vessel directly reflects the nature of prehistoric social networks across the huge Great Lakes-St. Lawrence River drainage, within which Lake Champlain is included. Likely made locally on the basis of similar finds elsewhere within the drainage, this jar directly demonstrates local participation within a far reaching style zone, or network, that extended in a relatively narrow geographic zone from Manitoba to Maine from west to east. This style extended into the boreal forest to the north until aceramic groups were reached, but southward it did not extend much beyond the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence River. It certainly occurred across northern New England, but seems to have occurred only rarely in southern New England and not at all to the south. From this evidence, various potential research questions emerge, among many others: when, where and how did such horizon styles arise? Do they reflect meaningful cultural entities, or were they merely the product of historical factors? When and where were variations in terms of tools, techniques of application and motifs likely to arise? Do these variations reflect any sort of meaningful social distinctions?

Leaving aside these broad level and rather esoteric concerns, the Thompson's Point vessel is highly important for the aesthetic it conveys. Native potters were certainly highly skilled over the full span of prehistory and early history in northeastern North America, but a particular emphasis on ceramic craftsmanship during the early

Middle Woodland period has been long recognized (e.g., Fitting 1970; J. Wright 1967). The reasons behind why pottery of this period was so often superbly crafted are unknown and perhaps the asking of this question is esoteric too. Nonetheless, one cannot help still feel something of the excitement that these early Middle Woodland potters caused among themselves, their communities and broader networks beyond the local group.

### Conclusions

In summary, the recent discovery of a prehistoric Native American ceramic vessel in Lake Champlain off Thompson's Point should serve as a reminder that there are still many important archaeological discoveries to be made. This discovery also points out the good luck, good technique and stewardship, and favorable conditions of preservation that potentially must come together in such cases. Reacting quickly, decisively and responsibly, two sport divers, William Jennison and David Knight, have made a really outstanding contribution to Vermont archaeology, for which they both were awarded at the autumn, 1997, meeting of the Vermont Archaeological Society.

With broad-scale connections in local and regional Native American prehistory, the Thompson's Point ceramic vessel is a cultural and scientific treasure. We can certainly look forward to learning more about it through intensive non-destructive analysis after it has been conserved and stabilized. Likewise, more precise dating of the vessel will be critical too. Finally, we can only hope that the ultimate disposition of the ceramic vessel will allow the public at large, both native and non-native alike, to view and appreciate this priceless cultural resource in perpetuity.

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