

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS
 UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
 NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

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**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
 INVENTORY -- NOMINATION FORM**

~~(NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS)~~ SEE INSTRUCTIONS IN HOW TO COMPLETE NATIONAL REGISTER FORMS
 TYPE ALL ENTRIES -- COMPLETE APPLICABLE SECTIONS

1 NAME

HISTORIC Oconto Site

AND/OR COMMON

Copper Culture State Park

2 LOCATION

STREET & NUMBER Copper Culture State Park--Mill Street S½, NW¼, Sec. 24, T.28 N., R.21 E.
 ---NOT FOR PUBLICATION

CITY, TOWN Oconto VICINITY OF Eighth CONGRESSIONAL DISTRICT

STATE Wisconsin CODE 55 COUNTY Oconto CODE 083

3 CLASSIFICATION

CATEGORY	OWNERSHIP	STATUS	PRESENT USE	
<input type="checkbox"/> DISTRICT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PUBLIC	<input type="checkbox"/> OCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSEUM
<input type="checkbox"/> BUILDING(S)	<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNOCCUPIED	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCIAL	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PARK
<input type="checkbox"/> STRUCTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> BOTH	<input type="checkbox"/> WORK IN PROGRESS	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATIONAL	<input type="checkbox"/> PRIVATE RESIDENCE
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> SITE	PUBLIC ACQUISITION	ACCESSIBLE	<input type="checkbox"/> ENTERTAINMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGIOUS
<input type="checkbox"/> OBJECT	<input type="checkbox"/> IN PROCESS	<input type="checkbox"/> YES: RESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENTIFIC
	<input type="checkbox"/> BEING CONSIDERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> YES: UNRESTRICTED	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRIAL	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
		<input type="checkbox"/> NO	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER:

4 OWNER OF PROPERTY

NAME State of Wisconsin, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

STREET & NUMBER 4610 University Avenue

CITY, TOWN Madison VICINITY OF STATE Wisconsin

5 LOCATION OF LEGAL DESCRIPTION

COURTHOUSE, REGISTRY OF DEEDS, ETC. Oconto County Registrar of Deeds

STREET & NUMBER Oconto County Courthouse

CITY, TOWN Oconto STATE Wisconsin

6 REPRESENTATION IN EXISTING SURVEYS

TITLE

DATE

___FEDERAL ___STATE ___COUNTY ___LOCAL

DEPOSITORY FOR SURVEY RECORDS

CITY, TOWN

STATE

7 DESCRIPTION

CONDITION		CHECK ONE	CHECK ONE
<input type="checkbox"/> EXCELLENT	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> DETERIORATED	<input type="checkbox"/> UNALTERED	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ORIGINAL SITE
<input type="checkbox"/> GOOD	<input type="checkbox"/> RUINS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ALTERED	<input type="checkbox"/> MOVED DATE _____
<input type="checkbox"/> FAIR	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNEXPOSED		

DESCRIBE THE PRESENT AND ORIGINAL (IF KNOWN) PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

The Oconto Site lies on a sand and gravel ridge about 150 yards from the Oconto River at the western limits of the City of Oconto, Wisconsin (Sec. 24, T. 28W., R. 21 E.). Grass, brush, and a few groves of trees provide the vegetal cover for this area on the banks of the river.

Unfortunately, the city dump for Oconto was located immediately to the north of the site for many years. Some of this fill probably extended onto portions of the site. Recent actions by preservationists have finally succeeded in stopping this landfill. At the present time, grass and brush have regrown over the area. Thus, although parts of the site may have been destroyed by this operation, at least there presently exists some sense of the environment as it must have been in prehistoric times.

Prior to the beginnings of the landfill operation, another enterprise contributed greatly to a destruction of a western portion of the site. During the 1920's, a commercial gravel company removed much of the cemetery and perhaps the entire living area. These two operations--combined with the fact that the undisturbed portions of the site have already been excavated--mean that, with the possible exception of a few intact burials, probably little remains in situ which would warrant any further archeological exploration.

Nevertheless, the site's importance in initially giving archeologists insight into the Copper Culture and its role in the history of North American archeology still make it worthy of preservation--even if it serves a wholly commemorative function. Presently owned by the State of Wisconsin (Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources) and the City of Oconto, the site operates as a public park which is awaiting further development. A dirt road cuts through the park and leads to a circle of posts surrounding a small mound which contains a plaque in its center describing the prehistoric importance of the property. The mound was not built by the prehistoric inhabitants and serves merely as a marker indicating the vicinity of the site. A building relating to the early history of the area falls within landmark boundaries but is intrusive to the landmark. Similarly, the roads, picnic areas, trails, etc. (Refer to Map B.) projected as integral parts of the park's development are extraneous to the landmark.

The Excavations

The Oconto Site was first discovered by 13-year-old Donald Baldwin while digging in the abandoned gravel quarry in 1952. Archeologists were quickly made aware of the discovery, and Reuben La Fave and George Hall of the Oconto County Historical Society began test excavations. When this initial investigation revealed burials accompanied by copper artifacts, Robert Ritzenthaler and Arthur Niehoff of the Milwaukee Public Museum became interested and began excavations as part of the program of the Wisconsin Archeological Survey. Two areas of the site were excavated--one at the eastern edge of the gravel and the other on a small island left in the center of the pit.

(Continued)

8 SIGNIFICANCE

PERIOD	AREAS OF SIGNIFICANCE -- CHECK AND JUSTIFY BELOW			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> PREHISTORIC	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-PREHISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNITY PLANNING	<input type="checkbox"/> LANDSCAPE ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> RELIGION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1400-1499	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHEOLOGY-HISTORIC	<input type="checkbox"/> CONSERVATION	<input type="checkbox"/> LAW	<input type="checkbox"/> SCIENCE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1500-1599	<input type="checkbox"/> AGRICULTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> ECONOMICS	<input type="checkbox"/> LITERATURE	<input type="checkbox"/> SCULPTURE
<input type="checkbox"/> 1600-1699	<input type="checkbox"/> ARCHITECTURE	<input type="checkbox"/> EDUCATION	<input type="checkbox"/> MILITARY	<input type="checkbox"/> SOCIAL/HUMANITARIAN
<input type="checkbox"/> 1700-1799	<input type="checkbox"/> ART	<input type="checkbox"/> ENGINEERING	<input type="checkbox"/> MUSIC	<input type="checkbox"/> THEATER
<input type="checkbox"/> 1800-1899	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMERCE	<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLORATION/SETTLEMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> PHILOSOPHY	<input type="checkbox"/> TRANSPORTATION
<input type="checkbox"/> 1900-	<input type="checkbox"/> COMMUNICATIONS	<input type="checkbox"/> INDUSTRY	<input type="checkbox"/> POLITICS/GOVERNMENT	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER (SPECIFY)
		<input type="checkbox"/> INVENTION		

SPECIFIC DATES approximately 2500 B.C. BUILDER/ARCHITECT

STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

A manifestation of the Late Archaic period, the Oconto Site is a cemetery of the Old Copper Culture people who occupied the northern Midwest about 2500 B.C. Twenty-one burials associated with a large percentage of copper artifacts were unearthed during excavations at the site in 1952.

The Old Copper Culture had been known for many years from surface collections, but it was not until 1945 with the discovery of the Osceola Site that the copper artifacts, known to be rather old because of a very heavy patina, were associated with a lithic-shell-bone-antler complex and burial customs. Oconto, discovered in 1952, was the second recorded Old Copper Culture site. As such, it helped to establish the characteristics of this cultural complex in greater detail. Its central location in the area generally regarded as the place of origin of the Old Copper Culture made it especially valuable for the elaboration of this trait list. Among the important insights revealed by the excavation of Oconto was the fact that the inhabitants of the site employed a great diversity of burial positions.

Oconto also provided radiocarbon dates of 5600 B.C. and 7500 B.C. for the Old Copper Culture. Although these dates have since been discredited, they stirred up a great deal of interest during their time; for they were the oldest dates for cultural materials in eastern North America and were thought to represent the earliest known inhabitants of Wisconsin as well as the earliest known metalsmiths in the world. The most recent dates from Oconto, as well as from other similar sites, indicate that the Old Copper Culture people inhabited the area about 3000 to 2000 B.C. The culture has been shown to represent a Late Archaic manifestation with copper tools and technology as added traits.

The Oconto Site now operates as a public park. Although most of the site has been destroyed by landfill, gravel quarrying, and previous excavations, it nevertheless remains worthy of preservation because of the role it played in the archeology of the North American Archaic.

The Old Copper Culture

For many years, the copper artifacts of the northern Midwest attracted a great deal of attention because their abundance was such a unique phenomenon in North America.

(Continued)

9 MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- Mason, Carol Irwin and Ronald J. Mason, "The Age of the Old Copper Culture," Wisconsin Archeologist, Vol. 42, No. 4, n.s., 1961, p. 143.
- Ritzenthaler, Robert, "Some carbon 14 Dates for the Wisconsin Old Copper Culture," Wisconsin Archeologist, Vol. 39, No. 3, n.s., 1958.
- Ritzenthaler, Robert, "Another Radiocarbon Date for the Oconto Site," Wisconsin Archeologist, Vol. 51, No. 2, n.s., 1970.
- Wisconsin Archeologist, Vol. 38 No. 3, n.s., entire issue, 1957.

10 GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

ACREAGE OF NOMINATED PROPERTY approximately 75 acres

UTM REFERENCES

A	1,6	4,2,8	4,5,0	4,9	7,0	6,0,0	B	1,6	4,2,9	2,7,5	4,9	7,0	8,0,0
	ZONE	EASTING		NORTHING				ZONE	EASTING		NORTHING		
C	1,6	4,2,9	2,5,0	4,9	7,0	4,5,0	D	1,6	4,2,8	4,5,0	4,9	7,0	2,5,0

VERBAL BOUNDARY DESCRIPTION Refer to Maps A and C for a clarification of the boundary description. The landmark is bounded on the north by the south side of Mott Street, on the west by the west line of Section 24, on the south by the north bank of the Oconto River, and on the east by the east line of the NW $\frac{1}{4}$ of Section 24.

The boundary contains the excavated areas of the site plus land which may contain any remaining intact burials.

LIST ALL STATES AND COUNTIES FOR PROPERTIES OVERLAPPING STATE OR COUNTY BOUNDARIES

STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE
STATE	CODE	COUNTY	CODE

11 FORM PREPARED BY

NAME / TITLE

Francine Weiss, Staff Archeologist, Landmark Review Project

ORGANIZATION

Historic Sites Survey, National Park Service

DATE

12/27/74

STREET & NUMBER

1100 L Street NW.

TELEPHONE

202-523-5465

CITY OR TOWN

Washington

STATE

D.C. 20240

12 STATE HISTORIC PRESERVATION OFFICER CERTIFICATION

THE EVALUATED SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS PROPERTY WITHIN THE STATE IS:

NATIONAL

STATE

LOCAL

As the designated State Historic Preservation Officer for the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (Public Law 89-665), I hereby nominate this property for inclusion in the National Register and certify that it has been evaluated according to the criteria and procedures set forth by the National Park Service.

FEDERAL REPRESENTATIVE SIGNATURE

TITLE

DATE

Boundary Certified: *[Signature]* 9-17-75

Chief, Hist. & Arch. Surveys date

DATE

FOR NPS USE ONLY

I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT THIS PROPERTY IS INCLUDED IN THE NATIONAL REGISTER (NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARKS)

DIRECTOR, OFFICE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND HISTORIC PRESERVATION

ATTEST:

DATE

Boundary Affirmed: *[Signature]* 9/17/75

KEEPER OF THE NATIONAL REGISTER

Director, OAHIP date

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CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 7

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The excavations revealed 21 rectanguloid to elliptical burial pits, generally measuring about 2 by 4½ feet. The pits extended down about 2½ feet below the 1952 surface, but their level of origin could not be discerned in the sand. They showed up only when they extended into the gravel layer underlying the sand. One burial pit contained nothing, eleven contained a single individual, seven contained two individuals, one contained three, and one contained five. Extended, flexed, partially flexed, and bundle burials were present, sometimes in the same burial pit. Eight circular cremation pits--some containing more than one individual--were also excavated. Thus, the site yielded about 45 individuals. Assuming that the portions of the site destroyed by the gravel quarry between the two excavated areas possessed the same concentration of burials, Ritzenthaler estimates that the site may have contained as many as 200 individuals.

Associated with the burials were numerous artifacts. Those made of copper include: 7 awls, 4 crescents, 3 clasps, 1 socketed-tang point, 1 fishtail tang point, 1 ovoid point with broken tang, 1 fishhook, 1 bracelet, a section of tubing spirally coiled, a rivet, a spatula, and 4 small unidentified pieces. Two points and a triangular scraper were the only chipped-stone artifacts found with the burials. Four other points and ten more copper awls were found in the sand layers above the graves. Bone artifacts in the burial pits include a whistle made from a swan humerus and an awl from a fish mandible. Pond snail beads, a fresh water clam whose nearest present source is the Mississippi, and a whelk shell native to the Southern Atlantic Coastal States illustrate the use of shell and the presence of trade in order to obtain certain materials. Two lumps of hematite, and some turtle and duck bones were also unearthed during the excavations of the graves. Many of these artifacts are housed at the Oconto County Historical Society Museum in Oconto, Wisconsin.

Although the site is mainly a cemetery, numerous post molds were recorded and mapped during the excavation. Many were of uniform size--about .8 feet in diameter. Two contained fragments of charcoal. Three or four holes would sometimes line up, but no significant discernible pattern was revealed.

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LANDMARKS))

CONTINUATION SHEET

ITEM NUMBER 8 PAGE 1

These copper artifacts did not correspond to the forms which were known to be associated with certain Woodland cultures. Their characteristic deep erosional patina caused archeologists to postulate an early time horizon for them.

The discovery of the Osceola Site in 1945 and the Oconto Site in 1952 enabled archeologists to relate these copper implements to a lithic-shell-bone-antler complex and to burial practices. The variety of burial positions at Oconto illustrated how diverse these practices were. The excavation of shell not native to the Wisconsin area implied the existence of trade. Radiocarbon dates of 5600 B.C. and 7500 B.C. from Oconto confirmed the initial convictions concerning the antiquity of the culture. As mentioned previously, these initial dates caused archeologists to consider the Old Copper Culture People as the earliest in Wisconsin and as the first metalsmiths in the world.

Subsequent dates of Copper Culture sites and the most recent date for Oconto (2590 B.C.) point out the inaccuracies of the first dates and the statements which follow from them. The Oconto date is still the earliest Old Copper Culture date, but it does not predate the metalworking practices in the Old World. Moreover, geological data indicates that Oconto could not have been occupied 7000 to 9000 years ago. And typological comparisons mark similarities between artifacts from Oconto and others from the Late Archaic period.

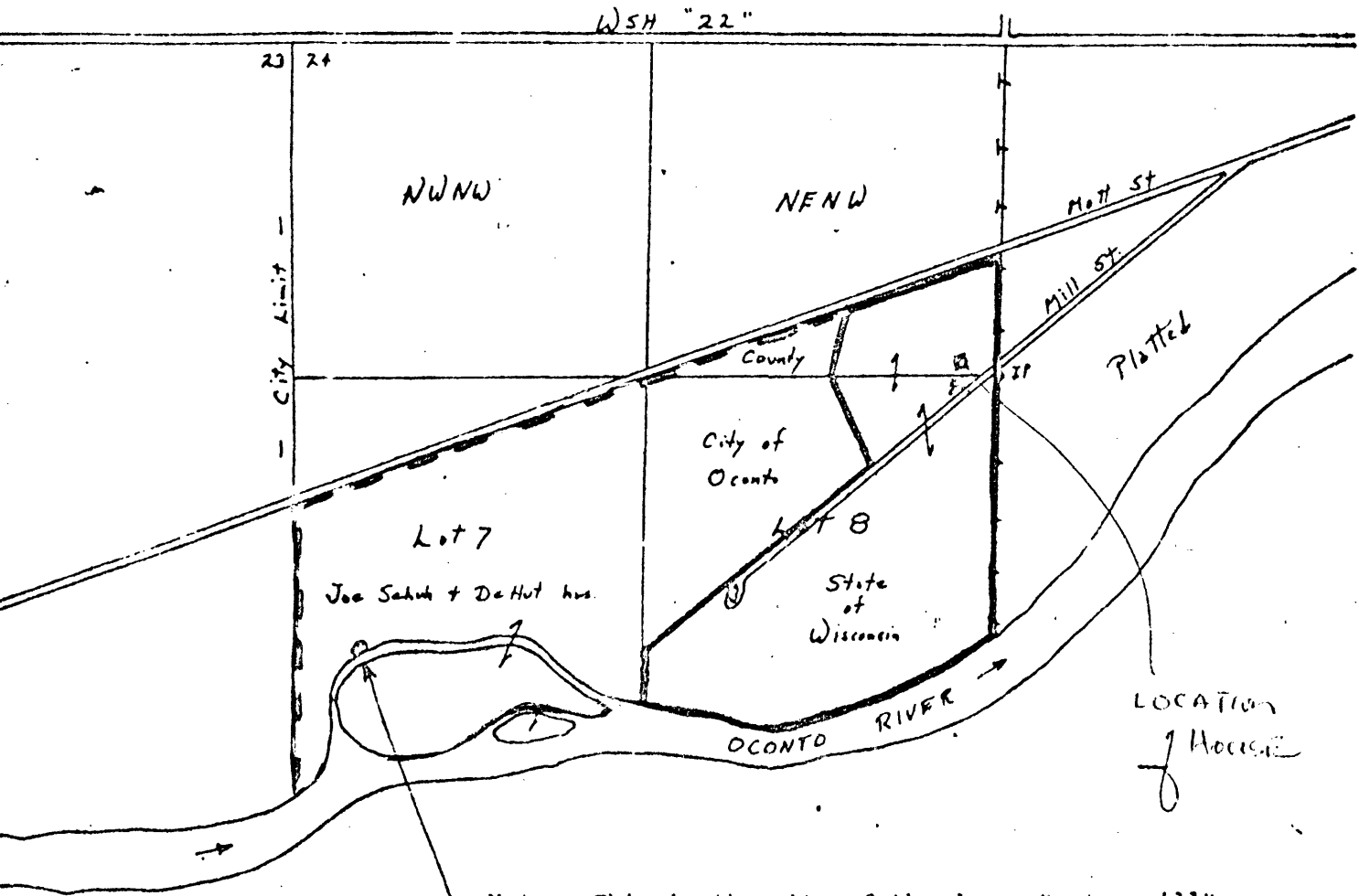
The Old Copper Culture is thus considered a Late Archaic (i.e. hunting and gathering, pre-pottery, pre-agriculture) manifestation. The copper tools and the technology of hammering and annealing native copper into various shapes represent added cultural traits. The forms diagnostic of the Copper Culture people include: double-ended awls or pins, square in cross-section; spear points with reinforcing rib and long tang; knives and triangular points; crescent-shaped knife blades; harpoons; rings; celts; and massive adz bits.

The origins of the Old Copper Culture people are not clearly understood. The copper artifacts are thought to be similar to slate specimens from other north-eastern Archaic sites, but the relationship is uncertain. Likewise the relationship between the Wisconsin sites and a number of Copper Culture sites which have been located in Ontario remains cloudy. Furthermore, the influence of these early copper users on the Woodland peoples of eastern North America, who also made use of copper, should be clarified. Thus, the Old Copper Culture still presents many basic and intriguing problems which will require the location and excavation of more sites.

Map C

COPPER CULTURE PARK AREA

Section 24 T28N-R21E - Oconto County
24 T28N-R21E



Note: This is the site of the Jones "water-mill" constructed in 1846, one of the early sawmills in northeastern Wisconsin. Piling and foundation remnants are still present on the site.