

Virginia Indian History at Riverbend Park



Figure 1 - ACB Archaeologist Brittany Blanchard Recovers a Quartz PPK from Riverbend Park

[Riverbend Park](#), situated on a bend of the Potomac River in northern Fairfax County, contains over one hundred archaeological sites. These resources speak to the county's rich history, especially histories connected to the region's first people, who were here thousands of years before European contact. Fairfax County archaeologists have conducted numerous investigations at the park, from surveys to intensive excavations (Figure 1). Findings from their work attest to connections the first people had to this resource-rich region of Fairfax County.

Virginia's Pre-Contact (referring to pre-European contact) history is divided into three cultural periods: Paleoindian (15000-8000 BCE), Archaic (8000-1200 BCE), and Woodland (1200 BCE-1600 CE) Each of these cultural periods is represented in Riverbend's

archaeological record, often identified through diagnostic lithic (stone) tools found at the park.

Lithic tools are a type of artifact archaeologists can use to identify Pre-Contact presence at Virginia sites. Unlike artifacts crafted from wood or fiber materials, lithics are durable and do not disintegrate. Virginia archaeologists often refer to tipped-tool lithics as projectile point/knives (PPK). Archaeologists examine a PPK's material type, size, width, manufacturing technique, and hafting element (how the tool attaches to a handle) to connect artifacts to specific cultural periods. The earliest stone tool discovered at Riverbend Park, a rhyolite fluted PPK (Figure 2), indicates that people were at the site that is now the park as early as the Paleoindian Period.

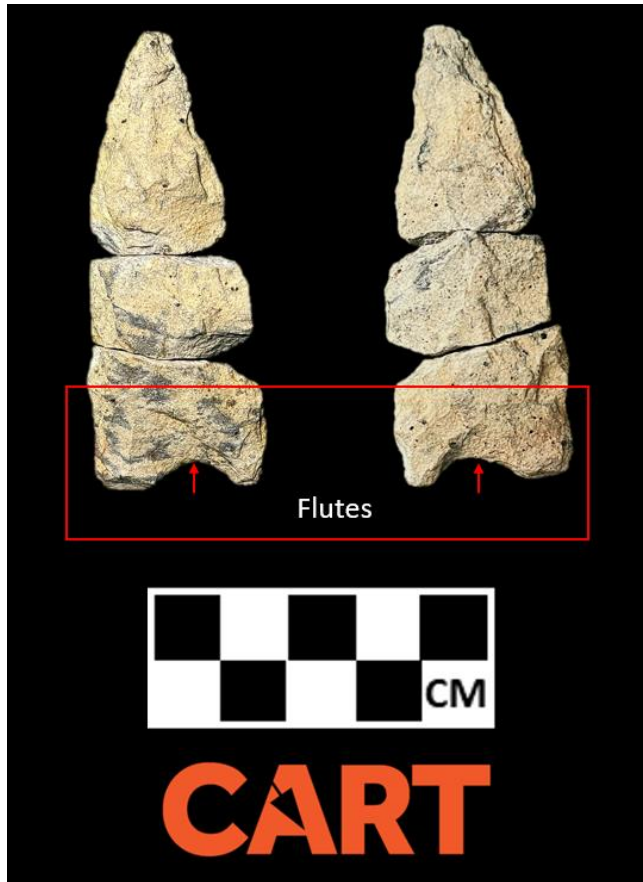


Figure 2 - Fluted Rhyolite PPK Recovered from Riverbend Park

Fluted PPKs, like the rhyolite PPK found at Riverbend Park (Figure 2), are the hallmark lithic technology of the Paleoindian Period. These tools are long, thin lanceolate points. They have characteristic thinning flakes typically removed from both sides of the base, leaving a distinct groove known as a flute. Skilled craftsmanship was necessary to create these thin, fluted points and they are typically made from fine, cryptocrystalline material.

Recent exploratory studies indicate that hunters in the Paleoindian Period may have preferred fluted PPKs due to shock-absorption. Hunters could use fluted tools for extended periods because, compared to thicker-based tools, they were less likely to snap on impact (Thomas et al. 2017). For Paleoindian Period hunters moving in small bands through northern Virginia, distanced from known quarries, the ability to reuse these tools would have been invaluable. Fluted PPKs are rare finds in Fairfax County.

The fluted PPK recovered from Riverbend was found in three segments and is heavily weathered, which makes it challenging to identify the flutes. A three-dimensional scan of this artifact, created by [Virginia Commonwealth University's Virtual Curation Laboratory](#), highlights features on this PPK and affords archaeologists, and public audiences, opportunities to closely study the fragile tool without harming the artifact.

Paleoindian Period hunters lived in cooler climates than that of present day, with long, cold winters and short summers. The transition to the Archaic Period in Northern Virginia is marked by a warming climate, and shift from coniferous forests with spruce, pine, and hemlock to deciduous forests with nut-bearing oak, hickory, and chestnut. The changing environment led hunters to modify lithic toolkits, replacing fluted tools with a variety of new lithic implements, including broadspears, which have been found at Riverbend Park and across Virginia (Figure 3).

One of the most common PPKs found in Virginia is the Savannah River Broadspear (shown hafted to a knife model in Figure 3). These distinctive PPKs are large, broad-bladed, and typically crafted from coarse, durable materials, e.g., quartzite, that can be obtained from regional quarries or in cobble form from rivers. Archaeologists often recover broadspears from sites lining waterways. These artifacts are also sometimes identified with large, rock features, possibly representing the remains of hearths.



Figure 3 - Broadspears Found at Riverbend Park (above) and Savannah River PPK Shown Hafted to a Knife Model (below)

During the Woodland Period lithic toolkits continued to diversify. In the Middle Woodland Period (500-900 CE), bow and arrow technology arrived in Virginia and hunters started using arrowheads (like the triangular point found at Riverbend (Figure 4)), turkey-fletched arrows, and longbows in their pursuit of game. Deer was a particularly important resource, and Northern Virginia was a known hunting spot.

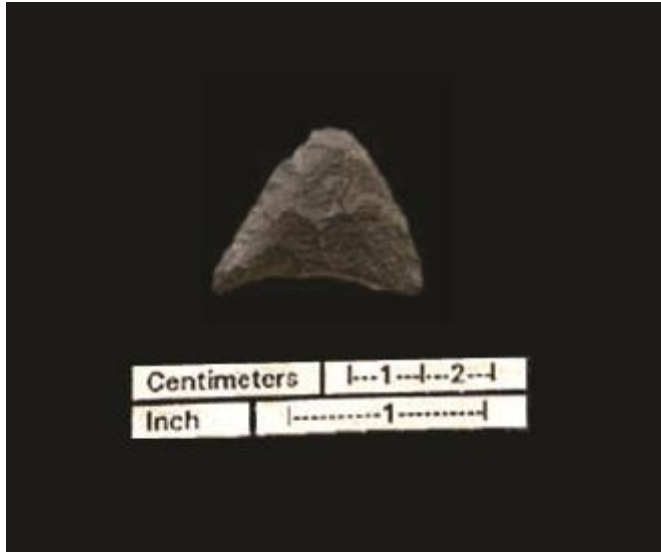


Figure 4 - Triangle Point Found at Riverbend Park

Hunters in the Woodland Period used three main methods of hunting: trapping, stalking, and surrounding. Trapping was usually reserved for smaller animals, like beavers. Stalking and surrounding techniques were used primarily for deer. In surrounding, hunters surrounded deer in circles, sometimes creating circular fires to contain the animals. In some areas, hunters burned foliage and cleared trees, so grass more favorable to deer might grow (Roundtree 1989).

Riverbend Park's museum, housed in the park's visitor center, contains a timeline exhibit displaying other lithics found at the park along with artifact replicas and

depictions of how people used the different tools (Figure 5). Some of the items on display are from archaeological investigations conducted by the county. Currently, Fairfax County's Archaeology and Collections Branch is completing a systematic archaeological survey over the entire park. Findings from these investigations will shed further light on the region's first people.



Figure 5 - Timeline Exhibit at Riverbend Park

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