Introduction

In the fall of 2006 the author accompanied Ms. Jamie Bennett, Heritage Program Manager for the USDA Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area (LBL), on an inspection of potential sites of Mississippian occupation within the LBL. On the south side of Ford’s Bay, in Trigg County, we noted lithics on the surface and also two small mounds on the west side of the ridge. Because of the proximity of these mounds to a reported Mississippian site, 15Tr165, and to the well-known Canton Mound site not far upriver, these mounds seemed potentially related to Mississippian occupation. However, the small size and irregular shape of the mounds raised questions about their origin and condition: were they prehistoric? Had they been looted?

The 2007 Murray State University (MSU) summer field school in archaeology was organized to assess the condition and cultural affiliation of the mounds. The field school began on May 29, 2007, and continued through June 25. At this writing, the materials recovered are held in the MSU Archaeology Laboratory (MSUAL) pending washing, cataloguing and analysis. This report summarizes the field work and offers some preliminary observations on the results.

Background

Four prehistoric sites have previously been recorded in the vicinity of Ford’s Bay, three on the north side and one on the south (Figure 1). Site forms for all four were submitted to the Office of State Archaeology (OSA) in Lexington, Kentucky, by Charles Moffat in March, 1983.

Ford’s Bay #1, 15Tr165, is a Mississippian site with indications of midden, features and a substantial artifact content. Jack Nance (1973) recorded this site as Tr67. However, according to Moffat (1983:63), Nance did not submit site forms to OSA for many of his sites, so that his site numbers did not become the official designations. Inspection of Moffat’s collection, curated at MSUAL, noted typical Mississippian jar, bowl, pan and plate forms, with specimens of Mississippi Plain, Bell Plain, Kimmswick Fabric Impressed, and Matthews Incised var. Beckwith rims and body sherds (types as defined by Phillips, Ford and Griffin 1951). The types are not temporally diagnostic within the Mississippian period; however, the plate forms are similar to those of the Late Wickliffe period at Wickliffe Mounds (Wesler 2001), which would place the site in the later Angelly phase of the Lower Tennessee-Cumberland and Lower Ohio region (Muller 1986; Clay 1963, 1979). One body sherd displays an incised, elongated, hatched
triangle. It may belong either to a deep plate (O’Byam Incised var. Stewart) or a rayed sun motif, in which case it may be fairly late (late 14th–early 15th century) for the local sequence. Unfortunately the sherd and decoration are too fragmentary to identify definitively, but the specimen suggests that further investigation of 15Tr165 might be interesting.

Ford’s Bay #2, 15Tr166, was a lithic scatter. Moffat recovered no diagnostics.

Ford’s Bay #3, 15Tr167, was recorded on the basis of Archaic lithics. There were no ceramics, so that 15Tr167 is listed as an Archaic site.

Ford’s Bay #4, 15Tr168, was recorded as Woodland/Mississippian on the basis of lithics and three potsherds. Further research should consider whether 15Tr168 is indeed a distinct occupation from 15Tr165.

Moffat’s survey of 15Tr166 apparently was confined to the relatively visible shoreline, and eschewed the wooded area of the ridge immediately south. Inspection of the area in Fall 2006 noted lithics on the ridge. A project conducted by the LBL Heritage Management Program in January, 2007, placed four 1 x 1 test units spaced widely along the ridge, recovering lithics in each test (Jamie Bennett, pers. comm. 2007). Diagnostic bifaces suggested Archaic period occupation. There is no reason to assume that the newly-recovered lithics belong to a site separate from 15Tr166, and that site designation is adopted here.

Methods

The southeastern corner of a previously excavated test unit, slightly down slope from the northern of the two mounds noted in 2006, was chosen as a site datum and designated Benchmark (BM) 1. LBL Heritage Program personnel provided gps coordinates as UTM Z 16 4063939.363 N 413353.539 E, elevation 85.941 m (NAD 83). Using a total station, the crew set a north and an east baseline from BM1, and by tape measured a set of 1 x 2 m excavation units reaching from 4063939.363-4063940.363N and from 413356-413366E. For simplicity of recording, these measurements were shortened to 39.36-40.36N and 56-66E. Unit designations were further simplified to whole meters.

In the final week of the project, crew members recorded elevation data with the total station in order to produce topographic maps of the immediate area of the mound (Figures 2, 3).

Excavation of each unit began with an arbitrary 5-cm deep Level 0-surface, in order to remove surface litter and loose soils. Further excavation proceeded in arbitrary levels of 10 cm depth, stepping down the sloping surface in order to achieve horizontal floors. This method provides deeper profiles at the upper (east, in this case) end of the unit, in order to prospect for changes in stratigraphy in an accretional mound. As the project continued and in the absence of visible stratigraphy, some deeper excavation levels increased in thickness to 15 cm, and the final level followed the depth of the subsoil regardless of the thickness of the excavation level.

Units were excavated by trowel and by shovel-shaving. All soils were sifted through hardware cloth of ¼" mesh. Large or diagnostic artifacts were mapped in situ and bagged.
individually. All non-perishable materials except large (fist-sized or larger) blocks of limestone were placed in bags marked with provenience data and transported to the MSUAL for laboratory processing. Each level floor and each profile was cleaned by trowel, mapped and recorded by digital photo. Spatial data were recorded both by hand (tape measure for horizontal control and surveyor’s level for elevations) and by total station. Standard records included a daily log, elevation record, square sheets, profile forms, a photo log, and a daily bag inventory. All records are on file at the MSUAL in hard copy and digital format, and copies will be deposited with the LBL Heritage Program in digital format.

Excavations

The crew began with three 1 x 2 units designated 39-40N56-58E, 39-40N60-62E, and 39-40N64-66E, leaving 2 m gaps in between. The first unit, 39-40N56-58E, lay at the base of the mound and was relatively shallow. On finishing that unit, the crew opened 39-40N62-64E, at first leaving 20 cm balks at each end to maintain separation from the adjacent units. The balks were removed, first the west balk as 39-40N60-62E was completed and then the east balk when 39-40N62-64E was completed, resulting in a 6 m trench from 60-66E (Figure 2).

Finally, the crew began a 1 x 1 on the south edge of the mound, designated 35-36N63-64E (actual coordinates 4063935-4063936N 413363-413364E), in order to extend the sample and to ascertain the consistency of the soil profile with that of the main excavation. Due to time constraints, 35-36N63-64E did not reach subsoil.

Profiles for each unit in the main trench are presented in Figures 4-7, with a composite north profile in Figure 8. Figure 9 presents profiles for 35-36N63-64E.

The primary deposit revealed by the main trench was a dry, homogenous tan soil that resembled loess. Towards the east, there are variations in the soil profile, with some areas including gravel, some large pieces of limestone, and, in 39-40N64-66E, two distinct areas of reddish soil. One area of reddish soil appears nearly coterminous with the root ball of a small tree. The underlying subsoil was slightly more orange in color, with a more compact, clayey texture.

The south unit, 35-36N63-64E, had a more varied soil, with lenses of more orangey soil within the general tan loessy matrix. However, there was no stratigraphic indication of more than a single depositional event. There were no features within the mound fill or at the subsoil, other than extensive rodent disturbance.

Observations

Prehistoric lithics were recovered throughout the excavation. However, no prehistoric ceramics or other materials were recovered. A few bifacial projectile point bases indicate an Archaic period occupation.

However, there were also historic materials in the mound, including barbed wire, a horseshoe, and traces of glass and historic ceramics. Most telling, at least one historic sherd
occurred in the basal excavation level of 39-40N60-62E. The crew also recorded several nearly-horizontal lengths of charred-looking wood which, given the proximity of barbed wire, likely were fence posts.

Field observation indicated that the historic ceramics were whitewares, therefore dating later than 1820. Given the small sizes of the recovered sherds, it is not likely that identification for a more definitive date will be possible, although of course they will be studied closely in the laboratory. The lack of large ceramics or the other detritus of historic domestic life—architecture, kitchen, personal, and activities-group artifacts (sensu South [1977]) in particular—diminishes the likelihood that the historic materials represent a household assemblage.

The author’s provisional interpretation of the 15Tr166 mound is that it was deposited by bulldozer employed to demolish a fencerow. The loessy texture and visual homogeneity of the soils within the mound probably result from the mound fill being made up primarily of displaced plowzone. The prehistoric artifacts represent a sample of the Archaic component of 15Tr166, formerly incorporated into the plowzone, from the immediate area of the mound. Of course, they are no longer in situ, but have the analytical value of an uncontrolled surface collection.

It seems likely that the mound was created during the Tennessee Valley Authority’s campaign to create an ersatz pristine environment from the rural landscape of the Land Between the Rivers. Probably the historic materials are too fragmentary to allow the assignment of so precise a date to the assemblage, but this interpretation fits the known activities of the TVA regime in creating the LBL. Indeed, the mound—and its very similar counterpart a hundred meters or so farther west—is in an odd location for a prehistoric mound. Prehistoric mounds usually are territorial markers, and are placed on ridge crests for visibility. The 15Tr166 mounds are set below the crest of the ridge and on its northwest side, invisible to travelers along the main channel of the river. Possibly this topographic setting may provide a pattern for distinguishing other TVA bulldozer piles from prehistoric mounds within the LBL.

Analysis of the artifacts will follow laboratory processing.

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Figure 1. Area around mouth of Ford’s Bay.
Ford's Bay site, 2007
Excavation plan

Figure 2. Topographic map with locations of excavation units.
Ford's Bay site, 2007

Figure 3. Wireframe representation of 15Tr166 mound.
Figure 4. 39-40N56-58E profiles.
Figure 5. 39-40N60-62E profiles.
Figure 6. 39-40N62-64E profiles.
Figure 7. 39-40N64-66E profiles.
Figure 8. 39-40N56-66E, composite north profile.
Figure 9. 35-36N64-65E profiles.