Cathlapotle Site Description - Excerpt

Cathlapotle is located on the Carty Unit of Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge, in Clark County, Washington (Section 11, Township 4N, Range 1W). It sits on an abandoned levee on the east side of Lake River approximately 1.3 km upstream from the river’s confluence with the Columbia River. This landform, known as Brush Ridge, runs parallel to Lake River on one side and Long Meadow on the other. Brush Ridge is actually comprised of three parallel ridges with swales between. The site is located on the easternmost ridge, adjacent to Long Meadow. We call this Site Ridge. The site covers an area of 17,500 sq. meters (ca. 4 acres, 250 meters long and 70 meters wide.)

Situated on the Columbia River floodplain in the Wapato Valley bottomlands, the site surface ranges from as low as 4.4 meters ASL to upwards of 7.4 meters ASL. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimates that prior to modern dam construction, the average annual flood crest would have been 16 feet (4.9meters) ASL. If this estimate is accurate, then much of the Wapato Valley, but not Cathlapotle, would have been subject to annual flooding (Hamilton 1993). The Wapato Valley floodplain averages 3.3 meters ASL. Consequently, the surrounding area of the site was an is frequently flooded (Abramowitz 1980). The flooding of February 1996 provided us with a “living geology” experiment in flooding at Cathlapotle. This “100-year flood” covered the site with seven to nine feet of water. The surface of the site was little affected beyond the deposition of less then 2-3 centimeters of alluvium, and so minor erosion. The flood caused a large number of trees to fall however. Whether this flood is at all analogous to pre-dam floods is an open question.

The Lewis River, Gee Creek, and Lake River enter the Columbia River in approximately the same place. The confluence of the four waterways creates a dynamic fluvial context in the site vicinity. For example, based on their comparison of maps from the 1853 survey to current USGS maps, Parchman and Hickey have determined that Fowler Point, downstream from the site, has been eroding. They also note that the Lewis River channel appears to be moving north relative to the Cathlapotle Site (Parchman and Hickey 1993). Additionally, Lake River appears to be migrating westward, away from the site.

The Columbia River floodplain is characterized by a mosaic of microenvironments created by a variety of alluvial topographic features. The upland zone, as defined here, is the Wapato Valley slope, which intersects the floodplain 1.8 km to the east. The gentle valley slope has a westward exposure. It is characterized by gently rolling hiss and plains that are covered with open farmland and intermixed with stands of conifers and deciduous trees.
On the Columbia River floodplain, between the valley slope and Site Ridge, lies a series of elevated landforms consisting of generally north-south levees, and an area of relatively high basalt outcrops. The elevated landforms are dense with oak and brush and are well drained. The basalt outcrops are concentrated in an area to the east and northeast of the site some as near as 100 meters. These basalt outcrops are the highest landforms in the area. The highest of these is 27 m ASL in what is called the Middle Lands just north of Gee Creek. Most of the outcrops near the site and south of Gee Creek are no higher than 9 m ASL.

Interspersed between the elevated landforms (levees and outcrops) are low lying meadows, wetlands and lakes. One large set of major wetlands are located between the basalt outcrops. Other wetlands are found to the south and southeast in broader, grassy lowlands between floodplain levees. Carty Lake is one of the largest, located 2.3 km south of the site. Farther south are Campbell Lake and Vancouver Lake.

Bachelor Island, just across Lake River, is also comprised of alluvial features but has no basalt outcrops. The island is characterized by a series of levees interspersed with long lakes, wetlands, and low meadows.

The Brush Ridge landform has been disturbed by Euro-American homesteading, logging, and the quarrying of basalt from a nearby deposit (Hamilton 1993). We would not be surprised to find the logging of the Brush Ridge landform represented in the archaeological record. The site has also been subject to artifact collection by James Carty and possible others. The 1993 excavation crew found a 1/4” mesh screen near Auger 93-16.

Given the limited nature of development on the Carty unit, it may be that the immediate vicinity of the site has much the same appearance today as it did in 1806. Currently, the Brush Ridge landform is covered by a mature stand of black cottonwood (Populus trichocarpa), and a dense understory of willow (Salix spp.), blackberry (Rubus spp.), elderberry (Sambucus sp.), and stinging nettle (Urtica dioica). Rodents are present and disrupt the archaeological context, and mosquitoes are regarded as disruptive by field workers. Given that most travelers could see Cathlapotle as they passed by on the Columbia, it is unlikely that the site itself was heavily forested at the time of occupation.

The valley and the surrounding foothills possessed high habitat diversity at the time of contact. The riparian forest which was noted in the vicinity of the village by Clark (Moulton, 1990) would probably have consisted of black cottonwood (Populus trichocarpa), willow (Salix sp.), Oregon ash (Fraxinus latifolia), and a tangled understory (Hamilton 1990). In addition, Long Meadow, adjacent to the site, is thought to be a naturally occurring clearing and was probably low grass-land habitat. However, as Hamilton (1990) notes, Euro-American alteration of such areas throughout the Wapato valley makes their precontact composition conjectural.

The reported campsite of the Lewis and Clark expedition (probably around 45CL4), upstream from the village site in a grassy low-lying area, was located near a pond (probably Carty Lake) from which the natives harvested wapato (Moulton 1990). In addition to these areas, the occupants of the village would have had access to nearby prairies, oak arbors, coniferous forests, and the resources of streams such as Gee Creek, and the Lewis, Lake, and Columbia Rivers (Abramowitz 1980).
Native inhabitants of the village utilized a variety of land, water, and airborne fauna. Abramowitz identified mammals including Rodentia and Lagomorphia, as well as blacktail deer (*Odocoileus hemionus columbianus*), white tail deer (*Odocoileus virginianus leucurus*), and elk (*Cervus canadensis*). Predators and scavengers included black bear (*Euarctos americanus*), red fox (*Vulpes fulva*), gray fox (*Urocyon cinereoargentus*), coyote (*Canis latrans*), wolf (*Canis lupus*), and mountain lion (*Felis concolor*). Anadromous fish were plentiful in the region, particularly chinook salmon (*Oncorhynchus tshawytscha*). White sturgeon (*Acipenser transmisotanus*), longfin smelt (*Spirinchus thaleichthys*), and eulachon (*Thaleichthys pacificus*) were also locally available (Abramowitz 1980). Both Lewis and Clark mention the presence of sea otter (*Enhydra lutris*) pelts at the village (Moulton, 1990).

**Excerpt of the Cathlapotle Site Description taken from:**


**Works Cited:**


