

CHAPTER 3

PREHISTORIC BACKGROUND

Although a handful of prehistoric artifacts were recovered from historic contexts in the archaeological excavations (see below, Appendix C), there is no record in the files of the New Jersey State Museum or the Office of New Jersey Heritage of prehistoric cultural materials being found within the Dunhams Block. A cursory inspection of standard published sources also failed to reveal any reference to prehistoric finds in the immediate project vicinity. This absence of prehistoric material is not surprising considering that the block had already reached an advanced stage of urban development before any serious or systematic attempts were made to record the locations of prehistoric sites in New Jersey.

Prior to August, 1988 the nearest officially documented prehistoric site to the Dunhams Block was the Late Woodland/Contact period settlement [28-Me-12] reportedly located about 1,000 feet to the south, close to the mouth of Assunpink Creek. This village site was still being occupied in the late 17th century and appears to have been located between South Warren and South Broad Streets on the south bank of Assunpink Creek. Cultural materials were collected from this site by Charles Rau earlier in this century (Skinner and Schrabisch 1913; Cross 1941; New Jersey State Museum site maps and files; Office of New Jersey Heritage site maps and files).

In addition to this locus adjacent to Assunpink Creek, the State House vicinity had also for some time been considered a likely location for aboriginal activity as this area lies astride a prominent bluff overlooking the Delaware Valley close to the point where Petty's Run and Assunpink Creek flow into the main river. This location would have been environmentally attractive to Native Americans as it offered excellent views of the valley and was close to the floodplain fringe where plant and game resources would have been abundant. The head of tide and fall line also occur in this section of the valley making this a potentially rich locale for fishing in the prehistoric period. Outcropping bedrock in the river bottom also facilitated fording of the Delaware at this point, another reason why one might anticipate evidence of prehistoric activity here.

It was therefore little surprise that in the summer of 1988 two separate archaeological investigations in the New Jersey State House/Old Barracks area produced evidence of prehistoric activity. Archaeological explorations conducted in late August, 1988 by Historic Sites Research, in connection with the proposed installation of chilled water lines in the park between the Old Barracks and the State House, encountered deeply buried "historic surfaces" in five out of 12 trenches excavated on both sides of Petty's Run. These deposits typically yielded "prehistoric artifacts (lithic flakes and sometimes aboriginal ceramic sherds) mixed with a few historic artifacts." One presumes that the density of historic materials declines with increasing depth and that there is a reasonable likelihood of undisturbed prehistoric deposits surviving at the base of the archaeological stratigraphic sequence (Historic Sites Research 1988).

Virtually simultaneously, Hunter Research Associates, conducting a preliminary archaeological study within the parade ground of the Old Barracks, found abundant and largely undisturbed evidence of prehistoric activity on the opposite (east) side of Petty's Run. Sealed beneath the earliest historic deposits associated with the Barracks are soils which have produced substantial quantities of Late Woodland and Contact period artifacts, as well as earlier Woodland and Archaic period materials (Hunter Research Associates 1989b).

In general terms, these prehistoric finds in Trenton's downtown can be seen as part of a wider pattern of intensive prehistoric activity all along the bluff line that runs through the Greater Trenton area. In 1981-82, for instance, archaeological studies by Louis Berger & Associates, Inc. (as yet unreported) along the route of proposed improvements to N.J. Route 29 between Ferry Street and Cass Street produced further evidence of a major Woodland period occupation around the Delaware River/Assunpink Creek confluence. This site is possibly an extension of site 28-Me-12 noted in the State Museum files. In addition, sporadic finds of prehistoric artifacts (again, for the most part, unreported) have occurred elsewhere along the bluff line in nearby Lambertton and even in the front yard of the New Jersey State Museum and Library.

The major focus of this prehistoric activity is the well-known Abbott Farm National Landmark, a complex of prehistoric sites southeast of the city which probably spans the full range of Native American occupation in the Mid-Atlantic region (Cross 1956; Stewart *et al.* 1986). However, the recent discoveries closer to the confluence of the Delaware River and Assunpink Creek suggest that the river front in downtown Trenton may have been an equally important focus of aboriginal activity, especially in the Woodland period. The prehistoric archaeological potential

of this area has perhaps been underestimated in the past because of the masking effects of Trenton's urban growth. While urban development has undoubtedly compromised the integrity of much of the prehistoric archaeology in this area, significant deposits do still survive in pockets within the downtown.

So far as the Dunhams Block itself is concerned, survival of prehistoric archaeological deposits in 1987 was considered very unlikely because of the scale and intensity of historic period land use within the block. The prehistoric archaeological potential of the block is likely to have been fairly high earlier in the historic period, although the fact that the block is located a few hundred feet back from the bluff edge may have led to a reduced intensity of aboriginal usage.