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Beaver Valley Cave, Delaware (7NC-B-002): A Review of Published Records

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BEAVER VALLEY CAVE, DELAWARE (7NC-B-0002): A REVIEW OF PUBLISHED RECORDS

Marshall Joseph Becker
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ABSTRACT

The Beaver Valley Cave (7NC-B-0002) is the only cave known in the present state of Delaware. It has attracted minimal attention from archaeologists since being probed by amateurs in 1948. This paper brings together the limited information regarding this site that has been generated over the past 70 years. What follows is primarily based on direct oral histories captured during the years of early work at the site. Some erroneous conclusions regarding this context, not evidence based, are clarified. In addition, this report presents three photographs relating to early exploration and brings together what little data has been generated about the site both archaeologically and geologically.

INTRODUCTION

About 1988 or 1989, Clinton Alfred (Wes) Weslager (1909–1994) presented the author with a small series of 2 x 2-inch slides, among which were three relating to the Montgomery Site in Chester County, Pennsylvania (36CH60). This site had been examined by Weslager and other individuals around 1952 (Becker 2019). The location of that site went unrecorded, but vague data from their diggings at site 36CH60 appeared in Weslager's 1953 book, *Red Men on the Brandywine*. Included with the Weslager slides given to me were a few views of sites along the Brandywine River Valley and three photographic prints that bear inscriptions attesting to their relationship to a site then called the Beaver Valley Cave, or rock shelter. Other names for that location include "Wolf Rock Cave."

BEAVER VALLEY CAVE, DELAWARE (7NC-B-0002)

The information presented here was gathered in an attempt to unite the three photographs in my hands with any archaeological records or artifacts from this site. In October 2020, I searched online for records and found the usual pastiche of "information" that constitutes Wikipedia and other entries on the web. There I discovered an undated photograph of the site's exterior taken during the warm season, perhaps during the excavations of July and August 1948 (Brooks 1949:23). This entry also states that the cave is 56 feet deep.

The year after Weslager and others investigated this site, Seal T. Brooks (1949) published a brief article about those efforts in the *Bulletin of the Archaeological Society of Delaware* (ASD), then being edited by Weslager. Brooks specifically states that those

members of the Society “who participated in the work were: A. Crozier, C. A. Weslager, H. Layman, John and Stanley Swietochoski, Elwood Wilkins and son, E. Carpenter, H. Lang, myself, and several students from the University of Pennsylvania” (Brooks:1949:24, n.2). This group of 13 or more may not all have been present at the excavation during the summer of 1948, as Brooks indicates. Some may have participated by cleaning and recording artifacts. The Brooks publication suggests that the site was visited during February 1947, but not tested until the summer of 1948 “by an excavating committee of the Archaeological Society of Delaware” (Brooks 1949:22). Ed Otter (personal communication, October 2020) points out that Brooks served as President of the ASD at one time. Brooks is mentioned in several local newspaper articles, attesting to his public outreach and his public relations work on behalf of the ASD.

Brooks’s other field activities also are indicated by a note in Weslager (1953:112) listing those digging in 1952 at a location now identified as the Montgomery Site (36CH60) (Becker 2015, 2017). Included are “L. T. Alexander, Seal T. Brooks, Theodore Dutt, [and] Irwin J. Kappes” (Weslager 1953:112, note). Weslager (1953:108) also reports that he “made several field trips with” the well-known Harry Wilson of West Chester boro, whose detailed record book is now at West Chester University. Weslager (1953:115) also offers a list of major collectors of artifacts in the Philadelphia area, and in his footnote 7 includes a reference to the almost unknown Brooks (1949) publication.

Weslager reports that the group at the Beaver Creek site in 1948 only excavated “at the mouth of this cave.” This seems to be where they recovered the artifacts illustrated in his book (Weslager 1953:xxii, 109), but this is not certain. Although the specific excavation area was said to have been selected “for reasons of safety, at the request of the owners” (Brooks 1949:24, n.10), the actual location or locations of any probes and their dimensions are never specified. Of some interest is Brooks’s (1949:22) statement that the mouth of the cave faces west, while the Speece map, the only plan made (Figure 1), indicates that the opening faces the northeast. I have been unable to trace several rare newsletter references to this cave, but they may be available in the files of the National Speleological Society based in Huntsville, Alabama.

Despite lacking permission to excavate within the cave, Brooks states that the floor of the shelter was covered by “an uneven layer of dark humus extending to a maximum depth of ten inches.” Beneath this they found “a yellow clay whose depth could not be determined...”. Large boulders impeded further work by hand tools. From this report it remains unclear if the “five specimens of primitive stone industry, and considerable numbers of cracked pebbles, chips, and flakes” were found within or just outside the entry of the cave. Two of the five illustrated stone tools are said to be of argillite and “the other three being more like shale.” Three clay pot sherds also were found. Supposedly bone fragments that were recovered then were being analyzed at the Smithsonian, although no other mention of them is known. This statement is not quite replicated in the caption for Weslager’s lower photograph. It reads as follows: “Specimens recovered at Beaver Valley cave included arrowheads, stone chips, and fragments of Indian pottery. Many years ago, a portion of an Indian clay pipe is said to have been found here.” (Weslager 1953:xxii, lower caption)

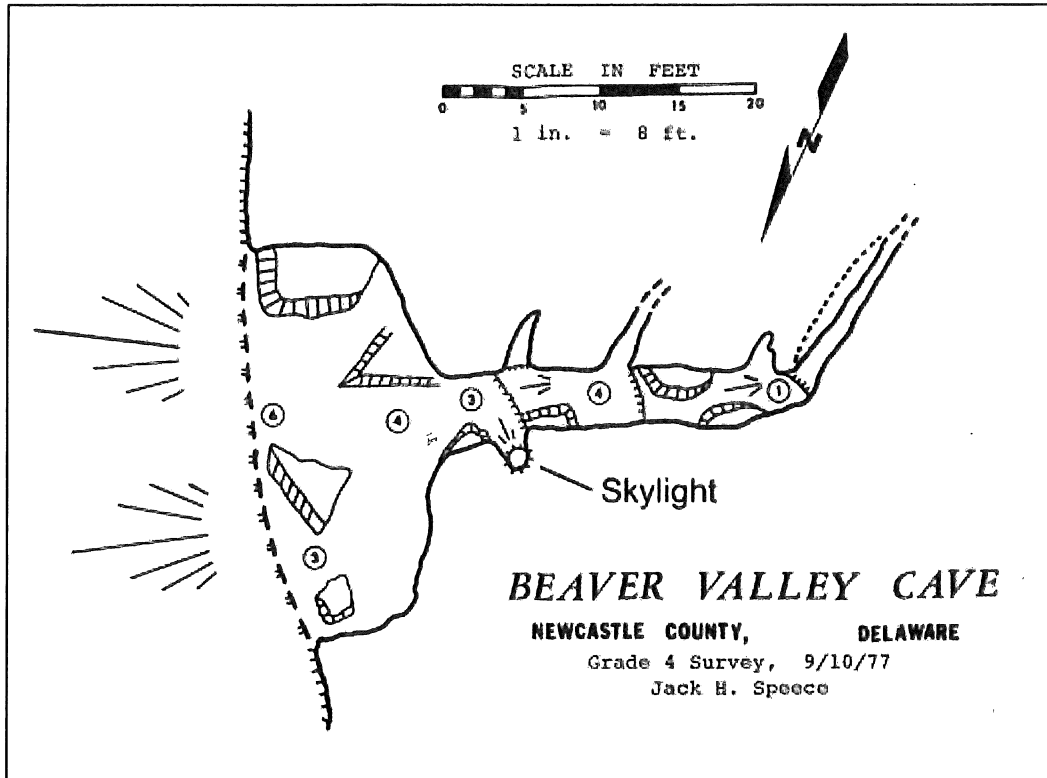


Figure 1: Plan of the Cave as Produced by Jack Speece (1977).

The five lithic pieces that were recovered, popularly termed “arrow heads” by Weslager, all appear to date from before the Late Woodland period. The presence “of an Indian clay pipe” fragment also suggests a date for this assemblage before 1600 CE (Becker In Press). This temporal distribution of these artifacts is in sharp contrast to lithics from within Pennsylvania rock shelters and caves. Reports suggest that generally these Pennsylvania examples appear to have been used primarily during the Late Woodland through Contact period (Becker 2011). Weslager’s photograph at the top of his page xxii shows the same two men seen in Figure 2, both standing in front of the cave. What has become of these artifacts remains unknown. The stone forming the Beaver Creek shelter is said by Jackson (1958) to be “entirely in a schist.” Speece (1977) also identifies the rock as being in the Wissahickon Schist formation (Ward 1959). Speece (1977) provides a detailed description of the geology, but cites Forney as reporting in even greater detail on this highly metamorphosed hornblende schist, not mica schist.

While the Beaver Valley cave is the only one known in Delaware, several rock shelters are known in the state. A listing of these sites should be easy to compile from present state archaeological site records. The Brooks report of 1949 makes note of a rock shelter near Claymont in Delaware that had been excavated in 1866 (Cresson 1889), and also identifies additional rock shelters sometimes called “Indian caves” in northern Delaware. No true “caves” are in this sample. Brooks (1949:23) also notes that in 1880s the Beaver Run was used to power mills that formed the basis for the growing

community in Chandler's Hollow, now almost entirely forgotten. Brooks (1949:24, n.8) also collected folktales relating to the Beaver Valley cave.

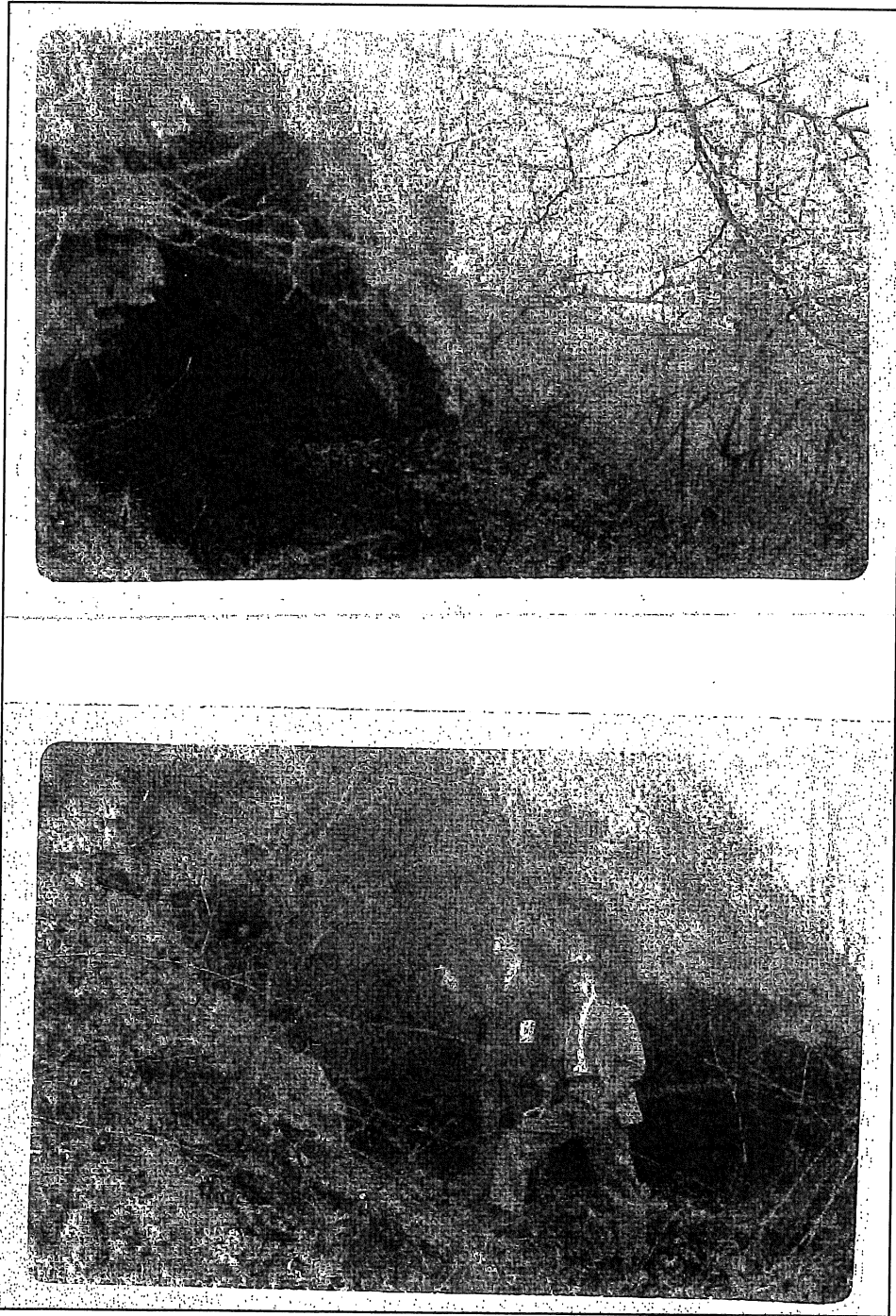


Figure 2: Text on reverse reads: "Feb 1947" and "Beaver Valley Cave 1947" (Weslager 1958:xxii). The photograph, measuring 3 1/8 by 2 inches) reveals nearly vertical bedding of a rock formation of perhaps 20 feet in height. Bottom: Text on reverse repeats above but there is also a stamped number 01280. The photograph reveals two men in coats and ties, both with period fedoras, standing at the entry to the shelter. The gentleman in front may be Frank G. Speck, while C. A. Weslager stands to his right and slightly behind him.

Brooks (1949) continues to summarize briefly other archaeological excavations in the area—sites where the materials found might relate to those few archaeological finds from 7NC-B-0002. Brooks mentions that Henry Mercer's (1897) work was a more sophisticated study of sites in this region than provided by Cresson. Brooks (1949:24, n. 6) directs readers to a description of the comparative "material from [a] shelter" near Claymont, as listed in the "Museum Inventories of Delaware Artifacts" ASD Paper Number 4 (Brooks's date of December 15, 1941 has not been verified). The more relevant papers in this collection relating to Cresson's work near Claymont include two by Weslager (nd A:5-6, nd B).

There followed two brief published mentions of the Beaver Valley site, including one derived from a presentation at the October 1958 meetings of the National Speleological Society (Jackson 1958), and another by Jerry Forney (1963, as cited in Speece 1977). Jackson (1958) offered yet another photograph of a man wearing a hat and standing in the entrance. His interest, as a "local resident," seems to have included placing the cave in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) on September 1, 1978 (NRHP 78000910), 20 years following his presentation. Jackson's listing of the site came a year after a paper was presented on the subject by Jack H. Speece (1977). Speece, who focused on the geology of this location, makes minimal mention of the archaeological record, which has remained minimal. He records the entry as being 24 feet wide and 5 feet high up to about 16 feet 5 inches from the opening, where the roof appears to drop considerably. The constricted crawlway is noted as 4 feet in diameter, "sloping 41° upward at a direction of 247°." The total depth of the cave is given as 53 feet. An edited version of Speece's 1977 paper appears on the Commander Cody Caving Club website (opened October 17, 2020), revealing details of an otherwise undocumented history of exploration and clarifying the interpretation of the many photographs available. Speece's important map (plan) of the cave appears elsewhere (see Figure 1).

In 2017 the Bill Beaver Project (<http://thebillbeaverproject.com>) uploaded four excellent color photographs online. Ken Mammarella's published newspaper piece on August 24, 2018, includes two color photographs of the cave, one of which was taken in the winter from within the cave. Another nine color photographs are attached to the online version of this piece, providing important details of the rocky contours of the interior. Mammarella also cites the version of Speece's 1977 paper that appears on the Commander Cody Caving Club web site. Mammarella's piece offers an address for the property (of the owner?), given as 810 Beaver Valley Road in Wilmington, Delaware. This is in New Castle County, and perhaps only 100 feet from the Pennsylvania border. Apparently the most significant aspect of this site is that a plaster replica of the interior was used in the Hollywood film *Dead Poets Society* (1989) starring Robin Williams.

The three photographs given to Becker feature Weslager's presence at the site. In one of these photographs, Weslager is accompanied by a person whom I believe to be Frank G. Speck of the University of Pennsylvania (see Figure 2, bottom). The autograph of L. T. Alexander appears on the reverse of a large print (Figure 3). Alexander most likely also was the author of the two prints seen in Figure 2. Alexander's photographs appear in many of Weslager's early publications (e.g., 1943). Alexander's own archaeological

research (e.g., 1984) is far more precise and valuable than Weslager's journalistic accounts of the various (and varying) populations of Native American groups in the Middle Atlantic region (Becker 2018). A trace of the relationship between Alexander and Weslager might reveal why Alexander published in 1984 the record of his detailed excavations and careful study of the artifacts associated with the Buck Site rubbish pit in the Quaker Neck area of Kent County, Maryland, in the *New York State Bulletin*. Alexander's outstanding drawings and illustrations of the clay smoking pipes as well as the pottery at the Buck Site reflect his interests, and tie him to the consummate scholar H. Geiger Omwake. Omwake is a public school teacher who had called together the first meeting of the of ASD in Dover, Delaware on February 24, 1933. Omwake went on to become perhaps the first world authority on kaolin pipes, objects so important to the dating of many sites, both Native and colonial, in the northeast. For full disclosure, I had the pleasure of briefly working with Omwake, from whom I learned a great deal about much more than just scholarly demeanor (Omwake and Becker 1965).



Figure 3: An 8 by 10 inch glossy photograph signed on the reverse by L. T. Alexander and labeled "C. A. Weslager at Indian Rock Shelter on Brandywine Beaver Valley" (Photo in the Collection of the Author). Blue pencil cropping directions on the rear suggest that this photograph had been used by Weslager in a publication, but such use has not been verified. The photograph reveals the large face of a boulder that appears to be the main sheltering stone within which the cave is located. To the left is Weslager holding a spade and wearing a fedora and a light (tan?) -colored windbreaker. There appears to be some spring foliage in this view, suggesting that Weslager had returned to the site (in 1948?) after the previous photographs had been taken, and he was prepared to dig.

In a search for a more appropriate home for these photographs than my massive archaeological files and other reports largely unrelated to Delaware, I contacted a number of professional archaeologists in and around the state to see what might be known about the site and any materials found there. Paul A. Nasca (Curator of Archaeology, State of Delaware) provided the site number and the official name assigned to it: the Beaver Valley Rock shelter, 7NC-B-0002. He notes that there are filed with the Site Registration form “five color slides that appear to have been taken in the early-mid 1980s.” (Nasca, personal communication, October 2020) Nasca believes that any artifacts that are referred to in a 1958 paper probably went “home with the excavators” (Nasca, personal communication, October 2020). This was the norm for that period. Those amateurs who were surface collecting as well as digging at known sites commonly took their finds home, often distributing them as gifts to relatives and friends (Becker 2019). The loss of data, in the form of mapping and any artifacts, is a problem exactly opposite that of the present extreme problem of curation, involving how to store collections that continue to multiply—to a large extent out of control. This problem was clearly pointed out some years ago by Jerald Milanich (2005), who spoke from his position as a museum director in Florida. I had long recognized this problem in Europe, especially in the areas of ancient Greek and Roman activities where a single museum might have 10 times the number of Attic red figured vases (530–320 BCE) as exist in all the North American museums combined (cf. Becker 1990)

Professor Jay Custer (University of Delaware) has located no record of any materials from 7NC-B-0002 among the collections curated by the University of Delaware Center for Archaeological Research (Custer, personal communication, October 2020). Keith Doms recalls that Professor Custer also had searched the records at the Island Field archaeological station (site 7KF17) in the early 1980s, but found no information relative to the Beaver Creek Cave. The five color slides noted by Paul Nasca may have been taken and filed by Scott Watson and Jay Hodney. Keith Doms, in a personal communication (October 2020) states that: “I remember Scott Watson and Jay Hodney investigated the cave briefly in the late 1980s for UDCAR.” Doms believes that they saw only modern litter, and Doms never saw a report. The online reference database “tDAR” (Digital Archaeological Record) has no record of a report. The only “Beaver Creek” mentioned in this national digital repository is Don Clauson’s 1981 entry for a site in Oregon (tDAR id: 120793). The Delaware State Historic Preservation offices have no records relating to this site.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Many caves in the Northeastern region, such as the Dutchess Quarry Caves in southeastern New York (Funk and Steadman 1994), have well-documented archaeological records that contain sites extending before the Archaic period. This is not the case with the tiny Beaver Valley Cave. Despite the Wikipedia entry (accessed October 9, 2020) claiming “ample historical evidence that Delaware Indians used it for shelter,” there is little archaeological support for this claim. Brooks (1949) presents the evidence

of Indian occupation, while Speece refers only to illustrations that appear on page xxii of Weslager's 1953 publication to support his claim for Indian activity at the site.

Weslager's volume (1953:50–83) on the inhabitants of the Brandywine Valley is among the earliest to include documents regarding historic period land sales from this band of Lenape, or from any specific area occupied by the individual bands of this tribe. The formation of the Lenape tribe, and its ecologically specific boundaries, are certainly part of the Late Woodland period (circa 1000 CE–1750 AD) evolution of the Northeastern tribes that were found by Europeans after 1500. Weslager's inability to recognize or understand the Lenape people as hunters and gatherers, as revealed in an error-filled paper by Dunlap and Weslager (1960), colored all his interpretations of their history. He, and others of that era, failed to recognize the sequential rather than contemporaneous occupation of the many fishing stations used by the Lenape over the years. This erroneous view of Lenape economics led Weslager and many archaeologists to construct a distorted history for these people, a history in keeping with a mythology that had developed by the middle of the 1800s and prevailed in the 1940s and 1950s (Becker 2014). No historical document or record relating to Native cave use in this region has been located (Becker 2011).

This review of the published record relating to the Beaver Valley Cave reveals that far more is known regarding the geology of this site than of the very limited archaeological record. Even the exact location of the 1948 digging of this site remains unknown. Whether the persons involved excavated just outside the cave, perhaps by the rock face seen in Figure 2, or actually within the area of the opening remains unclear. The artifacts that were recovered suggest Native activity at or around this site, all prior to the Late Woodland period. Thus there is no evidence of what would be Lenape material culture being recovered. Modern excavation techniques might reveal a more complete record of a history of utilization of this cave at any point in the 12,000 or more years of Native American activities in the general region that surrounds this site.

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