

OHIO

ARCHAEOLOGIST

VOLUME 75 NO. 2 SPRING 2025

PUBLISHED BY THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF OHIO



ELYRIA'S CASCADE PARK

by

Col. Matthew W. Nahorn
New Indian Ridge Museum
Amherst, OH.

INTRODUCTION

Water resources, topography, and their associated geology are the main factors that prehistoric peoples used in determining the locations of hunting spots and campgrounds. Later, early settlers from the New England area also saw those same opportunities and resources as useful and important to their own settlement locations and ultimately the creation of early towns.

Today, the area comprising Cascade Park, in Elyria, Ohio, is one such example. The local geology and water resources have largely contributed to the reason this area has been found useful for thousands of years. Once a spot chosen for its factors necessary to sustain human lifestyles, today Cascade Park remains a naturally beautiful spot within the county seat of Lorain County, Ohio.

GEOLOGY

The natural features of the Black River environs were used to the benefit of ancient American Indians and early New England pioneers, alike. Col. Raymond C. Vietzen (1907-1995) who did archaeological field work and operated the Indian Ridge Museum in Elyria, published seventeen books, one in which he noted, "...the natural accommodations of this site along with the location would make it a wonderland for a primitive people." Some of their ancient paths are still in use today, in the Park (Fig. 12). In order to fully understand why this location was useful to prehistoric and early historic peoples, it is necessary to review the area's geology.

Located in the Oberlin Quadrangle of the United States Geological Survey, the East (Fig. 7) and West Branches (Fig. 4-6) of the Black River converge in what is now downtown Elyria, Ohio (Fig. 1). The Black River mainstem then flows generally northward, and takes a sharp westward turn, just before flowing into Lake Erie, at its mouth located in Lorain, Ohio. Dr. Charles Herdendorf, Ohio State University Professor Emeritus (Geology) has stated that the Black River Valley is "a product of post-glacial erosion."

The stream channels of watersheds in this area, just south of Lake Erie, are generally known as consequent streams, as they are a consequence of their surrounding topography. The surrounding topography is generally a consequence of the last Ice Age, its peak being reached nearly 15,000 years or so ago. Once the giant, mile-high glaciers began to melt back, temporary melt-water lakes formed at certain intervals, creating beach ridges. These sandy ridges are well-drained and ideal for use as travel-ways. Much of this area, immediately north of State Route 113, had been under water until about 4,000 years ago when the current landscape became visible. As the outlet at Niagara Falls opened completely, and after some fluctuations, the lake level that we know as present-day Lake Erie, was eventually able to form.

In Elyria, the East and West Branches of the Black River flow over the largely erosion-resistant Berea Sandstone Formation bedrock. Let us become acquainted with the manner in which this bedrock was formed: the sandstone dates from a time when the land we now know as Ohio was just south of the Equator and covered by a warm, shallow ocean – about 350 million years ago, during Paleozoic Era. During the late Devonian geologic period of the Paleozoic era, sediments from mountain-building events farther east were being deposited at the bottom of this ocean. Those sediments were a result of the collision of the African continent with the North American continent. Rocks were pushed up, creating the Appalachian Mountains, thus creating large amounts of sediments, which

washed off of this newly created landscape. After millions of years and great amounts of heat and pressure, the sandstones and shales we see today, were thus created on that ancient ocean floor.

As seen within Cascade Park, each river branch has its own falls, some 40 feet in height. The two watercourses unite in a single mainstem just north of the falls. The basically constant flow of water continuously exposes and very slowly erodes that sandstone, as the falls gradually move southward. Herdendorf notes that this "Berea Sandstone is the most erosion-resistant bedrock formation exposed in north central Ohio." As a result of this characteristic, it can remain as a "cap rock," capping off a waterfall. We see this cap rock feature above the West Falls at Cascade Park. Under the West Falls and just to the east, is a grotto historically referred to as the Big Cave. This feature is in fact a "plunge pool" structure, being scooped out by the erosional forces of falling water from above. The rock opening here is approximately 120 feet wide and 90 feet deep. It ranges from 4 to 20 feet in height.

PREHISTORIC OVERVIEW

As is with most prehistoric sites around northern Ohio, the Cascade Park Site is no different: it is a multi-cultural site used periodically over thousands of years by various groups of prehistoric peoples. Culturally diagnostic artifacts in collections from this site reveal prehistoric cultures that inhabited the area of Cascade Park include Archaic, Woodland, and late prehistoric (Erie). Very little to no evidence of Paleo culture is found in these areas, just south of present-day Lake Erie, as much of the landscape was still under the water of an ancient glacial lake.

It is easy to understand why prehistoric people chose this area for their campsites. The topography and geology afforded these peoples a safe place that is high, well-drained, close to water resources, and provides good visibility (a 'lookout') of the area around them. Protection was key to ensure the safety of their campsites. Being close to water resources provided the opportunity for relatively close sustenance, in the forms of fishing and hunting. The River provided access for travel to other locales, via dugout or birchbark canoes. The "cave" provided shelter, especially in the winter season.

Of course, no written, documented history of these people exists. Therefore, we must learn about them through their tools and camp/village sites. Evidence of these cultures may be seen in the artifacts and tools they left behind. Vietzen mentions that "artifacts and potsherds as well as the debris and kitchen midden" were encountered during work in the 'Big Cave.'

A second shelter exists on the west bank of the River, just north of the West Falls, historically referred to as the Shelter Cave. Col. Charles Whittlesey (1808-1886), a president of the Western Reserve Historical Society, who published more than two hundred books, pamphlets, and articles, investigated this area. In 1851, Col. Whittlesey performed excavations to a depth of 4 feet, where he located charcoal, ashes, and animal bones, along with the human remains of 3 individuals. While studying the skulls, Whittlesey postulated that a large block of sandstone had fallen from the ceiling, "while they were asleep," killing the individuals. Also here, a Mr. D. C. Baldwin, an Elyria scientist, discovered many potsherds of the Erie style, similar to those found elsewhere in the Lake Erie Basin.

Two relatively small surface collections, plus a single celt, found in the Cascade Park area (no further detailed location is known), were a part of the Indian Ridge Museum and are now in the collections of the New Indian Ridge Museum (Amherst, Ohio). One collection was made by Elyria Attorney, Frank Wilford (1873-1944), who served on the Elyria Park Board for 25 years. Born in North Amherst (today, Amherst) and having attended Oberlin College, he was instrumental in the enlargement of the Park. The second collection was gathered by Walter Lersch.

Thirty-two specimens comprise the Wilford collection (Fig. 8). These are mostly small projectile points, representing the Archaic through Woodland periods. The sizes of these pieces range from 1" to 2 3/4" in length. One possibly late Paleo example is evidenced. The materials exhibited range from a few of Flint Ridge to basic, drab chert.

In the Lersch collection, there are 106 specimens (Fig. 9). A much wider variety of types and materials is exhibited. Archaic through Late Prehistoric cultures are represented. Materials range from Flint Ridge to a variety of cherts. We also see one piece of worked quartz and one odd, slate artifact, which looks to be in the shape of a projectile point (Fig. 11). Three pieces of worked shell are included, along with two fish "lucky stones."

Some of the highlights from the collection include: 26 end scrapers of varying chert types. There are 12 drills or perforators, 3 of which are complete. The drills range in length from 1" to 3"; one that is complete has a ground base. Two utilized flake scrapers are also included. Ten hafted scrapers are included; one is nearly completely exhausted. These scrapers range in length from ½" to 1 3/8". It is also interesting to note the presence of a base of a late Archaic lanceolate (with ground base) and 5 examples of bifurcates (2 with serrated sides). Finally, there are 23 late prehistoric (3 look to have serrations) Erie triangular points. These are made from a drab chert material, well-preserved, mostly complete, and a few are quite thin. The shortest is 5/8" long and longest is 1 7/16".

Lastly, a single hardstone celt (Woodland), from the Vietzen collection may also be added to this study. It measures 2 ¾" long and is marked "Cascade Park Elyria O."

As a side note, 16 chert flakes, not associated with the above collections, were found on one of the highest locations of the site. A few of these look to be Flint Ridge material, while the majority are of a drab chert. This evidence of debitage demonstrates that lithic reduction was in fact being practiced here, further bolstering the fact that the locale was being used as a campsite.

Finally, a background exploring the presence of triangular points found here, attributed to the Erie culture: An Iroquoian-speaking group, the Nation of the Cat (Nation du Chat) or Erieehronons - the Eries - were more settled and practiced agriculture. They were the last American Indian peoples to have settled village sites in the area. Studying The Jesuit Relations texts (Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France 1610—1791), we learn that the Eries inhabited the southern shores of Lake Erie:

"Almost due South from the country of the same Neutral Nation, we find a great Lake nearly two hundred leagues in circumference, called Erie; it is formed by the discharge of the fresh-water Sea and throws itself over a waterfall of a dreadful height into a third Lake, named Ontario, which we call Lake Saint Louys, and of which we shall speak farther on.

"This Lake, called Erie, was formerly inhabited on its Southern shores by certain tribes whom we call the Nation of the Cat; they have been compelled to retire far inland to escape their enemies, who are farther to the West. These people of the Cat Nation have a number of stationary villages, for they till the soil, and speak the same language as our Hurons."

The Eries were engaged by the Iroquois, over disputes surrounding control of land used for hunting and trapping. The major attacks commenced in 1654 and lasted for about two years.

After the defeat of the Eries in 1654 by the Iroquois, who were competing for hunting and trapping grounds, the southern shores of Lake Erie were basically devoid of American Indians. When the early settlers came in from the east, there were very few Indians here; they had gone. This area was basically a "pass through" and used for hunting grounds by various historic American Indian groups.

EARLY HISTORY AND PARK FORMATION

The first documented historical reference to the area around Cascade Park is found in Col. James Smith's journal. James Smith had been captured by the Wyandot Indians, and by the mid-1700s, during the time of his capture, he was brought to the Black River. In his journal, he mentions that the Indians referred to the Black River as the "waters of the Canesadooharie." He notes that, "We kept moving up this river until we came to the falls; here we

remained some weeks..." It is believed that they spent the early part of the winter taking up residence in the 'Big Cave.'

In 1817, Heman Ely, the founder of Elyria, Ohio, traveled with a small group from Massachusetts to this area, to settle "Elyria." Ely owned some 12,500 acres, including the area now known as Cascade Park. He recognized the fast-flowing water and associated waterfalls could be used in powering grist and sawmills. Without these two milling operations, a town could not thrive, and it would be impractical for any settlement to be furthered here. (*In 1811, Jacob Shupe founded Amherst, Ohio, just northwest of Elyria. He immediately started a saw, then gristmill, on the banks of the Beaver Creek. Previous to this, the closest mills of such kind were located at the Huron River to the west, or Chagrin Falls – each, a travel distance the duration of 3 days.*)

By 1818, Ely had permanently settled here. With these water resources, it was natural to use this location as basically a town center, and so Elyria grew out from there (Fig. 2). In 1824, Heman Ely constructed the "old Red Mill" on the East Falls. This was a gristmill, with a water-powered wheel that was 36 feet tall. The particular mill was in operation into the 1890s.

The Ely Family donated the nucleus of today's Cascade Park to the City of Elyria in 1894. Further donations by the Ely Family enlarged the Park space. In 2015 the Lorain County Metroparks took control of the entire Park, by way of a long-term lease from the City of Elyria. Cascade Park remains today one of the most unique and beautiful spots of Northern Ohio.

CONCLUSION

From the early days of the first prehistoric Americans to the settlement of Elyria, Ohio, the land that comprises Cascade Park was used because of its geology, topography, and abundant water resources. The Park is not only home to the confluence of the East and West branches of the Black River, but it is also a confluence of nature, human life, and tools to sustain a local population through the use of the area's natural resources.

REFERENCES

Bird, William L.; Ebert, Robert R.

2014 *Images of America Elyria*. Arcadia Publishing, Charleston, South Carolina.

Converse, Robert N.

1998 *Ohio Flint Types*. Archaeological Society of Ohio, Columbus, Ohio.

Herdendorf, Charles E.

2015a *Bicentennial History of Sheffield, Ohio—1815-2015*. Sheffield Village Historical Society and Bicentennial Commission, Sheffield Village, Ohio 440pp.

2015b *Black River Valley – a product of post-glacial erosion*. Bicentennial Bulletin No. 41 Sheffield Bicentennial Commission, Sheffield Village, Ohio.

Jesuit Relations. *Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France 1610—1791*

http://moses.creighton.edu/kripke/jesuitrelations/relations_33.html

Mello, Amarin

2016 *Col. Charles Whittlesey*. <https://chequamegonhistory.com/2016/05/27/colonel-charles-whittlesey/>
(Accessed 1/12/2025)

Redmond, Brian G., Scanlan, Brian L.

2009 *Archaeological Investigations at the Burrell Orchard Site (33Ln15): 2008 Season*. Cleveland Museum of Natural History: Archaeological Research Report, Cleveland, Ohio.

Smith, Col. James

1799 *An Account of the Remarkable Occurrences in the Life and Travels of Col. James Smith During his Captivity with the Indians in the Years 1755, '56, '57, '58, '59...* John Bradford, Lexington, Kentucky.

Tooker, Elisabeth

1991 *An Ethnology of the Huron Indians, 1915-1649*. Syracuse University Press.

United States Department of the Interior Geological Survey

1901 *Ohio (Lorain County) Oberlin Quadrangle*. State of Ohio, Columbus, Ohio.

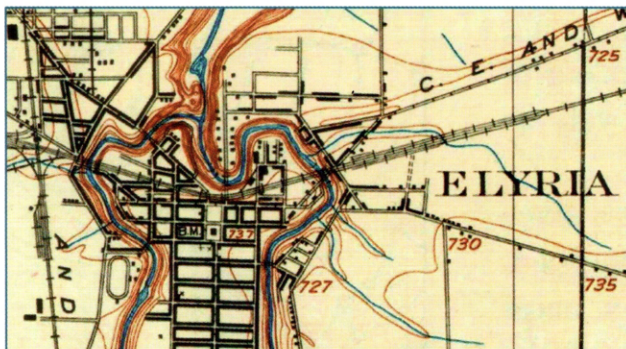
Vietzen, Col. Raymond C.

1945 *The Immortal Eries*. Elyria: Wilmot Printing Company.

1989 *Prehistoric Americans*. White Horse Publishers.

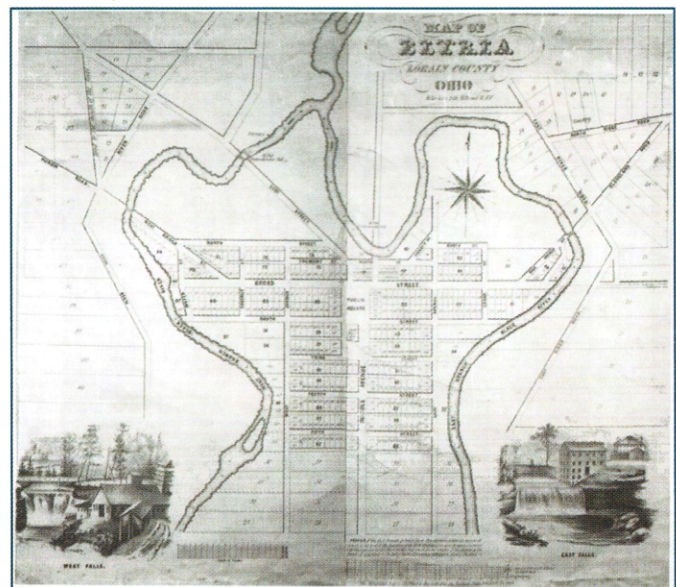
Wilford, Frank

1936 *Cascade Park: Elyria's Beautiful Natureland*. Elyria Park Commission, Elyria, Ohio.



(Nahorn) Figure 1. A detailed view of the 1901 USGS map, showing the confluence of the East and West Branches of the Black River.

(Nahorn) Figure 2. Circa 1838 map of Elyria, Ohio.





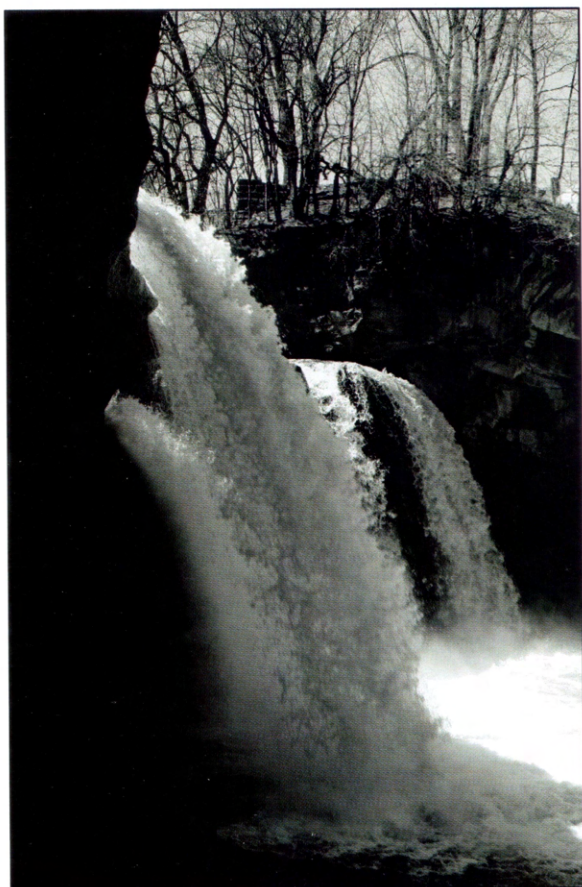
(Nahorn) Figure 3. The author in front of the West Falls (2011).



(Nahorn) Figure 4. The West Falls, showing the plunge pool feature to the left.



(Nahorn) Figure 5. West Falls of the Black River.



(Nahorn). Figure 6. West Falls, side view.



(Nahorn) Figure 8. Lersch artifact collection.



(Nahorn) Figure 7. East Falls of the Black River.



(Nahorn) Figure 9. Wilford artifact collection.



(Nahorn) Figure 10. Three selected artifacts from the Lersch collection.



(Nahorn) Figure 11. Unusual slate point, 3-1/2 inches long, found among the items in the Lersch collection.

(Nahorn) Figure 12. A photograph published by Col. Vietzen, with the caption, in part, "Old Indian Path in Cascade Park. Seneca Indians and Moravians walked here, as did Prehistoric Indians. Graves of Adena people were found on top of the land on right."

