The Meaning of Middens

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Woods area, for instance, were found to be resting on old beach ridges and stream banks that are now completely buried beneath the marsh or swamp.

Archaeologists know that pottery styles varied from one group of Indians to another and changed with the passing of time. By careful examination of the markings and decorations on the broken fragments of pottery, it is possible to estimate the age of a midden. This, in turn, gives a minimum age for the beach ridge below it. By comparing the relative locations and ages of several ridges, it is possible to determine the size and shape of the beach area for various times in the past.

In recent years age determination of organic substances by radiocarbon dating techniques is proving a great help in obtaining more accurate midden datings.

Fragments of wood and charcoal, shells and animal bones found in middens also are used to determine environmental conditions of the past. For example, several of the oldest middens near Lake Pontchartrain contain an abundance of oyster shells although in historic times the lake water has been too fresh for oyster growth; this indicates that the lake once was more saline than at present and probably an extension of the Gulf of Mexico. Geologic evidence supports this theory.

Although these Indians vanished hundreds of years ago and left no written records, their village sites and implements of everyday life are still telling a story.

WHERE THE INDIANS LIVED

Dots indicate sites at which Indian artifacts have been found or camps are known to have existed.