



La Harpe's Post: Tales of French-Wichita Contact on the Eastern Plains

George H. Odell

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This major contribution to contact period studies points to the Lasley Vore site in modern Oklahoma as the most likely first meeting place of Plains Indians and Europeans more than 300 years ago.

In 1718, Jean-Baptiste Bénard, Sieur de la Harpe, departed St. Malo in Brittany for the New World. La Harpe, a member of the French bourgeoisie, arrived at Dauphin Island on the Gulf coast to take up the entrepreneurial concession provided by the director of the French colony, Jean Baptiste LeMoyne de Bienville. La Harpe's charge was to open a trading post on the Red River just above a Caddoan village not far from present-day Texarkana. Following the establishment of this post, La Harpe ventured farther north to extend his trade market into the region occupied by the Wichita Indians. Here he encountered a Tawakoni village with an estimated 6,000 inhabitants, a number that swelled to 7,000 during the ten-day visit.

Despite years of ethnohistoric and archaeological research, no scholar had successfully established where this important meeting took place. Then in 1988, George Odell and his crew surveyed and excavated an area 13 miles south of Tulsa, along the Arkansas River, that revealed undeniable association of Native American habitation refuse with 18th-century European trade goods.

Odell here presents a full account of the presumed location of the Tawakoni village as revealed through the analysis of excavated materials from nine specialist collaborators. In a strikingly well-written narrative report, employing careful study and innovative analysis supported by appendixes containing the excavation data, Odell combines documentary history and archaeological evidence to pinpoint the probable site of the first European contact with North American Plains Indians.

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