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Mulberry Site (38KE12)

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The 1985 USC Archaeological Field School, co-directed by Dr. Chester B. DePratter and Dr. Joan Gero, was conducted at the Mulberry Site (38KE12). Four USC graduate students and ten undergraduate students participated in the field program which ran from June 3 to July 26, 1985.

Research at the Mulberry Site is part of a long term
research project begun by the USC Department of Anthropology in 1979. The Wateree Archaeological Research Project (WARP) has focused on a series of late prehistoric and early historic period mound sites located along a 20-mile long stretch of the Wateree River near Camden, South Carolina. Most WARP research to date has centered on the Mulberry Site, although limited field research was conducted during 1985 at two other mound sites: Adamson (38KE11) and Belmont Neck (38KE6).

Mound sites along the Wateree River relate to the development of a chiefdom level society which occupied the Valley between A.D. 1350 and 1670. Hernando DeSoto, a Spanish explorer accompanied by over 600 Spanish soldiers, visited the chiefdom in the spring of 1540. At that time, the chiefdom, called the "province" of Cofitachequi by DeSoto, was ruled by a female chief. The chieftainness of Cofitachequi controlled a territory that included the entire Wateree/Catawba River Valley from near Columbia, South Carolina, to Asheville, North Carolina. The chiefdom of Cofitachequi was visited by another Spanish explorer, Juan Pardo, in 1566-1568, and by an English adventurer, Henry Woodward, in 1670. Shortly after 1670, the chiefdom collapsed and disappeared from the historical record.

Summer 1985 field school excavations were intended to provide information needed to construct a long term research design for the Mulberry Site. Excavations and surface collections were carried out in several areas of the site, including test excavations in the two platform mounds on the site.

A 1 x 3 meters test pit was excavated on the eastern margin of Mound A. At one time, this mound was at least 30 meters square and 3 to 4 meters high. Today, only a small portion of the mound remains, the rest has been destroyed by erosion caused by the Wateree River. The 1985 test unit penetrated nearly two meters of mound fill and portions of the premound midden. No clear-cut stratigraphic zones were encountered, and the only features recorded were two postholes located just above the premound midden. The upper portion of the mound fill appears to have been mixed, and may represent deposits relating to construction of a 19th century overseer's house atop the mound or backdirt from late 19th century excavations in the center of the mound. Mound construction postdates A.D. 1300.

A 1 x 5 meters trench was excavated in Mound B. Mound B was originally about 30 x 40 meters square and 3 to 4 meters high, but it has been partially destroyed which has reduced its height to approximately two
The 1985 test trench was an extension of another 1 x 5 meters trench excavated in 1982. Both trench segments contained evidence of numerous mound construction stages that had been truncated by repeated plowing. The earliest construction stage appears to have been a platform approximately 1.5 meters high, whereas subsequent constructions stages appear to have been deposits only 20-30 centimeters thick. At least 15 construction stages are represented in our test trenches. Ceramics contained in mound fill indicate that construction of Mound B began around A.D. 1450 and continued on into the 17th century.

A third 1 x 5 meters test unit was excavated 100 meters south of Mound A in an area where A.R. Kelly excavated between 30 and 40 burials in 1952. The 1985 excavations were intended to provide information on the area from which those burials were taken. Our test trench encountered a 1 meter thick layer of recent, sterile alluvium overlying a 15 centimeters thick "midden" zone containing abundant prehistoric ceramics, but few other artifacts. Beneath this "midden" was a pit approximately 1 meter across and nearly 1 meter deep containing the enamel caps from two human teeth. No artifacts were found in association with these teeth, but it is likely they are the remains of a decayed burial. A single posthole was also encountered in the test trench, but it does not appear to have been part of a structure. At present, we do not know why burials were concentrated in this area.

A fourth excavation area was located approximately 250 meters east of Mound A. Surface examination following plowing revealed a concentration of mica fragments over an area approximately 10 meters square. Excavations revealed portions of an Indian house measuring approximately 4 x 6 meters square. The house floor had been badly disturbed by repeated plowing, but a fired clay hearth was found offset near the west wall of the structure. Two concentrations of hand-sized mica sheets were found in former floor deposits, and these appear to represent caches of unmodified raw material, since no piece showed any clear evidence of either cut edges or cut-outs. Although this structure may have been occupied by a mica worker, final identification of the structure's function will have to await analysis of materials recovered during excavations.
Excavation of one of mica concentrations in prehistoric house excavation (John Worth, David Babson).

Excavation of 1 x 5 m trench in Mound B (View to west). Chris Judge, Gina Tuten and Chester DePratter.
1 x 5 meter trench in area near where A.R. Kelly encountered numerous burials (Kimberly Grimes).

1 x 3 meter trench in Mound A (Ruth Wetmore and Beth Beckman).
Prehistoric house excavations (View to northwest).