

This article is protected by copyright, East Tennessee Historical Society. It is available online for study, scholarship, and research use only.

Suggested Citation:

Webb, William S. "The Prehistory of East Tennessee." *The East Tennessee Historical Society's Publications* 8 (1936): 3-8.

OLIVER H. SMITH
PHILIP M. HAMER
GEORGE L. SIOUSSAT

1935

Committee
Committee

SOCIETY

open to anyone interested
; sustaining members
of fifty dollars, which
A copy of the annual
bers of the *Publications*

should be addressed to
son McGhee Library,

as should be addressed
ty, The University of

ality for statements of

THE PREHISTORY OF EAST TENNESSEE*

By WILLIAM S. WEBB

Mr. President, members of the East Tennessee Historical Society, and guests: Your speaker is deeply sensible of the honor which you have done him in extending the invitation to address you on this occasion. So great was his appreciation of this invitation that he was led to an immediate acceptance of it, before his better and more mature judgment could point out the manifest presumption of his act.

Certainly it may be considered the height of presumption for one not a native of Tennessee, with but little formal training in the technique of historical research, and with no adequate knowledge of the recorded history of this state, to appear before this body of native Tennesseans, distinguished students of the history of this region, in an attempt to bring to them a worthwhile message.

It is further to be remembered that by many eminent historians archaeology is hardly as yet regarded as a historical science, and that the conclusions reached as a result of archaeological investigation oftentimes lack general acceptance by the historian. The reason for this attitude of the historian toward archaeological findings in general is not difficult to understand. The student of history organizes his science by hanging all events on a framework of chronology. This framework has been previously determined, is of universal acceptance, and is generally intentionally related by the original actors to the event recorded. To the historian, the date of an event so fixes this event in the chronological framework that the terms "before" and "after" have very definite quantitative meaning.

Unfortunately for the science of archaeology in North America, the terms just used have had no exact quantitative significance until very recent times, because of the absence of an established chronology. Only within the last few decades has the translation of the Maya hieroglyphics reached such a development that archaeology in Middle America has had an adequate chronological system. Very recently wonderful developments in archaeology in the southwestern United States have followed from the application of the new science of dendrochronology.

*An abstract of an address by the author at the annual banquet of The East Tennessee Historical Society at the Hotel Andrew Johnson, Knoxville, October 4, 1935.

Only within the last eighteen months has any successful attempt been made in the southeastern United States to assign actual dates to prehistoric sites. This has come about because of the discovery that the methods of dendrochronology are applicable to this area even though our Southland is not an arid region. As the result of this discovery a chronological framework is being constructed, to which, it is hoped, prehistoric events may be related with as great certainty as any historic event is related to the Gregorian calendar. The members of this Society will be pleased to know that this important advance has been made in East Tennessee and that much of the preliminary work has been actually accomplished in the city of Knoxville. And so it is because prehistoric events in East Tennessee may soon come to be regarded as historic, that your speaker has ventured to discuss a subject of prehistory before a historical society.

Your speaker's interest in the prehistory of East Tennessee began in 1934 when he was asked by the Tennessee Valley Authority to take charge of the clearance of archaeological sites in the Norris Basin. Up to that time no considerable archaeological investigations using modern techniques had ever been undertaken in the region, and practically the entire knowledge of the early occupation of East Tennessee consisted of the reports of travelers and explorers of colonial times who had visited the various Indian settlements. These men came in the pursuit of their own affairs, as traders, soldiers, or agents of church or state. None were trained ethnologists, and few were interested in the Indian beyond their own immediate purposes. Yet it is remarkable how much important ethnological information these early travelers obtained and reported. It is not the purpose of this discussion to review these written documents, or to discuss their merits. Their content and validity are well known to the members of this Society—doubtless much more exactly than to your speaker.

The early writings just referred to show clearly that the great Cherokee Indian nation was dominant in the southern Appalachian region in colonial times, holding sway over an area of approximately 40,000 square miles. During most of the eighteenth century the Cherokee were at war with one or the other of their remote Indian neighbors and often came into conflict with armed forces of neighboring white settlers. Whether victorious or defeated, each treaty of peace usually involved a cession of Cherokee territory; between 1721 and 1835 they made thirty-six treaties or cessions of land.¹ In accordance with the last treaty they were removed to their present home

¹Charles C. Royce, *The Cherokee Nation of Indians* in *Fifth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, 1887), 129.

successful attempt been made to determine actual dates to precede the discovery that the area even though it is hoped, which, it is hoped, as faintly as any historic members of this Society advance has been preliminary work has become to be regarded as a subject of pre-

Tennessee began in 1890 by Authority to take up the Norris Basin. Up to date using modern methods and practically the Tennessee consisted of prehistoric times who had come in the pursuit of church or state. It is interesting to note that the Indian markable how much travelers obtained and reviewed these written documents and validity are as much more exactly

early that the great Southern Appalachian area of approximately the eighteenth century the their remote Indian forces of neighborhood, each treaty of territory; between 1721 and 1765.¹ In accordance with their present home

Annual Report of the

in the state of Oklahoma, leaving only a remnant of their kinsfolk in the Southern mountains.

Because of the importance of the Cherokee in early historic times and of the magnitude of their settlements on the Little Tennessee River, only about fifty miles from Norris Basin, it would be natural to suppose that they made large contributions to the archaeology of the basin. The very opposite, however, seems to have been the case.

The archaeological survey of Norris Basin gave the author opportunity to investigate a total of twenty-four prehistoric sites. Of these, five were caves of which we shall speak presently, and eleven were sites of ancient villages. Near the center of each village site were usually found one or more large earth mounds. Upon investigation these earth mounds were determined to have been made by the collapse of wooden structures which had been covered with earth. Successive occupation at each site had been the rule; and after the collapse of the first structure the earth on its roof became the floor for a second structure. Thus the mounds were formed by successive increments, each representing the erection and final collapse of a large earth-covered wooden structure. These large buildings appeared to be "town houses," or communal buildings, of a public nature, where civil, military, or religious ceremonies were conducted. The successive occupancy of a site by a series of town houses produced a stratification easy to observe and showed a definite chronological order of events. Many of these wooden structures, when they had become antiquated, were partially destroyed by fire, while others may have been dismantled by their builders. In every case, on the site there were to be found molds in the earth floors, revealing the location of the posts used in constructing the building. In eleven sites there were found fifty-four post mold patterns. Of these patterns, every one of which was rectangular, twenty-nine were regarded as dwelling houses, and twenty-five were regarded as town houses. In historic times the earth-covered buildings both of the Cherokee and of the Muskogee were all circular in form, as reported by Timberlake² and by other writers, and as most beautifully revealed by the recent archaeological investigations of Kelly³ at Macon, Georgia. Since every one of the fifty-four post mold patterns found in Norris Basin was rectangular, and because of other evidence, it would seem conclusive that the Cherokee were not responsible for their construction.

Further investigations reveal that these town houses fall into two classes as determined by the type of construction. For simplicity they have been designated as "small log" and "large log" types. It appears

²Samuel Cole Williams (ed.), *The Memoirs of Lieutenant Henry Timberlake, 1756-1765* (Johnson City, 1927), 59.

³A. R. Kelly, unpublished research and explorations still in progress.

that each type of house construction was associated with a series of cultural traits, each group distinct from the other. This would argue the possibility of two different peoples, perhaps living simultaneously, in the same general area, but not necessarily on the same sites. The continued practices of quite dissimilar customs by two peoples, if in close contact, and simultaneously occupying the same region, would definitely suggest the existence of some barrier between them which, while effective in preventing them from acquiring identical traits, was still not of a material kind. Such a barrier to complete unity might have been a difference in language, a difference in religion, or the direct result of different origins.

It would appear, therefore, from the investigations in Norris Basin, that, aside from the occupancy of caves in the region, there were probably two very different people, possibly of different racial stocks, who occupied the basin, perhaps simultaneously, in friendly intercourse, but who remained distinct from each other in cultural traits. Further, it seems impossible to connect either of these vanished peoples with the historic Cherokee. Because of this, and of the further fact that there seems to be no definite historic reference by any of the early writers to any occupancy in this region, it would appear that this occupancy was entirely within the prehistoric. This was further emphasized by the absence of historic material in the excavations.

Within some of the mounds containing post mold patterns of rectangular structures there were found remnants of cedar posts and logs used in the house construction. A definite attempt is being made to date these logs by the science of dendrochronology. It appears that this attempt will be successful. It is a matter of regret that the work has not progressed far enough to be able to announce at this time the actual date of some of these sites. It is hoped that definite announcement can be made in the near future. It is probable, however, from the archaeological data, that this occupancy will be found to extend down to the late prehistoric, and that the conclusion of this occupancy probably marks the actual entrance of the Cherokee into East Tennessee. Some students of Cherokee history have thought that that nation's migration up the Kanawha River from their early home north of the Ohio into the southern Appalachian Mountains may have taken place from six hundred to one thousand years ago. Recent opinion seems to be inclining toward the belief that the Cherokee had been on the Little Tennessee River but a short time—at most a few hundred years—before Fort Loudoun was built and destroyed (1756-1760). In fact, a leading American ethnologist⁴ has recently expressed grave doubt that the

⁴John R. Swanton, of the Bureau of American Ethnology, in a personal communication to the writer.

ed with a series of

This would argue
ing simultaneously,
e same sites. The
two peoples, if in
ame region, would
etween them which,
identical traits, was
mplete unity might
ligion, or the direct

ns in Norris Basin,
there were probably
ial stocks, who oc-
lly intercourse, but
traits. Further, it
ed peoples with the
ther fact that there
the early writers to
this occupancy was
emphasized by the

old patterns of rec-
edar posts and logs
t is being made to
y. It appears that
egret that the work
nce at this time the
t definite announce-
e, however, from the
und to extend down
occupancy probably
t Tennessee. Some
t nation's migration
of the Ohio into the
place from six hun-
seems to be inclining
he Little Tennessee
years—before Fort

In fact, a leading
ave doubt that the
gy, in a personal com-

Cherokee were on the Little Tennessee River at the time of De Soto's visit (1540), as has so often been asserted. The actual dating of occupancy of the Norris Basin—the first dating by dendrochronology in the southeastern United States—will have, therefore, far-reaching effect on the organization of the prehistory of East Tennessee.

Reference has been made to the occupancy of caves in Norris Basin. It is surprising to note how definitely this evidence of occupancy differs from that of the builders of mounds and of town house sites, and how definitely similar it is to the occupancy of rock shelters in eastern Kentucky. There can be little doubt that this phase of the great woodlands culture represents some member of the Algonquin linguistic stock. This great linguistic family had many representative tribes scattered throughout the Mississippi Valley to the north and east. Those occupying the caves of Kentucky and Tennessee were a very homogeneous group and seemingly were at a rather low cultural level. Their inability to build dwellings seems to have forced them to use the caves and rock shelters. They had but little use for agriculture beyond the gathering of food from nature's bounty. They appear never to have been completely beyond the danger of famine, and their occupancy of any particular site seems to have been precarious and transient. That these people, living at a lower level of culture and perhaps at a much less population density than the "town house" builders, antedated the latter in Norris Basin there can be little doubt.

Thus the outstanding facts which seem to be demonstrated by the investigation in Norris Basin may be stated as follows:

(1) The occupancy of caves by a people of a rather low cultural level seems proved. Their connection with one of the historic racial stocks seems definite. The time of this occupancy was wholly prehistoric, and is perhaps the earliest in the region.

(2) There was a later and perhaps simultaneous occupancy by two people each having distinctive cultural traits. They have not yet been certainly identified with any historic stocks, but the time of their occupancy is likely to be definitely ascertained. It probably will be shown to have been post-Columbian and to have preceded immediately the historic period.

(3) The Cherokee seem to have made only an insignificant contribution, if any, to the archaeology of the region.

Having stated what he considers demonstrated, your speaker should perhaps bring this discussion to a close. He is aware that by some it may be accounted idle to speculate, but it is also a fact that truth is sometimes revealed in attempting to verify speculations.

Two of the very important questions of the prehistory of East Tennessee relate to (1) the time of the coming of the Cherokee, and (2) the identity of the peoples preceding them in this region.

Since occupancy of Norris Basin is characterized by rectangular structures, and other cultural traits distinctly different from those of the Cherokee, we may well ask what brought to an end the occupancy of Norris Basin. If it may be assumed that this termination came as the result of the advent of the Cherokee, and if we are finally able to date by dendrochronology the last remains of the rectangular structures in Norris Basin, a close approximation to the date of the entrance of the Cherokee into East Tennessee may be obtained.

In 1673 Colonel Abraham Wood, a Virginia Indian trader, sent James Needham and a white servant, Gabriel Arthur, on a journey of exploration into the mountains to the southwestward.⁵ They visited and reported on a tribe called the Tamahita and, after the death of Needham, Arthur lived for a season with them. This tribe has been identified as Yuchi,⁶ and its early location placed on the westward slope of the mountains, on streams tributary to the Tennessee River.

It is interesting to speculate on the possibility that the builders of the rectangular large log structures in Norris Basin may have been Yuchi. In this connection Arthur mentions another tribe evidently closely associated with the Yuchi. He says: "All ye Wesock children they take are brought up with them as ye Ianesaryes are a mongst ye Turkes."⁷ If the Wesock of Arthur, probably a Siouan tribe, account for this other phase of culture in the Norris Basin, we may have a vague and uncertain suggestion of the identity of the people on the streams tributary to the Tennessee, before the coming of the Cherokee. Thus may we speculate.

Much of the final writing of the prehistory of East Tennessee is yet to be done. This Society and all Tennessee is to be congratulated on the attempt recently begun by the University of Tennessee to continue the study of prehistory in this state. The establishment of a department of archaeology at the University of Tennessee and its occupancy by so able a research worker in prehistory⁸ guarantee the solution of many of the unsolved problems of early times and a great advance in the knowledge of the prehistory of southeastern United States.

⁵Clarence Walworth Alvord and Lee Bidgood, *The First Explorations of the Trans-Allegheny Region by the Virginians, 1650-1674* (Cleveland, 1912), 212.

⁶John R. Swanton, *Early History of the Creek Indians and their Neighbors* [Bureau of American Ethnology, *Bulletin* 73] (Washington, 1922), 188-189.

⁷Alvord and Bidgood, *op. cit.*, 218.

⁸The reference is to Professor T. M. N. Lewis [Ed.].