

# Embracing Archaeology

**The Eastern Band of the Cherokee was once suspicious of archaeology. Now they're using it to learn about their history.**

*By Andrea Cooper*

**Chief Michell Hicks and TRC Environmental Corporation's field director Tasha Benyshek stand next to the remains of an early 18th-century Cherokee winter house.**







*These excavated postholes reveal the pattern of a paired early 18th-century summer house (rectangular, on left) and octagonal winter house.*

he directed a second round of testing and evaluation of the Kituwah town site, which covers almost 300 acres, before leaving to join the Research Laboratories of Archaeology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

Today, Townsend is the tribal historic presentation officer. His area of responsibility includes not only Qualla Boundary in western North Carolina, where the Eastern Band largely lives, but also the portions of North Carolina, Alabama, Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia, Kentucky, Virginia, and West Virginia where Cherokees lived historically.

The tribe is responsible for cultural resource surveys on the Qualla Boundary in advance of construction projects, and is also responsible for reviewing archaeological projects associated with federal undertakings in traditional aboriginal territory. In the last decade, the tribe has designed and overseen many projects, hiring firms such as TRC Environmental Corporation, where Webb is principal archaeologist, to conduct fieldwork and analysis. The Eastern Band maintains strong ties with the Cherokee Nation and the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians, both in Oklahoma, and Townsend shares information with them.

**JUST** north of the town of Cherokee, along the Raven Fork of the Oconaluftee River, Ravensford feels far from the town's casino and touristy shops, and close in spirit to the Oconaluftee Indian Village, a living history museum portraying Cherokee life in the 18th century. What is now North Carolina was the heartland of the Cherokee world in the 1700s, and the Ravensford excavation turned up evidence that the Cherokees, their ancestors, and possibly other groups have lived here as long ago as 8000 B.C.

Archaeological surveying and testing at Ravensford

began in 2001, when the National Park Service owned the land. The tribe acquired it in 2003 with the intent of conducting large-scale excavations before beginning construction of the school. Major field work ran from 2004 to 2006, involving some 40 excavators, and continued with smaller crews until 2008.

The researchers unearthed house patterns, hearths and pits, and other artifacts. They also uncovered quartzite tools and tool making debris dating to roughly 1500 B.C., and pottery with several different stamped designs from Woodland settlements dating from about 1000 B.C. to A.D. 1000. "We found much more than we expected," says TRC's senior archaeologist Tasha Benyshek.

There were more than 15 Cherokee houses at Ravensford that dated from the early to mid 1400s. Three centuries later, the area was home to five small settlements. "We found very well-preserved house remnants, some that date to probably the early 1700s," Webb says. "You can see very clearly in the ground you have the patterns from the posts and entryways that connected the buildings. You also have the burned remains of the buildings themselves preserved in the ground. You can see the central fire pit. It's not glamorous in the sense of single artifacts that just blow your mind, but it's phenomenally well-preserved information, some of the best-preserved examples that anybody's ever found."

Eighteenth-century Cherokees built pairs of houses together—a rectangular summer home and a round winter one insulated against the cold. The winter houses were built in basins and are now manifested as dark stains. Benyshek and her coworkers exposed hearths, postholes, a bottle gourd and other foodstuffs, stone tools, and pottery vessel fragments. One burned house contained a collapsed wall and roof timbers lying on top of the floor. "Eventually, we'll



**Cherokee high school students  
watch the excavation of a winter house.**



have a good idea of what was in the building when it burned, as well as what activities took place during the occupation," Webb says.

The recovered artifacts included arrowheads, a stone pipe, and a chunky stone, a piece used in a game played by the Cherokee. Players would roll the chunky stone, then bet on who could throw a stick or spear closest to where the stone would stop. A round stone and ceramic pieces for another game were found as well, though it's unclear how that game was played.

The researchers also encountered graves, which they left untouched. While the tribe is subject to federal preservation laws, such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, it has its own code regarding the treatment of burial and human remains. It's important to the Cherokees that their ancestors' graves stay undisturbed, out of respect and also for spiritual reasons. Having touched an artifact that might have come from a grave, Townsend plans to get a ritual cleansing later in the day.

Throughout the project, many Cherokee residents stopped by. Every teacher in the Cherokee school system visited the site, as well as elementary, middle, and high school students. All the visitors made it impossible to get mired down in the data of archaeology. "You're reminded these are people you're documenting," Benyshek says. "Everything you're trying to put together represents the people who live there."

**american archaeology**

**TOWNSEND** gives me a tour of the many sites where excavation has been completed and new construction is taking place: A day care center. A former motel. A private language-immersion school where Cherokee students will learn the Tsalagi language and written syllabary. But one place where new construction won't occur is Kituwah Mound, where Cherokees believe their people began, where the Creator gave the first fire and the clan law to the tribe. A structure on the mound housed a sacred flame that Cherokees kept burning constantly.

Some modern-day Cherokees have been eager to find out if there was archaeological evidence of the fire, and to know what else was there. They had lost the mother town of Kituwah and the mound once already, prior to the Trail of Tears, when the state of North Carolina didn't honor a federal government treaty and confiscated the reserve. The Cherokees didn't own this 309-acre parcel again until 1996. It was so expensive to purchase, some argued for building a tourist attraction on part of the land to recoup the tribe's expenditure. Others were aghast at that possibility.

To help settle the debate, the tribe hired Brett Riggs in 1997 to direct an archaeological survey of the site. His team dug some 1,700 small test holes, from 12 to 15 inches deep. Eighty-four percent of them revealed archaeological



materials, the oldest of which dated from the early Archaic period.

In 2000, a groundhog uncovered a skeleton on the Kituwah site; it was associated with a Pisgah village, roughly A.D. 1100–1200. This discovery prompted the question of how many more graves might there be. To answer that question, Riggs was hired to direct another study in 2001. He and his team employed a proton magnetometer that detects small changes, known as anomalies, in the Earth's magnetic field created by disturbances. Archaeologists found many hearth sites, including one at the center of the mound. One photo, at once vague and distinct like a pregnancy ultrasound image, depicted concentric anomalies that, Riggs believes, marked the reconstructions of a townhouse. It was a structure used as a temple, council house, and civic center. The people rebuilt the townhouse as needed in the same spot through the years.

The townhouse anomalies resemble 16th-century townhouse patterns found during excavations of nearby Coweeta Creek Mound. At that site, “the ruins of these community buildings, stacked one atop another, grew over time as a mound, probably the same way in which the Kituwah Mound grew through several centuries of use,” Riggs wrote in a report to the Eastern Band. Plowing has reduced the height of Kituwah Mound and very likely destroyed the latest stages of the townhouse there, Riggs believes. All the evidence at Kituwah suggested a temple “destroyed at the midpoint in the use-life of the mound, probably in the 15th or 16th century.”

While conducting remote sensing on a section of the site away from the mound—a place thought to be a lightly inhabited—the team discovered about 15 graves. Tribal officials asked how many more graves might be hidden. Kituwah had been a town of 200 to 300 residents for many generations, and the people tended to be buried where they had lived. Based on that information, Riggs estimated that hundreds, perhaps even 1,000, graves could be there. Consequently, the tribe decided to keep the Kituwah property as is, using it strictly for farming, Cherokee heritage and cultural events, and religious observance.

Townsend is comfortable with the decision to preserve Kituwah as it has been for generations. “Archaeologists constantly leave data behind because we didn’t have the time, permission, or money” to obtain it, he says. At the same time, he and many other tribal members are unhappy about the possibility of leaving behind too much material or disturbing graves at a controversial project, a runway extension for a local airport. Government and state officials and tribal leaders have been at odds over how and how much to excavate. Airport officials have agreed to strip and map the entire area, which will reduce the chance of accidental disturbance of human remains during construction, says Townsend. Benyshek and her team, hired to do the field work there, have already found two palisaded villages from about A.D. 1100. The discovery is newsworthy because archaeologists hadn’t expected to find palisaded villages in



**An archaeologist exposes burned timber while excavating a mid 15th-century dwelling.**

western North Carolina at that time.

That airport debate demonstrates the changing nature of the relationship between the Cherokees and archaeologists, who are now often allies rather than adversaries. “It’s a matter of educating archaeologists that they have a bigger responsibility than just tearing up some ground,” says Eastern Band Chief Michell Hicks. “That’s not what it’s about. It’s about showing the lives of people over time and giving back to the people... Hopefully, (the information) gets carried on to future generations. I think that’s archaeologists’ responsibility.” Hicks hopes the tribe can build a restoration and research facility in the future where Cherokee students can learn about their archaeological history.

Archaeology has added to the Cherokees’ already strong bonds to each other and their land. The importance of community here can’t be underestimated. Russell Townsend is working on his Ph.D. in archaeology at the University of Tennessee and is passionate about his field. Yet at the end of my day in Cherokee, he revealed something I never expected. “I’d rather drive a garbage truck here,” he admitted, “than teach archaeology at a big, distant university like Princeton.”

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