

Excavations at Tallassee (40Bt8): An Historic Cherokee Village Site in East Tennessee

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ABSTRACT

Prior to the construction of the Chilhowee Dam in the mid-1950's, salvage excavations were conducted at the Tallassee Site (40Bt8). Tallassee, the location of an historic Overhill Cherokee Village, is a multicomponent site with prehistoric Woodland and Mississippian components. The eighteenth century Cherokee component at Tallassee is described, and pertinent ethnohistorical background is presented.

INTRODUCTION

In early 1955, the Aluminum Company of America (ALCOA) made public plans to construct Chilhowee Dam on the Little Tennessee River (Figure 1). Construction of this reservoir would inundate the historic Cherokee sites of Chilhowee and Tallassee. This proposed power dam was to be constructed just upstream from the historic Cherokee site of Halfway Town. Locations of these historic Cherokee towns were recorded by Lieutenant Henry Timberlake, a British soldier who lived among the Overhill Cherokee in 1762 (Figure 2).

After learning about plans for this reservoir, members of the Knoxville Chapter of the Tennessee Archaeological Society became concerned about the destruction of these significant archaeological resources located on private land. The cooperation of ALCOA was sought and permission was obtained to make surface surveys and excavate the area. Field trips were

made to the sites of Chilhowee and Tallassee to determine the best method to salvage the most information in the limited time available. On the basis of immediate availability and surface collections made, Tallassee was selected for intensive excavation. Only limited tests were conducted at Chilhowee.

EXCAVATION PLAN AND METHODS

It should be understood that this was strictly a salvage project and that it was impossible to obtain the total record available. A running record of the location of burials and refuse pits was made with photographs of burials and other main features. Materials excavated were deposited with the University of Tennessee at Knoxville (McClung Museum) for photographing and cataloging. The field crew consisted of about twelve energetic amateur archaeologists, who worked primarily on weekends. T.M.N. Lewis and Madeline Kneberg, both professors at UTK's Anthropology Department, provided guidance in the conduct of these controlled excavations.

The site of Tallassee was located on *both* sides of the Little Tennessee River (Figure 2). The excavations described herein were conducted on the northernmost bank of the river, now part of Blount County. The excavations were started with the hand digging of a 5 foot wide trench 150 feet long parallel to the Little Tennessee River and downstream from a prehistoric substructure mound also located on the site. No burials, refuse pits or house patterns were found while excavating this trench. Cultural material present in the midden, however, indicated Tallassee was occupied intermittently

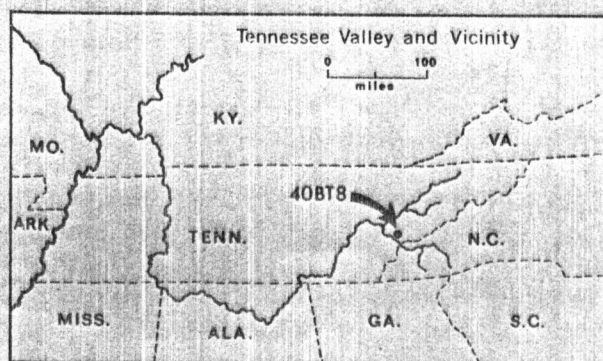


Figure 1. Location map showing Tallassee Site (40Bt8) on the Little Tennessee River in eastern Tennessee.

from Early Woodland through historic Cherokee times. The average depth of the soil showing traces of occupation was very shallow, being about two feet in this area. Progress was slow and results were disappointing, so a decision was made to employ heavy earthmoving equipment in an effort to recover an adequate sample from the site.

A road grader, supplied by ALCOA, with a ten foot wide blade was used to cut two trenches parallel to the hand-excavated trench. The blade of the grader was positioned vertical to the axis of the trench and thus moved the soil to the end avoiding piles at the sides of the trench. This went very slowly due to the small carrying capacity of the blade and the tendency of the wheels to dig in when the blade was loaded. It was planned to cut to subsoil, or to such depth as would show the refuse and burial pits, but the slow progress of the dirt moving and the increased depth to subsoil upset this plan.

Two historic burials were discovered just below the plow zone in this second area. Several weekends were then spent excavating a burned house structure in this area. One trade bead and a poorly fired large diameter shallow pottery vessel was found on this house floor. It is recorded that Tallassee was among the Cherokee towns burned by Col. John Sevier in the spring of 1788 in retaliation for a Cherokee raid of white settlers on Nine Mile Creek in Blount County.

Grading was continued downstream from the mound with one 200 foot trench, ten feet wide and parallel to the river, and a second trench parallel to this one, but 200 feet inland. This time the grader blade was tilted, and the dirt was pushed to one side. With this method, more area was uncovered to a greater depth in less time, but again the shallow pits were not well defined and were sometimes not recognized. This graded area and some adjacent areas were then hand shoveled to subsoil or to a depth where pits could be identified.

Finally, a bulldozer provided by ALCOA was employed to strip the site of topsoil exposing burial and refuse pits in the underlying subsoil. A few features and some material was destroyed, but time was a limiting factor with dam construction in progress. All exposed features were hand excavated, photographed, and recorded.

THE HISTORIC OVERHILL CHEROKEE COMPONENT

The purpose of this report is to make available some portion of the data collected at Tallassee during the excavations of the 1950's. This report is limited in scope to the historic Cherokee component, an occupation in which there is presently considerable research interest. The publication of this data from Tallassee is intended to supplement the ongoing Tellico Archaeological Project, which is presently generating new information on nearby historic Cherokee sites soon to be flooded.

Some of the more interesting historic burials and features excavated at Tallassee are described. This information was abstracted from the original field notes made by the excavators. The complete field notes from the Tallassee excavations are housed at the McClung Museum at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. The material described represents only a small portion of this data, which is available for study to qualified persons interested in the historic period.

Of the 145 burials and eighteen refuse pits excavated at Tallassee, twenty seven burials and five refuse pits have been attributed to the historic Overhill Cherokee. Five of the burials are described as being representative of the type of grave goods found with historic Cherokee burials of the eighteenth century.

Burials 3 and 4, a double burial of a child and adult found in an oval pit. The child was at a depth of 30 inches. The adult was at a depth of forty eight inches. As was the case with most burials at Tallassee, bone preservation was in extremely poor condition. Thus, sex of both burials was indeterminate. Grave associations with the child burial included glass trade beads and eight brass Morris bells (Figure 3). Grave associations with the adult burial included two iron hatchets, scissors, a clasp knife blade, and a large iron hoe (Figure 4).

Burial 26, the flesh burial of a male juvenile lying on his right side in a partly flexed position. Placement was about two feet from the surface, with the head in a northern orientation (Figure 5). Bone preservation was generally poor. The teeth and jaw were copper stained. Grave associations with burial Number 26 included blue and white glass seed beads, flint perforator, conical copper beads, sheet copper

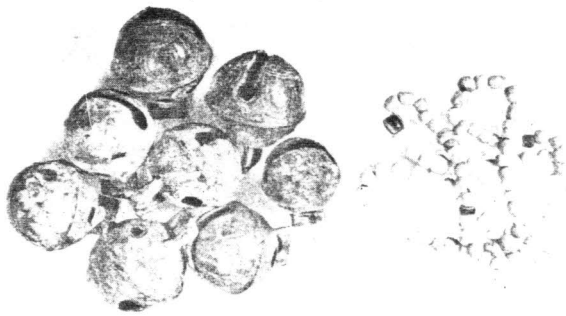


Figure 3. Glass trade beads and cast brass Morris bells from historic Cherokee burial (Number 3) at Tallassee.

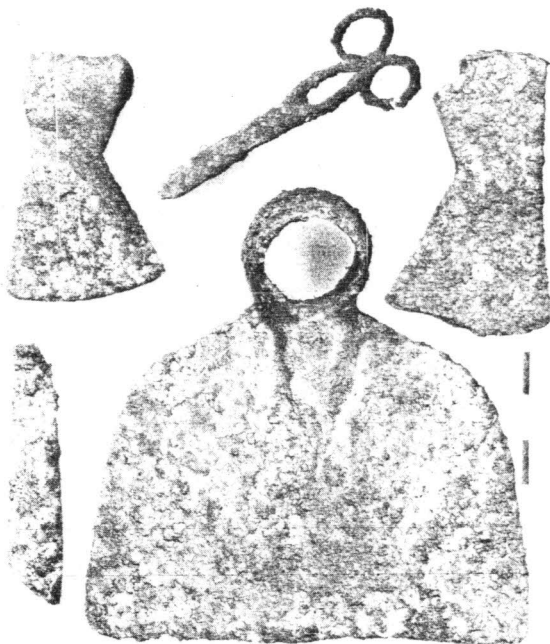


Figure 4. Iron grave goods associated with historic Cherokee burial (Number 4) at Tallassee. Items include two "squaw" axes, scissors, large hoe, and clasp knife blade.

tubular beads, and iron knife with a partly preserved antler handle (Figure 6).

Burial 34, the flesh burial of an adult of indeterminate sex in a partly flexed position. The pit was shallow, about twenty four inches in depth, and shape could not be determined

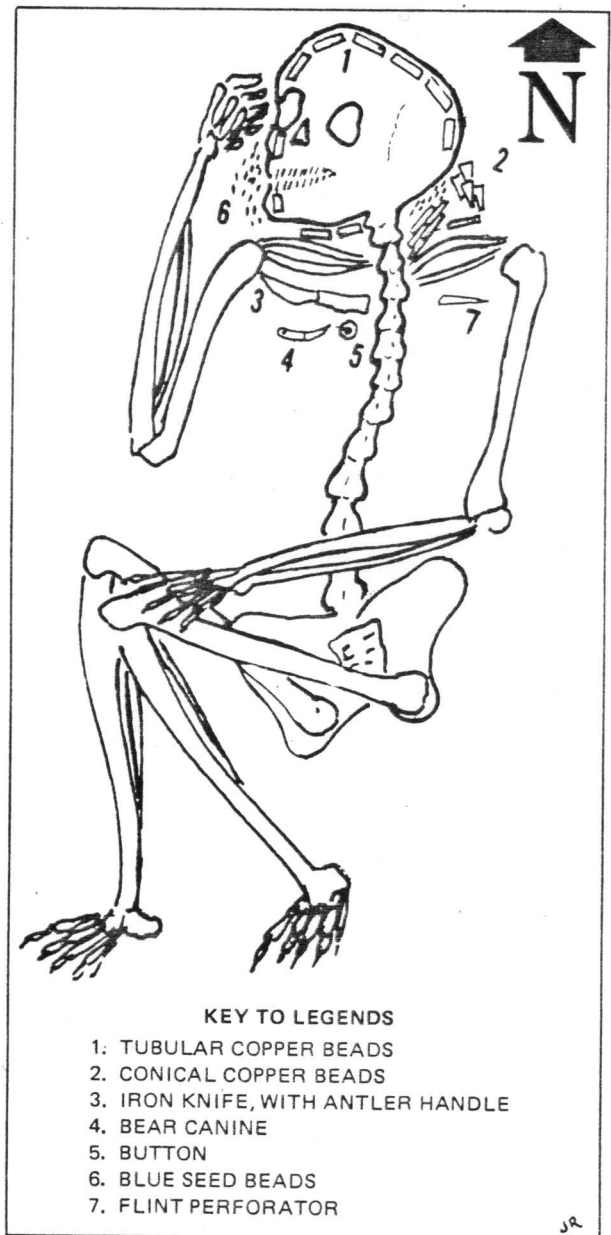


Figure 5. Drawing of partly flexed historic Cherokee burial (Number 26) from Tallassee, showing location of grave goods illustrated in Figure 6. After sketch by Madeline Kneberg in original field notes.

due to the dark midden. Grave associations included a bracelet of glass seed beads, a brass belt buckle, a pewter button, a tubular sheet copper bead, and jews' harp (not illustrated). A cache of seven perforated sheet copper arrow-points were found in a quiver-like arrangement

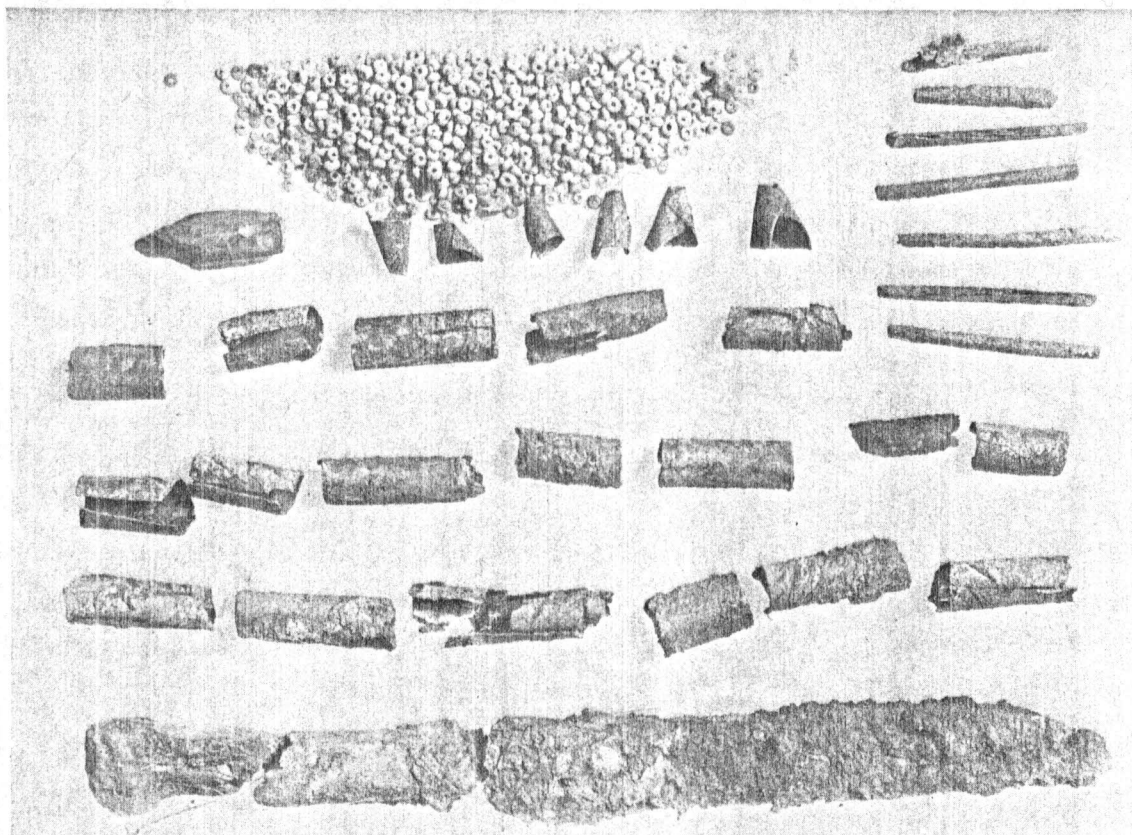


Figure 6. Associations with historic Cherokee burial (Number 26) at Tallassee. Grave goods include blue and white glass seed beads, flint perforator, conical copper beads, sheet copper tubular beads, and an iron knife with partly preserved antler handle.

near the shoulders. Eighteen musket balls occurred in a group near the waist, perhaps contained by the remains of a pouch originally secured to a belt. A chipped stone arrowpoint, a broken stone pipe, and fragments of a glass mirror occurred in the pit fill (Figure 8). Other iron implements found with this burial, including a large iron hoe and scissors, are illustrated in Figure 9.

Burial 35, the flesh burial of an adult of indeterminate sex in a partly flexed position. This burial was crushed by the bulldozer used to strip the site of topsoil. The pit shape and size could not be determined. Grave associations included 215 large glass beads of assorted colors, blue and clear glass seed beads, and four copper bells (Figure 10).

EARLY NINETEENTH CENTURY SETTLER'S CABIN?

During the excavations, a large rectangular pit of uncertain origin was encountered. This pit had vertical sidewalls and a hard packed level floor, suggesting that it may have functioned as a cellar. The floor of this cellar-like feature was almost six feet below the present ground surface. A large hearth, underlain by limestone slabs, was located on the floor in one corner of the cellar-like feature. Also, a number of limestone blocks, possibly a fallen chimney, occurred in the interior of the feature-lying on the floor level.

Less than half of this cellar-like feature was excavated. One vertical side wall was completely exposed and was found to be 17 feet in

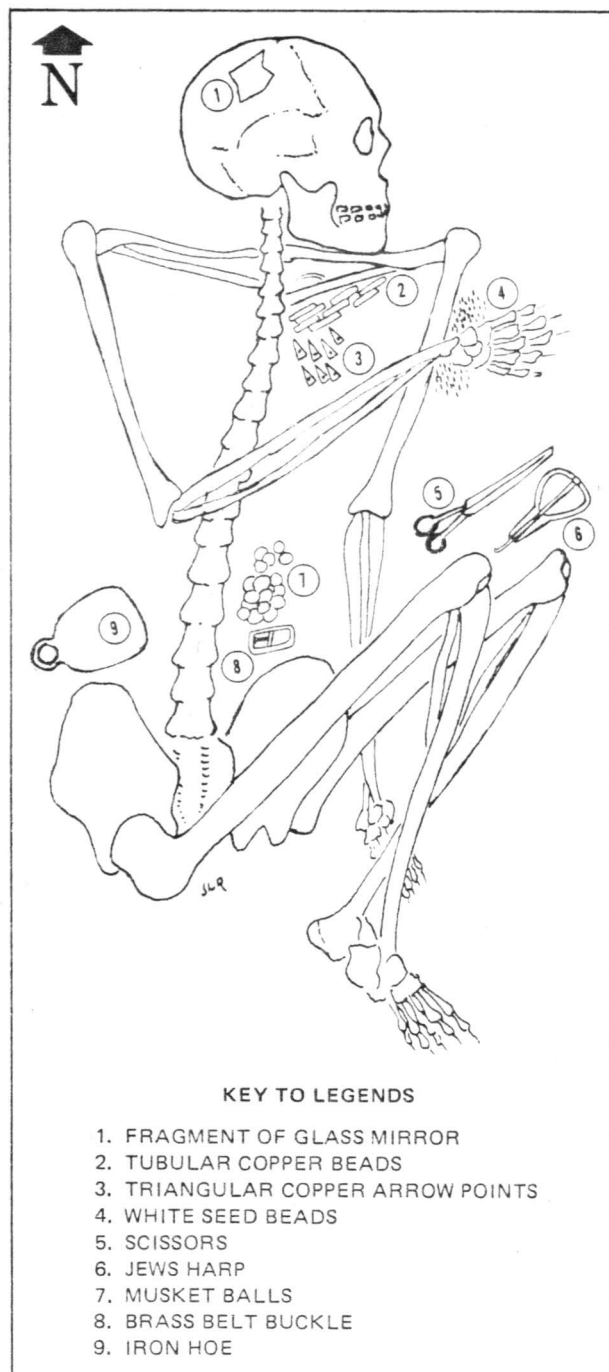


Figure 7. Drawing of partly flexed historic Cherokee burial (Number 34) at Tallassee, showing location of grave goods illustrated in Figures 8 and 9.

length. This large rectangular pit is not well understood. It represents either (1) an early nineteenth century settler's cabin, or (2) a late

historic Cherokee cabin, which ethnohistoric accounts indicate. Also, it is not clear whether the deep floor represents the only floor level of a deeply dug-in pit-house like structure, or whether it represents a basement floor beneath a log cabin standing immediately above, evidence for which had been plowed away.

Iron nails, fragments of European chinaware, as well as artifacts of aboriginal manufacture were recovered from this subterranean floor. A single extended burial was recovered near this feature, and it represents the only extended burial found at Tallassee. This suggests a white settler's grave, since most historic Cherokee burials were fully flexed (See Table I). A single iron nail occurred in the extended burial with no other grave goods. A refuse pit was encountered nearby the structure. This pit originated at the base of the plow zone. It contained a variety of European chinaware fragments, as well as shell-tempered pot-sherds of aboriginal manufacture. Aboriginal ceramics were present in the midden when this pit was dug, so the pot-sherds found in the pit fill may have been included inadvertently and are not contemporaneous with the chinaware. This pit, located immediately adjacent to the cellar-like feature,

Table I. Summary of Historic Burial Data (40Bt8)

	Number of Occurrences
Position	
Extended	1
Partially Flexed	17
Fully Flexed	2
Indeterminate*	7
Age Group	
Infant	6
Child	7
Adult	14
Sex	
Male	6
Female	2
Indeterminate	19

*Most of the 27 historic Cherokee burials found at Tallassee were quite shallow. Consequently, skeletal material was often in poor condition (leached by soil acids). Burial pit size and shape could not be determined in many cases due to shallowness and black midden, but most pits were generally oval or rectanguloid. Burials varied in depth from base of the plow zone to 48 inches.

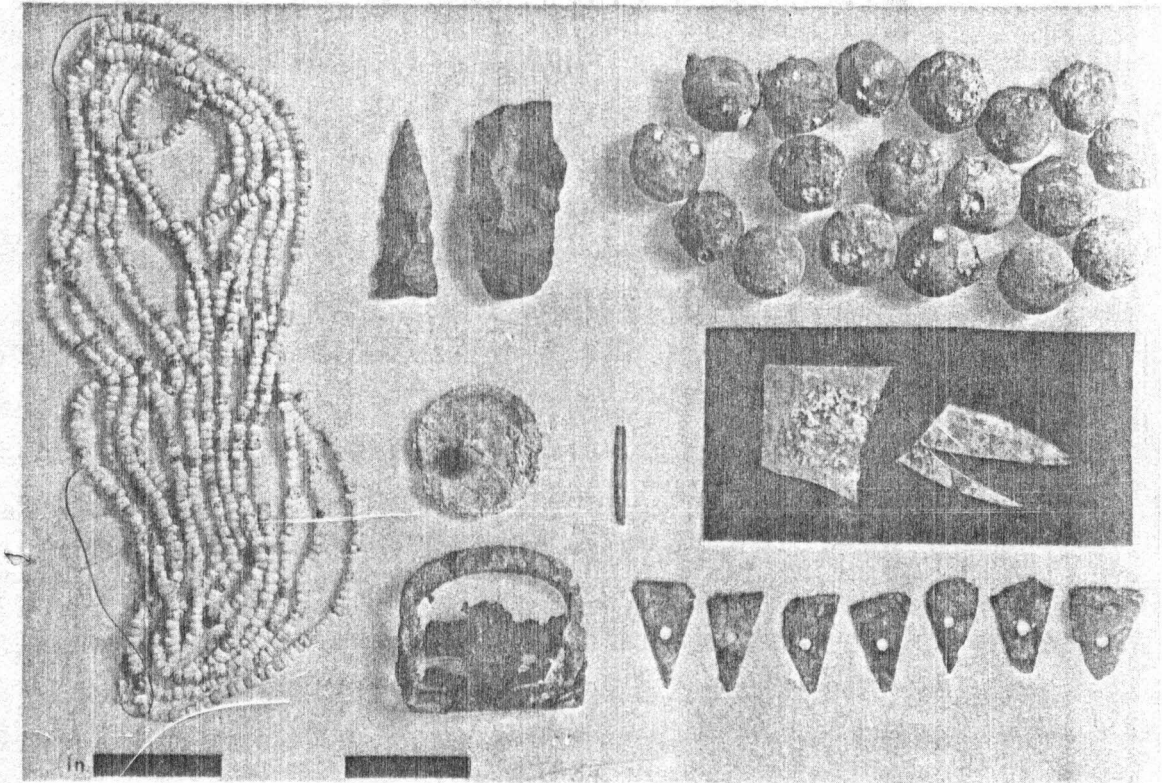


Figure 8. Artifacts from historic Cherokee burial (Number 34) at Tallassee. Grave associations include a bracelet of glass seed beads, a brass belt buckle, a pewter button, a tubular sheet copper bead, a cache of seven perforated sheet copper arrowpoints, and eighteen musket balls. The chipped stone arrowpoint, a broken stone pipe, and fragments of a glass mirror occurred in the pit fill.

is clearly associated with the problematical structure and thus affords us a means of dating this archaeological feature. The European chinaware fragments found in this pit are quite diagnostic (Figure 11). Photographs of these sherds were submitted to the National Park Service for identification. Mr. J. Paul Hudson, Museum Curator of the Colonial National Historical Park at Jamestown, Virginia, studied this material. Mr. Hudson's tentative identification of selected chinaware sherds from the Tallassee refuse pit is reported below:

The sherds in Fig. 11a appear to be from a hand-decorated English earthenware cup, commonly known as English Staffordshire. Large quantities of this earthenware were made in England during the period between 1790 and 1850. This particular cup probably dates to the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Fragments 11c and 11d also appear to be examples

of English hand-decorated earthenware, again probably made in Staffordshire, and dating to the first quarter of the nineteenth century.

Fragments 11b and 11e are examples of English transfer-printed earthenware made in Staffordshire. These particular sherds were probably made between 1820 and 1850. Transfer printing consisted of first engraving the desired design on a copper plate, inking the plate, and transferring the design to specially prepared paper. While the ink was still wet, the paper was carefully laid on the piece of pottery to be decorated, and the design transferred itself to the ware. Many designs used by the English potters represented scenery of an Oriental nature; although some pictures were of English landscapes, castles, flowers-and-leaves, and geometric patterns. A great deal of the blue-on-white English transfer-printed ware was made for export. It was very popular in America

Table II. Historical Burial Associations (40Bt8)

Grave Associations	Number of Burial Occurrences
A. European Trade Materials	
<i>Glass</i>	
Glass trade beads	19
Mirror	3
<i>Iron or Steel</i>	
Axe	2
Hoe	1
Knives	5
Scissors	3
Jews Harp	1
Bracelet	1
Nail (square cut)	1
<i>Copper (or Brass)</i>	
Neck collar (sheet copper)	1
Bracelet	1
Coiled Copper Wire	1
Gorget — 5 inch diameter disk (sheet copper)	1
Ornaments — Animal cutouts (sheet copper)	1
Tubular Beads (rolled from sheet copper)	2
Conical Beads or Dangles (rolled from sheet copper)	3
Triangular Arrowpoints (drilled, sheet copper)	1
Morris Bells	1
Hawk Bells	2
Buckles	2
Buttons	3
<i>Silver</i>	
Ear Ornaments	1
<i>Other Metal Objects</i>	
Musket Balls (lead)	1
Buttons (pewter)	3
B. Grave Goods of Aboriginal Manufacture (Occurring with European trade goods)	
Triangular Arrowpoints (chipped flint)	3
Perforator (chipped flint — in pit fill?)	1
Shell Pendant	1
Shell Gorget (plain)	1
Shell Beads	2
Yellow and Red Ochre	1

The above data summarizes the number of burial occurrences of each type of trade good. Example, glass trade beads were found with 19 of the 27 historic Cherokee burials excavated at Tallassee.



Figure 9. Iron hoe and scissors from historic Cherokee burial (number 34) at Tallassee. Note the riveted patch repair of the hoe. A jews-harp found with the burial is not pictured.

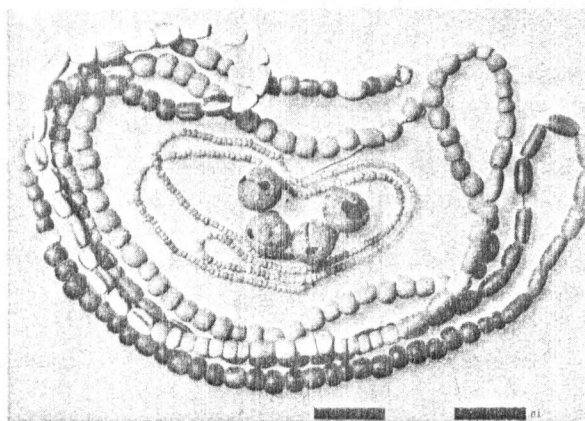


Figure 10. Glass trade beads and copper bells from historic Cherokee burial (Number 35) at Tallassee. The small copper bells apparently functioned as buttons. The trade beads (assorted colors) are cane-drawn.

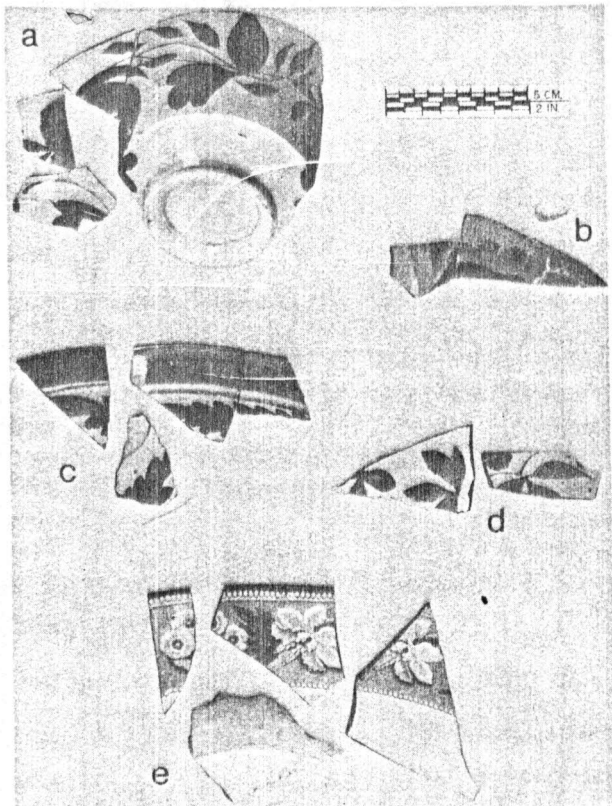


Figure 11. European chinaware fragments from a refuse pit at Tallassee. Shell-tempered aboriginal ceramics were also found in this pit, which is thought to be a trash deposit from an early Nineteenth Century settler's cabin located nearby.

during the first half of the nineteenth century, especially between 1820 and 1840.

The chinaware sherds from this refuse pit date to the first or second quarter of the nineteenth century. This indicates that the associated cellar-like feature was probably an early white settler's home, since by this time few Cherokee remained in the Little Tennessee River Valley.

CONCLUSION AND REMARKS

The Little Tennessee River Valley is one of the most important areas in the country for the study of historic occupation, as evidenced by results of the Tellico Archaeological Project. Tallassee represents a multicomponent site with a significant historic Overhill Cherokee occupation. No doubt, a more scientific and extensive investigation of the Tallassee site, together with presently generated new data from nearby historic Cherokee sites, would greatly contribute to our knowledge of the historic inhabitants of the southeastern states. The amateur excavators of the Tallassee site, however, have salvaged pertinent data and material which otherwise would be forever lost. Where construction, farming techniques, and other forms of destruction threaten significant sites, and where professional resources are not available, the amateur archaeologist can make a meaningful contribution.

This report is taken primarily from the field notes written by the amateur excavators at the site, not from their recollections of several months and years later. As such, it constitutes a record of genuine value. Failure to keep good records is to fail as an amateur archaeologist.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Finally, thanks go to the dozen amateur archaeologists for their "labor of love," enthusiasm, and willing participation in efforts to salvage the fast-disappearing prehistory of the Little Tennessee River Valley.