

The following chapter is from:

The Archaeology of North Carolina: Three Archaeological Symposia

Charles R. Ewen – Co-Editor
Thomas R. Whyte – Co-Editor
R. P. Stephen Davis, Jr. – Co-Editor

North Carolina Archaeological Council Publication Number 30

2011

Available online at:

<http://www.rla.unc.edu/NCAC/Publications/NCAC30/index.html>

COLLISION AT THE CROSSROADS: CONFUSION IN THE LATE WOODLAND PERIOD (A.D. 800–1400) OF NORTHWESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

Thomas R. Whyte

THE LOST LATE WOODLAND PERIOD IN THE APPALACHIAN SUMMIT

As a child I was warned of the dangers of busy intersections. Not one to heed a mother's advice, I find myself confronted with the study of the prehistory of the Appalachian Summit, a veritable "cultural crossroads." It is not a place in which typologies and stratigraphy are consistent between sites or where one stratified site can serve as the type proxy for the entire region. One can no more generalize about the region's prehistory than about the region's weather. This is especially the case for later prehistory. Cultural and typological heterogeneity in many physiographic regions appears with the onset of sedentism. This is perhaps punctuated in regions such as the Appalachian Summit, characterized by more extreme variation in elevation, geomorphology, and hydrology. Moreover, since it is a cultural crossroads, what we tend to see is a blending of influences from all fronts rather than the convenient building blocks of phases and foci that form the foundations of traditional culture histories. Yet our predecessors made bold attempts to identify and organize these blocks of time and space from the chaos of the archaeological evidence at hand.

The earliest "archaeology" in the Appalachian Summit, like that of other areas of the Southeast, emphasized the mining of mounds for museum collections. The Garden Creek mounds in Haywood County were a favored source (Keel 1976). The later Depression Era archaeology (e.g., Setzler and Jennings 1941) and the Cherokee Project of UNC also attended much to the mounds because of what had been found by earlier excavators and their potential connection to the historic Cherokee.

The early results of the Cherokee Project, especially the oft-cited dissertations and books of Bennie C. Keel (1972; 1976) and Roy S. Dickens, Jr. (1970; 1976) serve as the foundations of Appalachian Summit typologies, cultural sequences, and other frameworks of archaeological reference, yet they are based largely on two sites: Garden Creek Mound No. 2 (31HW2) in Canton, North Carolina, and Warren Wilson (31BN29) on the Swannanoa River just east of Asheville. Neither intended his work to define cultural sequences for the entire region, yet for decades we have vainly pigeonholed our findings from new sites into the compartments conveniently provided in these and other handy publications such as Coe's (1964) *The Formative Cultures of the Carolina Piedmont*. This has resulted in some frustration for later prehistory, and particularly with regard to the elusive Late Woodland period. Indeed, evidence of a Late Woodland period was all but lacking in the part of the state on which the Cherokee project was focused. Keel (1976:239) concluded that by A.D. 600 the Connestee (Middle Woodland) phase "had evolved into a transition phase which would develop into the Pisgah (Mississippian) phase." Wetmore (2002:266) observes, "...no changes in material culture or subsistence or settlement patterns have been identified that would indicate an intervening cultural manifestation between the Connestee and Pisgah phases." In his overview of North Carolina mountain prehistory Burton L. Purrington (1983:142) said, "At the present time the Late Woodland period...in the Appalachian Summit is very poorly understood and no phase has been defined."

Jeff Chapman (1985:72), in discussing the Tellico project of the neighboring Ridge and Valley to the west noted “Unfortunately no sites were excavated on which a Late Woodland component could be isolated. The situation is probably due to our inability to recognize artifacts that are distinct to this period; on the sites we can identify, the artifacts are associated with and dated to the phase transitional to the Mississippian period.” More recently, Ward and Davis (1999:157) wrote “At present, the cultural dynamics and stylistic markers of the Late Woodland period in the Appalachian Summit region are poorly understood. Currently, only ideas, suggestions, and hypotheses can be offered to fill the void between the Middle Woodland period and the beginning of the Mississippian period.”

This statement implies that (1) a Late Woodland period is required in a sequence where there is a Middle Woodland period, and (2) a Mississippian period *should* be expected to exist throughout the Appalachian Summit, as it does in the small part of the Appalachian Summit where the University of North Carolina Research Laboratories of Archaeology has focused its Cherokee Project. Thus, our tried but not true cultural sequences fail to accommodate contemporaneous cultural (e.g., Woodland and Mississippian) patterns much like unilinear evolutionary schemes in paleontology fail to accommodate contemporaneous fossil congeners. Because the founders of our historical cultural units were working in a part of the mountains where evidence of a Late Woodland period was not discovered, we have failed to recognize the existence of Late Woodland evidence in other parts of the region and have stretched the existing Mississippian types (e.g., Pisgah) to accommodate that evidence. As aptly noted by Ward and Davis (1999:160), “some of the ideas and interpretations gleaned from these (Warren Wilson site) excavations may have been stretched beyond their limits to include areas of the region to which they may not necessarily apply.”

For example, the Mississippian Pisgah phase was created on the basis of distinctive pottery, formally named and described by Patricia Holden (1966), and later embellished with architectural, settlement, and subsistence traits and temporal and geographic dimensions by Dickens (1970; 1976). Subsequently, archaeologists have assigned sites to the Mississippian Pisgah phase on the basis of a single ceramic trait—the distinctive Pisgah style punctuated collared vessel rim—even when most other traits of the ceramics, the architecture, political structures, and the relative dietary contribution of maize do not describe the phase or South Appalachian Mississippian culture in general. This was the case for the Ward site (31WT22) on the Watauga River in western Watauga County. Observing the prevalence of the distinctive Pisgah-style punctuated collared rim in the ceramic assemblage, Ayers et al. (1980) and Purrington (1983) defined the site as a prehistoric Pisgah phase village, although the site has no mound, no double palisade, no rectangular architecture, nor evidence of maize dependence, and the ceramics generally lack other attributes (tempering and surface treatments) distinctive to the Pisgah type (Whyte 2003).

Mississippian chiefdoms did exist in the gentler climes and broader fertile floodplains of the larger valleys of the Appalachian Summit foothills and adjacent Ridge and Valley province. The existence of these Mississippian “outliers” or “frontiers,” showing less evidence of maize dependence than places in the heart of Mississippia, has been explained by their proximity to important trade routes, sources of important commodities, or resource-rich ecotones (Beck and Moore 2002; Myers 2002). South Appalachian Mississippian phases recognized in western North Carolina include Pisgah (A.D. 1000–1450) concentrated at the headwaters of the French Broad and Little Tennessee Rivers (Dickens 1978), Qualla (A.D. 1450–1600) found in southwestern North Carolina at the headwaters of the Hiwassee and Little Tennessee rivers

(Dickens 1978), and Burke (A.D. 1300–1600) concentrated in the upper Yadkin and Catawba River valleys (Beck and Moore 2002). Pottery of these phases is found in small amounts outside of these areas of concentration and in the higher elevations of the Appalachian Summit. For example, Burke and Pisgah series pottery sherds occur in small numbers at sites such as the Ward site (31WT22) and Charles Church Rockshelter (31WT255) near the headwaters of the Watauga. In other words, the higher elevations of the North Carolina Appalachian Summit, drained by the Watauga, Yadkin, Catawba, and New River headwaters, was only brushed by the eddies of South Appalachian Mississippian culture as it was by the preceding Hopewell influences. This brushing likely involved some exchange of goods and ideas and some transhumance. But the Eastern Woodland cultural tradition of egalitarian societies supported by hunting, gathering, and maize horticulture remained intact until sustained European contact.

THE FOUND LATE WOODLAND PERIOD IN THE APPALACHIAN SUMMIT

Adoption of pottery, diminishing use of soapstone and large stone knives, and changes in projectile point size and hafting are the primary observable differences between Late Archaic and Woodland period culture in the region. From 1000 B.C. to A.D. 900, there is no definable deviation from the established Archaic period pattern of cyclical migration, consisting of seasonal visits to the higher elevations. While variations in archaeological evidence across this span of time may be more evident at lower elevations to the east and west, where the same players may have resided for the rest of the year, use of the higher elevations by these populations remained consistent until the onset of the Medieval Warm and the adoption of Flint maize permitted permanent residence (Whyte 2003, 2010a). Indeed, most of the larger base camps, whether found on river terraces such as the Colvard II site (31AH266) in Ashe County (Whyte 2010b) or on high elevation gaps or springheads such as Wakeman 3 (31WT219) in Watauga County (Purrington 1983), contain Late Archaic, Early Woodland, and Middle Woodland components.

Seasonal use of the higher elevations in Northwestern North Carolina prior to the Medieval Warm is evidenced in many ways. One example is the distribution of limestone-tempered net-impressed pottery along the Watauga River in western Watauga County. Recovered in abundance at the Ward site, this was originally considered contemporaneous with the village structure. A vertical distribution analysis of ceramic tempering and other attributes within the site's profile, however, indicates otherwise. In some parts of the site there is a dark artifact rich alluvium beneath the plowzone. Radiocarbon dates on charcoal from this zone range from A.D. 1010 to 1280. Limestone tempering increases with depth. Although some limestone tempered and net impressed pottery on the site is Late Woodland (possibly Radford series), and some sport the Pisgah-style rim, much probably represents a late Middle Woodland *seasonal* contribution. Similar pottery was found in late Middle Woodland contexts along with Candy Creek cord-marked pottery and dated to A.D. 630–660 just 20 kilometers downstream at a site (40JN89) now under Watauga Reservoir (Boyd 1986). Further evidence that seasonal visitors with their limestone-tempered pottery migrated up river from the west is revealed by a decreasing presence of limestone-tempered sherds in rockshelters along the Watauga (Figure 15-1). The Ward Shelter site (31WT126), just across the Watauga River from the Ward site village (31WT22), contained the most limestone-tempered pottery (10%). The Charles Church

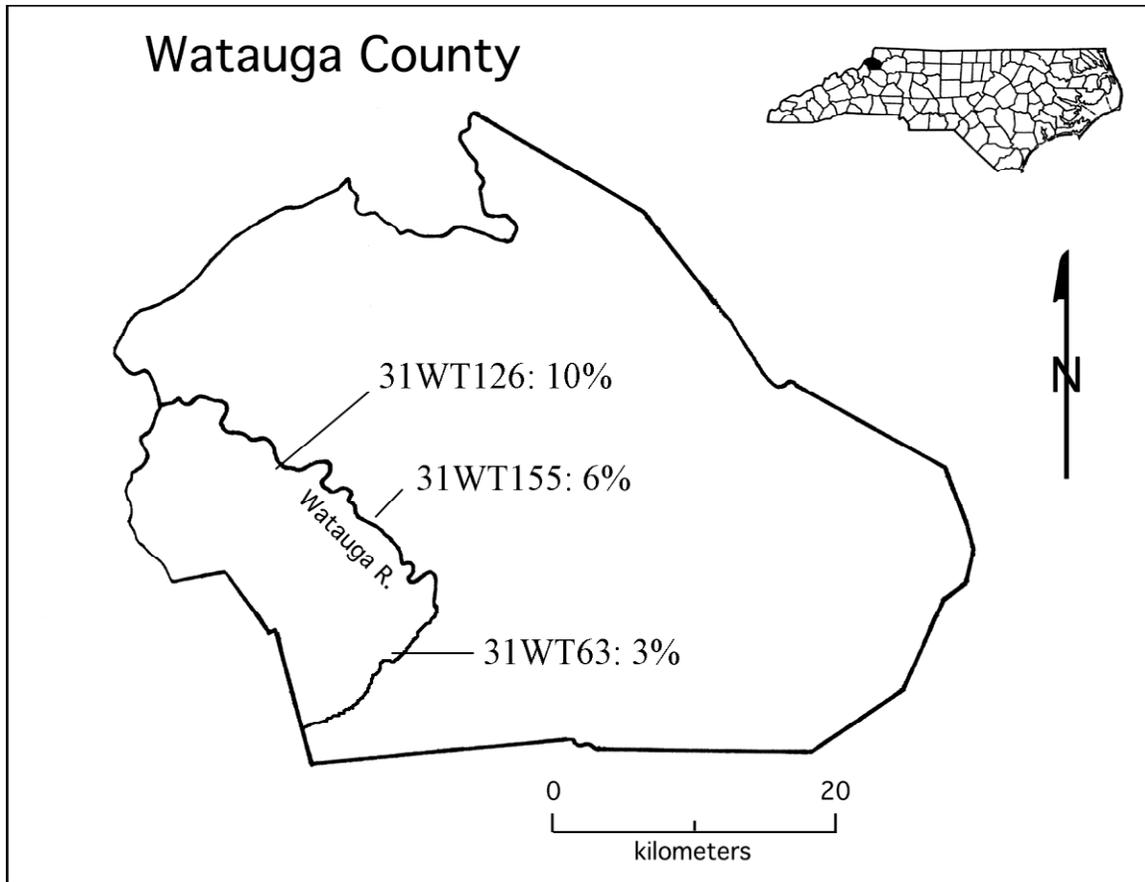


Figure 15-1. Diminishing evidence of limestone tempering at rockshelter sites along the Watauga River.

Rockshelter (31WT155) located 4.5 miles upriver contained 6%, and the Devil's Den Rockshelter (31WT63) located 7.5 miles further upriver contained the least (3%).

In contrast, very different and more complicated cultural currents were affecting human life to the immediate south, such as in the Asheville Basin and the headwaters of the Pigeon River, where Hopewellian influences led to the establishment of ceremonial mound centers at Biltmore (Kimball et al. 2010) and Garden Creek (Keel 1976). These Middle Woodland, Connestee phase village and mound complexes, and the travel-ways that linked them with more complex societies of the larger Southeast, arguably etched a cultural landscape that would influence the shape of subsequent Appalachian Summit Mississippian culture. This had little noticeable impact on Woodland societies utilizing the mountains of the northern counties.

The Late Woodland period emerges with the Medieval Warm climatic episode at about A.D. 900, when villagers and maize gardeners, possibly the descendents of earlier groups using the uplands only seasonally, expanded into the higher valleys (Whyte 2003). Global warming and Flint maize, which matures more quickly than its progenitors, permitted permanent residence for the first time above 2,500 ft. Dozens of these high-elevation residential sites have been identified, but few have been excavated. The Ward site, a palisaded village with circular houses on the Watauga River (Figure 15-2), was built, occupied, and abandoned sometime between A.D. 900 and 1300 (Whyte 2003). Most of the Late Woodland pottery from the Ward site, contemporaneous with the permanent village occupation, is tempered with crushed local mica

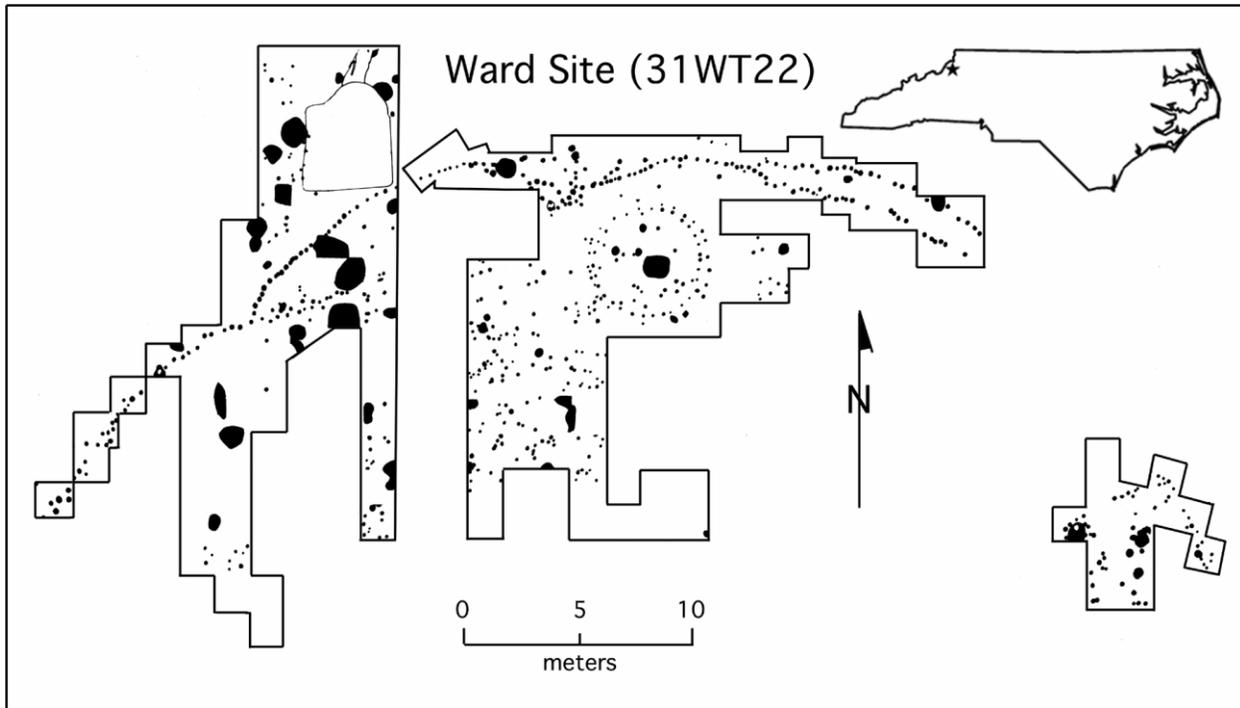


Figure 15-2. Excavation plan view of the Ward site (31WT22), Watauga County, North Carolina (from Whyte 2003).

schist or grit, is net impressed or rectilinear stamped, and boasts the classic Pisgah style rim (Figure 15-3). Collared and thickened rims, copied from Mississippian neighbors to the south and west, may have conferred an advantage by strengthening otherwise vulnerable rims; punctations, while decorative and undoubtedly symbolic (Whyte et al. 2011), were necessary for even firing.

Another site in the region providing evidence of a Late Woodland period residence with architecture preceded by Early and Middle Woodland seasonal components is located along a headwater stream of the South Fork of the New River (Figure 14-4). At the Katie Griffith site (31WT330), Late Woodland period pottery (Figures 15-5 and 15-6) is either net-impressed, rectilinear-stamped, or both, has scraped interiors, is tempered with either crushed soapstone or quartz, and also boasts the Pisgah rim (Whyte 2003). The paste contains an abundance of amphibolite grains, an unavoidable component of locally derived clays. In contrast, Early Woodland Swannanoa cord and fabric-marked pottery tempered with alluvial quartz sand, contains *no* amphibolite grains, indicating a more distant place of manufacture. This also is revealed in the site profile by a downward decrease in frequency of sherds containing amphibolite. In other words, people bearing non-locally made ceramics seasonally visited the site prior to the Medieval Warm period. The Late Woodland occupation is radiocarbon dated to about A.D. 1300 and is characterized by permanent architecture (a single residence) and locally made ceramics that, like those of the Ward site (Mathis and Moore 1984), have technological affinities with the Late Woodland Dan River and related Wythe series prevalent to the east and north, but exhibit the classic “Pisgah” rim, a likely borrowing from Mississippian neighbors to the south (Whyte 2003).



Figure 15-3. Pottery rim sherds from the Ward site (31WT22), Watauga County, North Carolina (from Whyte 2003).

Evidence of permanent residence in the northern part of the region disappears with the intensification of the Little Ice Age into the fifteenth century. When the Moravian August Spangenberg passed by the headwaters of the Watauga and South Fork of the New rivers in December 1752, he encountered no humans or evidence of them (Arthur 1915).

SUMMARY

In sum, it appears that the early history of Appalachian Summit archaeology, emphasizing tantalizing mound sites and a search for a prehistoric archaeological record of a historic tribe, influenced a focus on southwestern portions of North Carolina. Therein typologies and other archaeological constructs became established and assumed applicable to the broader Appalachian Summit region, thus resulting in an academic ignorance of the Woodland period of other parts of the region. Evidence indicates only seasonal use of the northern Appalachian Summit prior to the onset of the Medieval Warm period, which coincides with and likely made possible the appearance of more sedentary, horticultural village life at the start of the Late Woodland period. This Late Woodland period, previously confused with Mississippian because of pottery rim forms and decorations, may be characterized by nucleated and then disbursed village settlement, circular architecture (nearly a universal symbol of egalitarian society), and



Figure 15-5. Pottery rim sherds from the Katie Griffith site (31WT330), Watauga County, North Carolina (from Whyte 2003).



Figure 15-6. Pottery vessel body sherds from the Katie Griffith site (31WT330), Watauga County, North Carolina, showing rectilinear stamping (top row) and rectilinear stamping over net impressing (bottom row) (from Whyte 2003).

hunting, gathering, and horticulture, and has its strongest archaeological affinities with the Dan River and related phases downhill and to the east. Marginal Mississippian influence is reflected in the borrowing of ceramic motifs and the *occasional* presence of Pisgah and Burke series ceramics, possibly resulting from human transience or exchange from the south and west. The Appalachian Summit, long assumed to have been a homogeneous prehistoric cultural-geographical unit (Kroeber 1939), was indeed a cultural crossroads where a Woodland-Mississippian frontier existed in late prehistory, perhaps at or near the Toe River.

REFERENCES CITED

- Arthur, John P.
1915 *A History of Watauga County, North Carolina*. Everett Waddey Co., Richmond.
- Beck, Robin A., and David G. Moore
2002 The Burke Phase: A Mississippian Frontier in the North Carolina Foothills. *Southeastern Archaeology* 21:192–205.
- Boyd, C. Clifford, Jr.
1986 *Archaeological Investigations in the Watauga Reservoir, Carter and Johnson Counties, Tennessee*. University of Tennessee Department of Anthropology Report of Investigations No. 44 and Tennessee Valley Authority, Publications in Anthropology, No. 46.
- Chapman, Jefferson
1985 *Tellico Archaeology: 12,000 Years of Native American History*. Publications in Anthropology No. 41, Tennessee Valley Authority.
- Coe, Joffre L.
1964 *The Formative Cultures of the Carolina Piedmont*. Transactions of the American Philosophical Society 54, pt 5.
- Dickens, Roy S., Jr.
1970 The Pisgah Culture and its Place in the Prehistory of the Southern Appalachians. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

1976 *Cherokee Prehistory : The Pisgah Phase in the Appalachian Summit Region*. The University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville.

1978 Mississippian Settlement Patterns in the Appalachian Summit Area: The Pisgah and Qualla Phases. In *Mississippian Settlement Patterns*, edited by B. D. Smith, pp. 115–139. Academic Press, New York.
- Holden, Patricia P.
1966 An Archaeological Survey of Transylvania County, North Carolina. Unpublished M.A. thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
- Keel, Bennie C.
1972 Woodland Phases of the Appalachian Summit Area. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

1976 *Cherokee Archaeology: A Study of the Appalachian Summit*. University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville.

- Kimball, Lary R., Thomas R. Whyte, and Gary D. Crites
2010 The Biltmore Mound and Hopewellian Mound Use in the Southern Appalachians. *Southeastern Archaeology* 29:44–58.
- Kroeber, Alfred L.
1939 *Cultural and Natural Areas of Native North America*. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology 38.
- Mathis, Mark A., and David G. Moore
1984 Some Thoughts on Woodland Period Ceramics from Northwestern North Carolina and Adjacent Areas. In *Upland Archaeology in the East: Symposium 2*, edited by M.B. Barber, pp. 63–74. Cultural Resources Report No. 5, Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, Washington, D.C.
- Meyers, Maureen S.
2002 The Mississippian Frontier in Southwestern Virginia. *Southeastern Archaeology* 21:178–191.
- Purrington, Burton L.
1983 Ancient Mountaineers: An Overview of the Prehistoric Archaeology of North Carolina's Western Mountain Region. In *The Prehistory of North Carolina: An Archaeological Symposium*, pp. 83–160, edited by M.A. Mathis and J.J. Crow. North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Department of Cultural Resources, Raleigh.
- Rodning, Christopher B.
2008 Temporal Variation in Qualla Pottery at Coweeta Creek. *North Carolina Archaeology* 57:1–49.
- Ward, H. Trawick, and R.P. Stephen Davis, Jr.
1999 *Time Before History: The Archaeology of North Carolina*. The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.
- Wetmore, Ruth Y.
2002 The Woodland Period in the Appalachian Summit of Western North Carolina and the Ridge and Valley Province of Eastern Tennessee. In *The Woodland Southeast*, edited by D.G. Anderson and R.C. Mainfort, Jr., pp. 249–269. The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa.
- Whyte, Thomas R.
2003 Prehistoric Sedentary Agriculturalists in the Appalachian Summit of Northwestern North Carolina. *North Carolina Archaeology* 52:1–19.

2010a *Erethizon dorsatum* (L.) (American Porcupine) Skeletal Remains from Charles Church Rockshelter, Watauga County, North Carolina. *Southeastern Naturalist* 9:821–826.

2010b Archaeological Investigations at the Colvard II Site (31AH266) on the South Fork of the New River, Ashe County, North Carolina: Field Season 1. Report submitted to the North Carolina Division of Archives and History, Office of State Archaeology, Raleigh.

Whyte, Thomas R., Scott A. Fleeman, and Cathleen D. Evans

2011 An Alternative Ontology and Experimental Study of Pottery Punctuation in Southern Appalachian Region Prehistory. *Southeastern Archaeology* 30 (in press).