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## CHEROKEE ETHNOGENESIS IN SOUTHWESTERN NORTH CAROLINA

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Dozens of Cherokee towns dotted the river valleys of the Appalachian Summit province in southwestern North Carolina during the eighteenth century (Figure 16-1; Dickens 1967, 1978, 1979; Perdue 1998; Persico 1979; Shumate et al. 2005; Smith 1979). What developments led to the formation of these Cherokee towns? Of course, native people had been living in the Appalachian Summit for thousands of years, through the Paleoindian, Archaic, Woodland, and Mississippi periods (Dickens 1976; Keel 1976; Purrington 1983; Ward and Davis 1999). What are the archaeological correlates of Cherokee culture, when are they visible archaeologically, and what can archaeology contribute to knowledge of the origins and development of Cherokee culture in southwestern North Carolina? Archaeologists, myself included, have often focused on the characteristics of pottery and other artifacts as clues about the development of Cherokee culture, which is a valid approach, but not the only approach (Dickens 1978, 1979, 1986; Hally 1986; Riggs and Rodning 2002; Rodning 2008; Schroedl 1986a; Wilson and Rodning 2002). In this paper (see also Rodning 2009a, 2010a, 2011b), I focus on the development of Cherokee towns and townhouses. Given the significance of towns and town affiliations to Cherokee identity and landscape during the 1700s (Boulware 2011; Chambers 2010; Smith 1979), I suggest that tracing the development of towns and townhouses helps us understand Cherokee ethnogenesis, more generally.

Whyte (2007) has recently made a compelling case—based on archaeological, paleoenvironmental, and linguistic evidence—that a basic adaptation to mast forests was in place throughout the Appalachians by the Late Archaic period, and that the divergence between northern Iroquoian and Cherokee groups took place in this context. If there were basic similarities in adaptations throughout the Appalachians at the end of the Archaic period, what, then, led to the development of later groups that we know as “Cherokee,” “Yuchi,” “Chisca,” and “Monongahela,” or the groups we associate with archaeological phases such as “Connestee,” “Pisgah,” “Qualla,” and “Burke”? What clues are there from Woodland, Mississippian, and protohistoric sites that can help us understand the origins and development of Cherokee culture, as such?

Eric Wolf (1984) has argued that the names with which indigenous societies are labeled—the Creeks, the Iroquois, and others throughout native America—have taken shape within larger social and cultural fields that include other native groups and the European colonists with whom they interacted. From this perspective, the larger social and cultural field that was the setting for Cherokee ethnogenesis includes Muskogean-speaking peoples south and west of the Appalachians, the Siouan-speaking peoples east of the Appalachians, Catawbas, Yuchis, Chiscas, Westoes, Spanish expeditions, English traders, and French *coureurs de bois* (Corkran 1962, 1967, 1969; Merrell 1989). Wolf (1982, 1984, 1997) argues that the history and prehistory of “indigenous societies” around the world is best understood in terms of dynamic relationships among “colonists” and “natives.” The characteristics of Native North American groups, and the names applied to them, have taken shape, in part, in response to European colonialism in the Americas. This is not to say that native societies had no sense of identity or history before European contact. They did, there had been a long history of community formation and intercommunity interaction, and this history shaped responses by native groups to

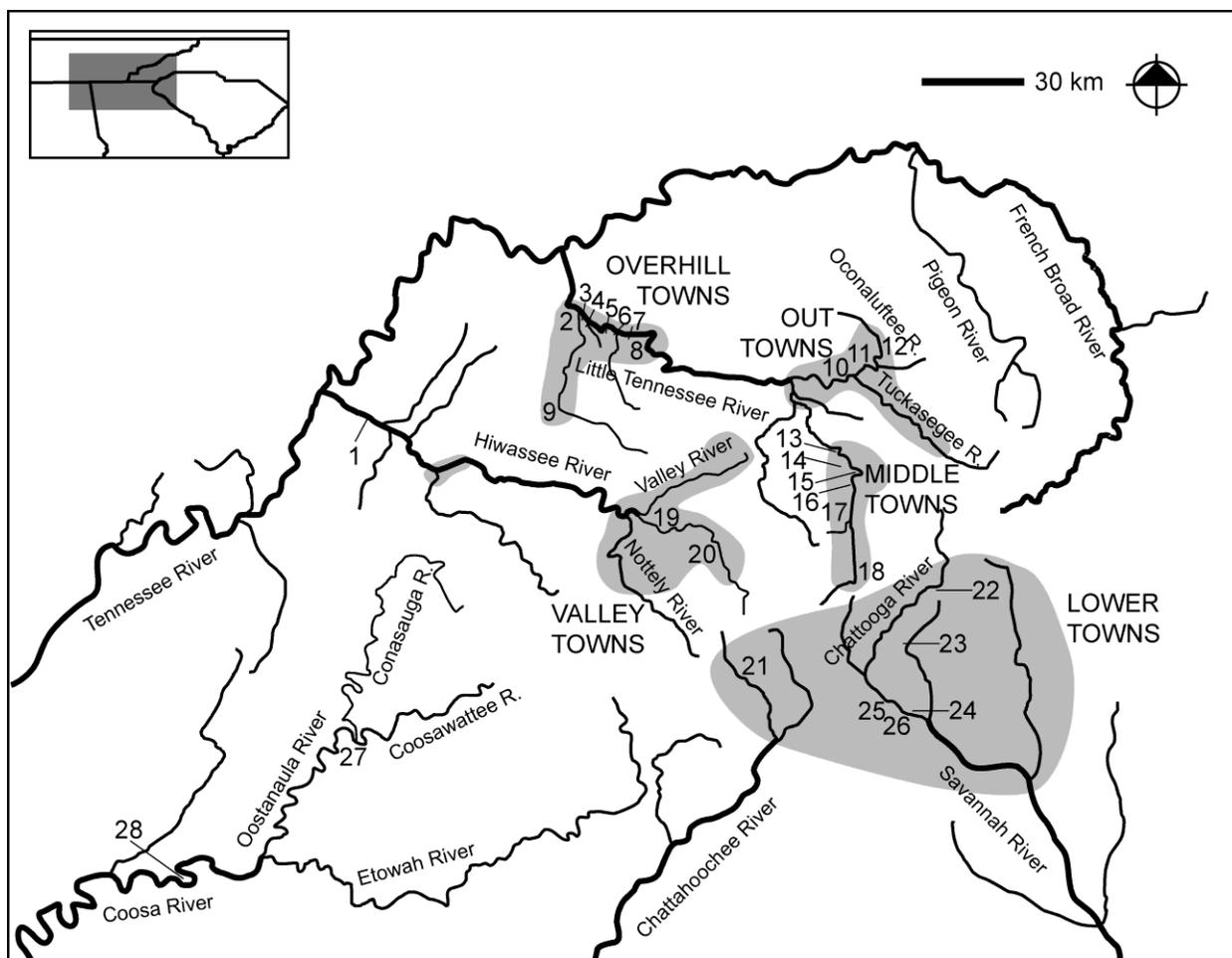


Figure 16-1. Selected archaeological sites and groups of historic Cherokee towns in the southern Appalachians (after Anderson 1994; Dickens 1979; Duncan and Riggs 2003:17; Hally 1994:168; Rodning 2008:11; Schroedl 2000:205, 2001:279; Smith 1979). Townhouses have been identified archaeologically at sites listed in italics, and ethnohistoric evidence suggests that townhouses were present at some other sites noted here, as well (Baden 1983; Chapman 1985; de Baillou 1955; Dickens 1976; Duncan and Riggs 2003; Goodwin 1977; Hally 2008; Keel 1976; Polhemus 1987; Russ and Chapman 1983; Schroedl 1978, 1986b, 2000, 2001; Smith 1992; Ward and Davis 1999; Wynn 1990). Sites shown here include: (1) *Ledford Island*, (2) *Mialoquo*, (3) *Tomotley*, (4) *Toqua*, (5) *Chota-Tanasee*, (6) Citico, (7) Chilhowee, (8) Tallasee, (9) Great Tellico/Chatuga, (10) *Kituwha*, (11) Birdtown, (12) Nununyi, (13) Cowee, (14) Joree, (15) Whatoga, (16) Nequassee, (17) *Coweeta Creek*, (18) Old Estatoe, (19) Peachtree (Hiwassee), (20) Spike Buck (Quanasee), (21) Nacoochee, (22) *Chattooga*, (23) Keowee, (24) Chauga, (25) Estatoe, (26) Tugalo, (27) *New Echota*, and (28) the *King* site. Reprinted from *American Antiquity* 74(4), © Society for American Archaeology (Rodning 2009a:628).

European colonial activity. Native North American cultures and traditions did not develop in isolation, and when Europeans landed in the Americas, they encountered native societies in the midst of making their own history.

The first written reference to a group known as the Cherokee, by that particular name, comes from Henry Woodward, the man credited with beginning the Charles Town trade with the Cherokee and other groups on the Carolina frontier (Gallay 2002). In 1674, at the newly settled Westo town on the Savannah River, Woodward encouraged the Westo to bring “deare skins, furs and younge slaves” to trade in the following year, and he learned that in areas farther west

lived “the Cowatoe and Chorakae Indians wth whom [the Westoes] are at continual warrs” (Hatley 1993:17). In 1684, the Cherokee signed a treaty with Charles Town, partly in response to Westo slave raids (Crane 1929). Before 1715, English trade networks emanating west from Charles Town focused more on the Creeks, Chickasaws, and Choctaws than on Cherokee towns (Rothrock 1976). After 1717, following Cherokee assistance to Carolina during the Yamasee War, direct and sustained trade developed between Carolina and Cherokee towns (Hatley 1993). English traders made distinctions between Lower, Middle, Out, Valley, and Overhill Cherokee towns (Smith 1979). These distinctions probably also reflect geographic, linguistic, and social distinctions within the greater Cherokee community, but the familiar locations of these groups of Cherokee towns, and the identification of them as such, are first documented in the late 1600s and early 1700s (Goodwin 1977).

Of course, there were Cherokee towns in southwestern North Carolina during the 1500s and early 1600s, before Woodward wrote about them. Spanish expeditions led by Hernando de Soto and Juan Pardo did not venture into the core areas where eighteenth-century Cherokee towns were located, but they did encounter Cherokee speakers (Booker et al. 1992; Hudson 1997). Members of the Pardo expeditions met with leaders from towns whose names are very similar to or the same as the names of eighteenth-century Cherokee towns, and they may have interacted with Cherokee people at Tocaé and Cauchi, both of which were towns in western North Carolina, and both of which were probably located at or near the northeastern edge of Cherokee territory (Beck 1997; Beck et al. 2006; Hudson 2005; Moore 2002).

Shifting focus to another type of evidence, let us consider Cherokee oral traditions, as they were recorded in western North Carolina by James Mooney (1900), an ethnologist affiliated with the Smithsonian Institution, during the late nineteenth century. Mooney recorded a cosmogonic myth about how the world was made, and this myth refers to the earth as an island suspended by cords at its four corners. Archaeologists have drawn upon this and other evidence to characterize Mississippian mounds as earth icons (Knight 2006). Similarly, many Cherokee townhouses had four roof support posts placed around central hearths, perhaps symbolizing the four cords holding the earth in place (Rodning 2002, 2009a, 2010a). Public structures known as townhouses were hubs of public life and landmarks for Cherokee towns. Social groups known as towns, meanwhile, are likewise present in Cherokee myth and legend. Mooney summarized an early nineteenth-century written description of a migration legend—reportedly recited by Cherokee orators at annual Green Corn Dances until the mid-1800s—tracing the movement of *towns* from one place to another, from year to year, until those *towns* reached the Cherokee homeland in the southern Appalachians. These myths and legends identify towns, townhouses, and earthen mounds as significant components of the Cherokee cultural landscape, in its mythical and material forms.

Townhouses appear in other Cherokee myths, including those about the first Cherokee man and woman (Mooney 1900:242–250), the origin of the constellation Pleiades (Mooney 1900:258–259), and spirits who emerge from the Nequassee mound to help local warriors repel an enemy attack (Mooney 1900:336–337). In the historical myth about “The Mounds and the Constant Fire,” there are references to fires that burn constantly in the Nequassee and Kituwha mounds (Mooney 1900:395–397). In the historical myth about “The Removed Townhouses,” the Cherokee spirit folk known as the Nunnehi invite the Cherokee to fast for seven days in their townhouses, at which point the Nunnehi lifted those townhouses to take them into rivers and onto mountaintops (Mooney 1900:335–336). One townhouse is dropped on the ground in transit, forming an earthen mound, making symbolic connections between mountains, mounds,

and townhouses. There are other references in oral tradition to mythical townhouses on mountain peaks and in other places.

Towns were, first and foremost, groups of people, more than particular places on the landscape, but Cherokee towns were materialized in the form of townhouses. Some townhouses were built on the summits of earthen mounds, as at Cowee, and probably at Nequassee and Kituwaha (Duncan and Riggs 2003:10, 151–156, 171–174; King and Evans 1977:284; Riggs and Shumate 2003; Waselkov and Braund 1995:74–88). One of seven “Mother Towns” of the Cherokee, Kituwaha gives its name to one Cherokee name for themselves, which translates as “the people of Kituwaha” (Duncan and Riggs 2003:73; Hill 1997:72–74; Mooney 1900:525; Riggs and Shumate 2003).

Acknowledging that legends recorded by Mooney were written down in the relatively recent past, and that oral traditions are related differently by different people in different settings, let us make the following points. First, towns, as groups of people, are thought to have been present in the mythical past, demonstrating that towns are and have been fundamental social groups in the Cherokee world. Second, townhouses, as architectural manifestations of towns, are part of the landscape in these myths and legends, further indicating the significance of this architectural form to Cherokee cosmology. Third, townhouses and mounds are receptacles for sacred fire. Fourth, mountains are symbolic components of the Cherokee landscape, as landmarks and as settings for mythical townhouses. Of course, archaeologists know of several mounds and townhouses in southwestern North Carolina. Some of these sites postdate European contact, others date to the Mississippian period, and others date to the Woodland period.

Archaeologists have identified townhouses at Kituwaha, at Chattooga, and at Coweeta Creek (Figure 16-1; Riggs 2008). Five stages of a townhouse have been uncovered at the Chattooga site, along the Chattooga River, in northwestern South Carolina, with an adjacent plaza and areas that were likely locations of domestic structures nearby (Schroedl 2000, 2001). The townhouse at Coweeta Creek was placed beside a town plaza, with domestic structures placed around the plaza (Ward and Davis 1999:183–190). At least six stages of the Coweeta Creek townhouse were superimposed on each other, with each successive stage built atop the burned and buried remnants of its predecessors (Figure 16-2; Keel et al. 2002; Rodning 2002, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b; Rodning and VanDerwarker 2002). The hearth was kept in place within each stage of the townhouse, and the alignment of the entryway was the same in each stage, although when the second stage was built, the entryway was moved (Rodning 2009a). Geophysical survey of the Kituwaha mound has identified the footprint of a townhouse comparable to those seen at Chattooga and Coweeta Creek (Riggs and Shumate 2003). Townhouses at Chattooga and Coweeta Creek date to the 1600s and early 1700s, and the Kituwaha townhouse may date to roughly the same period (Schroedl 2000, 2001). These structures are square with rounded corners, with central hearths and arrangements of four or eight roof support posts (Figure 16-3). At present, there are no archaeologically known examples of eighteenth-century Cherokee townhouses in the western Carolinas or northeastern Georgia, but eighteenth-century Cherokee townhouses in eastern Tennessee are round or octagonal (Figure 16-4). The shift from square to rectangular townhouses may be related to increases in the sizes of Cherokee townhouses—pushing out along the edges of the seventeenth-century townhouse template may have led to the eighteenth-century template of circular townhouses. As townhouses increased in size, so also did the area of townhouse roofs above centrally placed hearths—necessitating the increase in the numbers of roof support posts in Cherokee townhouses from four to eight. Primary documentary sources do refer to eighteenth-

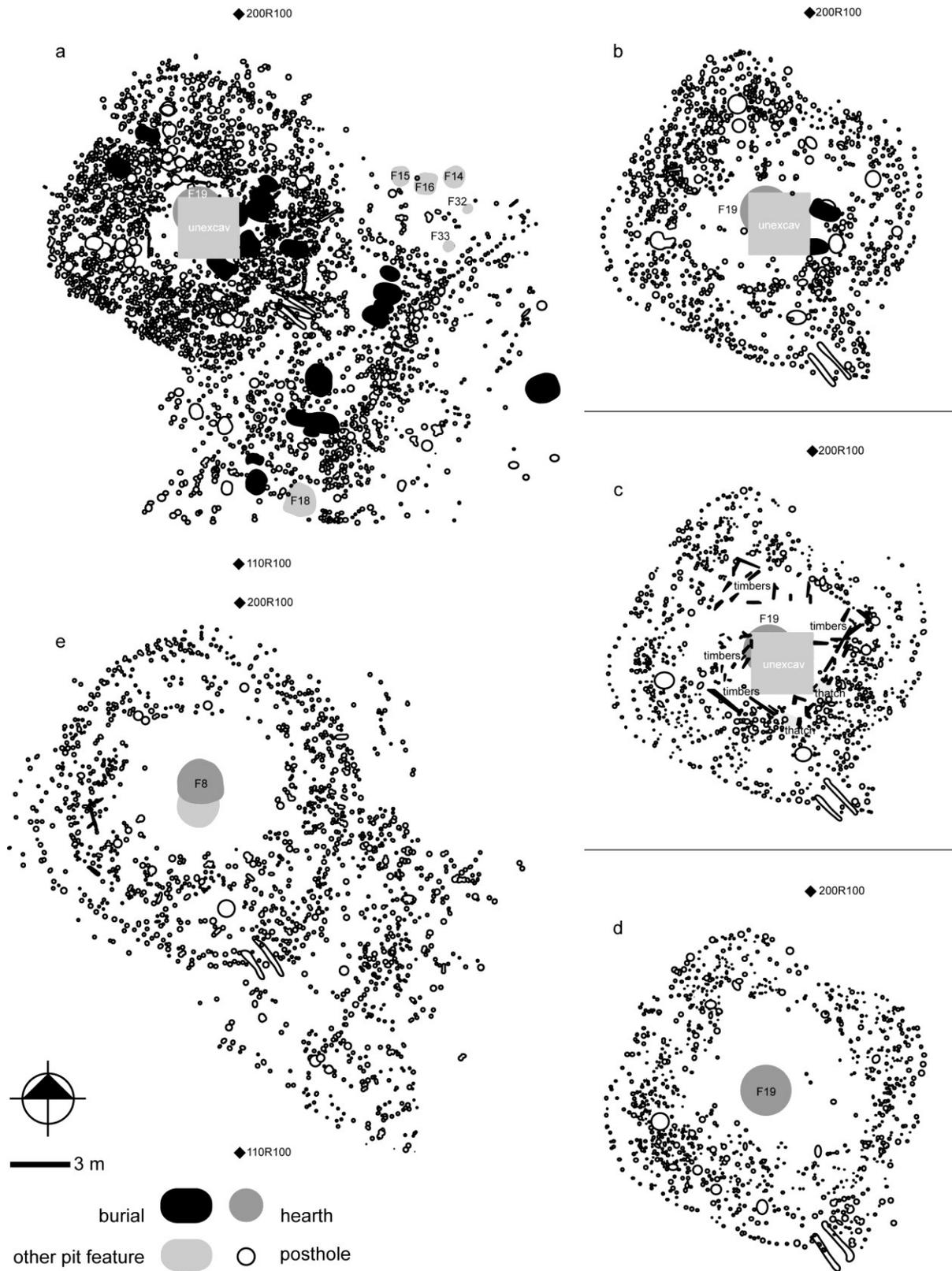


Figure 16-2. Sequence of townhouses at the Coweeta Creek site in southwestern North Carolina. Reprinted from *American Antiquity* 74(4), © Society for American Archaeology (Rodning 2009a:641).

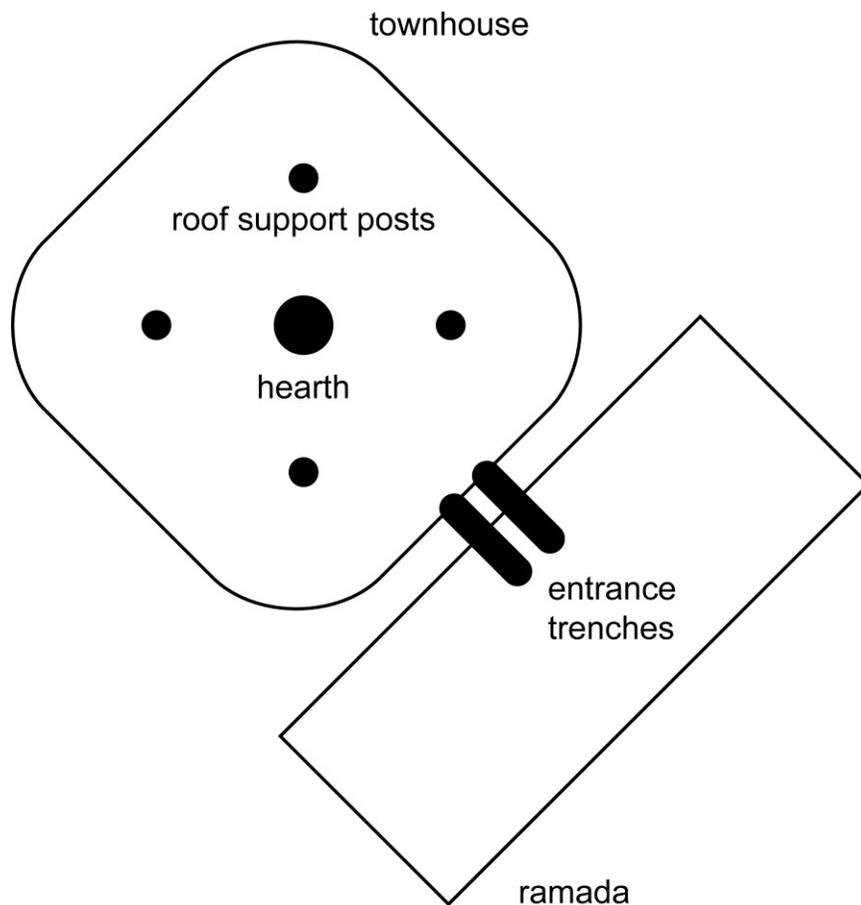


Figure 16-3. Schematic template of seventeenth-century Cherokee townhouses (after Rodning 2009a:641; Rodning and VanDerwarker 2002:5; Ward and Davis 1999:185; see also Schroedl 2000, 2001).

century townhouses placed on earthen mounds (Duncan and Riggs 2003; Waselkov and Braund 1995), but at present, there is no archaeologically known example of an eighteenth-century townhouse placed on an earthen mound. Archaeological and ethnohistoric evidence, and Cherokee oral tradition (Mooney 1900), all suggest an association between townhouses and earthen mounds, and the shapes of townhouses and mounds are broadly comparable to each other.

Earthen mounds are present at Nacoochee, Peachtree, Spike Buck, Garden Creek, Kituwaha, Nununyi, Birdtown, Cowee, Whatoga, Nequassee, Chauga, Tugalo, Estatoe, and Dillard, and there probably were more mounds and townhouses in the past than archaeologists know about in the present (Figure 16-1; Steere 2011). Platform mound stages at Garden Creek were placed atop the collapsed remnants of Mississippian earthlodges, another form of architecture that probably fits within the ancestry of Cherokee townhouses (Dickens 1978; Keel 1976; Rudolph 1984; Ward and Davis 1999). Various structures are associated with mound stages at Chauga, Estatoe, Tugalo, and Peachtree, although architectural patterns are indeterminate, and it is unknown whether they were public or domestic structures (Anderson 1994; Hally 1986; Kelly and de Baillou 1960; Kelly and Neitzel 1961; Setzler and Jennings

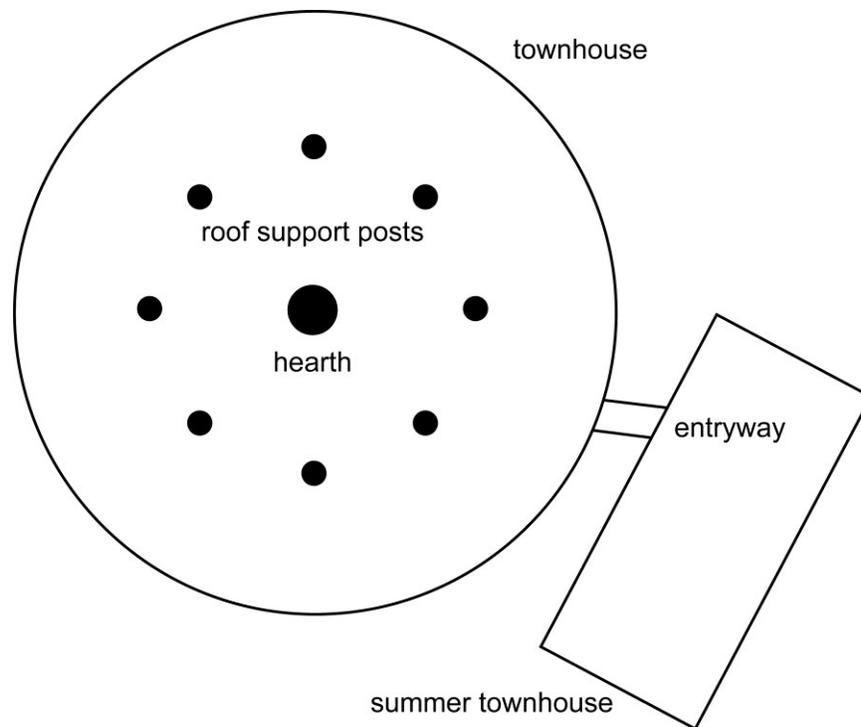


Figure 16-4. Schematic template of eighteenth-century Cherokee townhouses (after Schroedl 1986b:230; see also Baden 1983:36; Russ and Chapman 1983:52; Schroedl 2000, 2001).

1941). While details of mound sequences are unknown in some cases, many mound stages at these sites probably date to the Mississippian period, although most were used after European contact, as well.

Some earthen mounds in the Appalachian Summit date not to the Mississippian but to the Middle Woodland period, including one mound each at Garden Creek and the Biltmore Estate. The Middle Woodland mound at Garden Creek was a platform for a structure or structures. These structures, and hearths and other pits found in the two stages of the mound, are evidence for periodic visits to the site for ritual events and social gatherings (Keel 1976; Kimball 1985). Recent investigations of the Middle Woodland mound at Biltmore have unearthed evidence for several mound stages, as well as a very large post, and other evidence for a variety of ritual activities (Kimball et al. 2010). Comparable evidence has been found at Middle Woodland platform mounds elsewhere in the Southeast, including large posts (Kimball 1985; Knight 1990). These large posts probably are landmarks for gathering places within the Middle Woodland landscape, at which point there were semisedentary settlements in some areas of the Southeast, but at which point many groups were still relatively mobile, and were still primarily foragers rather than farmers. Large town posts have been found at other sites in the greater southern Appalachians dating to later prehistoric and early postcontact periods, including the King site (Hally 2008), the Berry site (Moore 2002), and Town Creek (Boudreaux 2008).

Although there are differences between Middle Woodland mounds, Mississippian mounds, and postcontact Cherokee townhouses, they all mark major community centers within the western North Carolina landscape. The Middle Woodland mounds date to a period just

before or at the beginning of sedentary village life in the Appalachian Summit—as there are in Cherokee townhouses, there is evidence for hearths and firepits in these mounds, and like Cherokee townhouses, large posts and the mounds themselves mark symbolically significant points in the landscape. Mississippian mounds likewise mark significant points in the landscape of western North Carolina—and at least some of these mounds probably were settings for Cherokee townhouses built after European contact. During the 1700s, townhouses were hubs of public life in Cherokee towns, and they were visible landmarks for those towns. Tall posts and earthen mound stages are, of course, different forms of architecture than historic Cherokee townhouses, but, arguably, those Middle Woodland mounds and posts were ancestral to townhouses from later periods (David Moore, personal communication 2003).

Towns and town identity were fundamental components of the Cherokee world in the eighteenth century. The manifestations of Cherokee towns in the southern Appalachians were townhouses, the architectural ancestry of which can be traced back to mounds and marker posts from as early as the Woodland period. Pottery found at postcontact Cherokee settlements can be traced back to South Appalachian Mississippian pottery, including the Lamar ceramic tradition (Dickens 1979; Hally 1986; Riggs and Rodning 2002; Rodning 2008; Wilson and Rodning 2002). Adaptations to Appalachian environments were in place by the Late Archaic period (Whyte 2007). Linguistic evidence suggests that the split between northern Iroquoian and Cherokee languages may date to the Late Archaic, and Cherokee oral tradition identifies the southern Appalachians as the homeland of the Cherokee people. The roots of Cherokee culture in the mountains run deep.

From another perspective, articulated by Eric Wolf (1982), historically known Native American tribal groups coalesced as such in the course of or in the aftermath of European contact. For the groups that became the Cherokee towns of the eighteenth century, early episodes of European contact included the Spanish entradas of the 1500s (Beck 1997, 2009; Beck and Moore 2002; Moore 2002), the slave trade that was encouraged and abetted by English colonial groups in the 1600s (Bowne 2005, 2006, 2009; Gallay 2002; Ethridge 2006, 2009a, 2009b; Martin 1994; Meyers 2009; Worth 2009), and the deerskin trade that developed in the late 1600s and continued through the mid-to-late 1700s (Goodwin 1977; Hatley 1993). Conditions created by these and other developments set the stage in which the Lower, Valley, Middle, Out, and Overhill Cherokee towns formed, as such. This is not to say that the Cherokee or other “native societies” elsewhere in the Americas had no sense of shared history and identity. In fact, one of the main points Wolf makes is that there was considerable interaction among societies before and after European contact, and that European colonists encountered societies—including the Cherokee—in the *midst* of rather than at the *beginning* of a long history of community identity and interaction with other groups.

Ethnogenesis has both long-term and short-term dimensions. On one hand, some components of Cherokee cultural identity—pottery, language, adaptations to mountain environments—have considerable antiquity. There are ancient precursors to the manifestations of historic Cherokee towns and townhouses, as well, in the form of late prehistoric earthen mounds, and, perhaps, posts, hearths, and firepits in mounds dating as early as the Woodland period. These local traditions were incorporated within the architecture of Cherokee townhouses, and they were elements of architectural practices through which Cherokee people identified themselves as towns, and as groups distinct from others in the broader “social field” of the Southeast during the period just before and after European contact.

## NOTES

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