

MANAGEMENT SUMMARY

The 2010 archaeological investigations of the Ashe Ferry site (38YK533) aimed to document contexts and recover assemblages from the site in order to mitigate adverse impacts to the site occasioned by the replacement of the SC Highway 5 bridge across the Catawba River. Construction of a new bridge and approach ramp after the conclusion of field investigations obliterated or buried that portion of 38YK533 north of the existing 1959 roadway that bisected the site. Phase I archaeological survey of the bridge replacement project area by Legacy, Assoc. in 2009 identified the Ashe Ferry site and documented the presence of potential buried contents, discrete features, and appreciable substantive content, qualities that led SCDOT to seek further evaluation of contextual integrity and content as an initial stage of the 2010 investigations. Testing of the site by the University of North Carolina Research Laboratories of Archaeology in the spring of 2010 clearly demonstrated integrity of site deposits and the presence of coherent material assemblages that exhibited capacity to “yield information important to prehistory,” consistent with significance Criterion D for eligibility of the site for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. Because avoidance or other preservation options were not feasible given the scope of the bridge replacement project, mitigation of construction impacts through data recovery of “information important to prehistory” was undertaken immediately on the heels of site evaluation and expedited consultation, consistent with Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act.

Archaeological field investigations began on March 10, 2010 and were completed on November 19, 2010. Investigations entailed eight components: (1) establishment of a site grid; (2) field evaluation of Legacy shovel tests and exploratory backhoe trenches; (3) systematic test excavations; (4) selective mechanized stripping of plowed soil and overlying flood-deposited sand; (5) excavation of additional test units and block excavations within stripped areas; (6) additional mechanized stripping of the site; (7) mapping and excavation of archaeological features; and (8) removal, relocation, and re-interment of identified graves.

Hand dug excavation units totaled 212m², a well distributed sample of approximately 3.5% of the accessible site area (exclusive of areas obscured/obliterated by the existing SC Highway 5 causeway and the site access road). These units yielded artifact samples that included approximately 8,500 ceramic sherds and 10,000 lithic artifacts, most of which are attributable to Late Woodland period site occupations. Mechanical removal of plowed soils from 2583 m² (42% of the accessible site area) revealed 81 archaeological features, 52 of which proved to be cultural in origin. These facilities included 42 features referable to Late Woodland period site occupations, seven Mississippian period deposits, one facility associated with Early Woodland period site occupation and one associated with Late Archaic period occupations. AMS dates obtained from 10 contexts indicate that the predominant Late Woodland period Ashe Ferry phase components spanned ca. A.D. 1000–1150, followed by occupations during the early Middle Mississippian period Early Brown phase, ca. A.D. 1150–1350.

Cultural features documented at 38YK533 included 17 probable roasting facilities (fire cracked rock filled basins), seven deep pits (storage facilities), 12 shallow basins, nine postholes, three graves, and a hearth. In general, the facilities form linear arrays along the terrace crest and backslope, with postholes, graves, shallow basins and hearths associated with residential activities on the crest, and roasting facilities and storage facilities situated on the backslope, where they constitute a specialized work precinct.

Excavation and waterscreen or flotation processing of feature deposits recovered substantial assemblages of cultural artifacts and archaeobotanical remains; archaeofaunal remains were

notably scarce. Analysis of these assemblages recovered from discrete contexts (particularly radiocarbon dated contexts) provided organizational structure for identification and interpretation of the remainder of the site collections. Analysis of plant remains established a basis for interpretation of feature function and site function. Analysis of archaeobotanical materials recovered from primary deposits in probable roasting facilities (the most common facility type) revealed predominant content of charred acorn shell fragments, a pattern indicative either of roasting acorns (with concomitant shell breakage) or use of acorn shells as fuel. Such roasting or parching of acorns is indicated as a processing technique in ethnohistoric and ethnographic literature, and these features are interpreted as processing facilities that represent a primary activity at the site. This hypothesized function is bolstered by the incidence of complete shelled acorn nutmeats recovered from deep pit features. These probable storage facilities are also posited as components of an acorn collection/processing/storage complex. Because these processing and storage facilities predominate, and because evidence for long-term residential occupation (e.g., architectural remains) is scanty, the primary Late Woodland period and early Middle Mississippian components are interpreted as representative of successive, seasonally occupied extraction camps where activities focused on collection and processing of arboreal nuts.

Material assemblages recovered by the 2010 investigations at the Ashe Ferry site indicate small scale occupations during the Early, Middle, and Late Archaic periods and during the Early and Middle Woodland periods, with much more intense occupations in the terminal Late Woodland and early Middle Mississippian periods. Ceramic assemblages from features dated ca. A.D. 1010-1160 are dominated by sand tempered simple stamped wares, and constitute the Ashe Ferry phase, a construct parallel to the Santee II phase in the South Carolina Coastal Plain and the Vining phase defined in the Georgia piedmont region. Definition and temporal placement of the Ashe Ferry phase extends the geographic scope of a supra-regional terminal Late Woodland period horizon of simple stamped ceramics posited by Anderson (Anderson, et al., 1996) and others.

Ceramic assemblages associated with features dated ca. A.D. 1160-1350 are characterized by grit tempered Mississippian Plain/Burnished Plain wares, which constitute one aspect of the Early Brown phase, a Savannah Culture complex parallel to the Belmont Neck and Beaverdam Creek phases, but most similar to ceramic assemblages from the Blair Mound Site in the nearby Broad River Valley. The character and dating of the Early Brown phase relative to the Ashe Ferry phase indicates relatively late transition to Mississippian ceramic patterns in the north central piedmont of South Carolina.

Definition and absolute dating of the Ashe Ferry phase and Early Brown phase ceramic assemblages provides anchors for the development of cultural historical sequences specific to the central piedmont region, a particularly understudied area of South Carolina. In addition, the closely sequential dating of these Late Woodland and Mississippian period ceramic assemblages presents additional complexity to current understandings of the process of “Mississippianization” in the South Carolina piedmont. Finally, the proposed definition of the Ashe Ferry phase and Early Brown phase components at 38YK533 as representative of seasonally occupied extraction encampments that focused on collection, processing and storage of acorns provides an initial measure of logistical mobility in late prehistoric era settlement-subsistence systems in the central Piedmont, and illustrates the continued dietary importance of arboreal nuts long after the establishment of horticultural production.

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Archaeological data recovery at the Ashe Ferry site was directed by Drs. Brett H. Riggs and R. P. Stephen Davis, Jr., and undertaken in three phases. The crew for the initial phase, undertaken between March 15 and May 7, 2010 and consisting of site-wide test excavations and mechanic stripping of topsoil, included Johann Furbacher, Eric Deetz, Duane Esarey, Mary Beth Fitts, Dr. Bill Jurgelski, Sean Patton, Mark Plane, J. P. Preston, Scott Shumate, and Erin Stevens. Operation of a mini-excavator to strip topsoil from the site was ably performed by Mr. Byron K. Hill of B. K. Hill and Associates, LLC, of Rock Hill, South Carolina.

During the second phase of investigation, undertaken between May 11 and June 7, 2010, students and staff of the UNC archaeological field school conducted block excavations and excavated archaeological features. The field school staff consisted of Brooke Bauer, David Cranford, Johann Furbacher, Elise Duffield, Duane Esarey, Mary Beth Fitts, Bill Jurgelski, Mark Plane, Anna Semon, Erin Stevens and Rebecca Wingo. Field school students included Timothy Barco, Rosanna Crow, Natalie DeMasi, Yosha Gunasekera, Shane Hale, Jonathan Leggett, Katherine Mullis, Laura Parks, Alyssa Parry, Sarah Settle, Michelle Stanfield, Elaine Tolbert, Mary Walker, and Abigail Winegarten.

The final phase of investigation occurred between November 15 and 19, 2010 and involved the hand excavation, removal, and re-interment of three graves. This work was conducted by Johann Furbacher, Bill Jurgelski, and Eric Deetz in consultation with staff from the Catawba Tribal Historic Preservation Office. We wish to thank Ms. Beckee Garris for her thoughtful advice and assistance with this task. Prior to re-burial, a field assessment of the three graves was performed by Dr. Dale Hutchinson of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Cleaning and cataloging of the artifacts recovered from Ashe Ferry were performed by undergraduate employees and volunteers in the Research Laboratories of Archaeology. They included Jacqueline Berton, Jonathan Branch, Caroline Carter, Rosanna Crow, Elise Duffield, Shane Hale, Cassie Marcelo, Carmen Mendoza, Bouran Mozayen, Becka Rohrer, Sarah Settle, Archie Smith, Janice Tse, and Andy Valiunas. Duane Esarey and Andy Valiunas assisted Brett Riggs with the ceramic analysis. David Cranford analyzed the chipped stone projectile points from the site, and Elise Duffield, Bouran Mozayen, and Sarah Settle assisted Steve Davis with the analysis of other artifacts. Dr. Thomas R Whyte of Appalachian State University undertook the analysis of zooarchaeological remains, and Ashley Peles conducted the analysis of paleobotanical remains in consultation with Dr. C. Margaret Scarry of the University of North

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