

# FG/CCHS NEWS



FORT GAINES/ CLAY  
COUNTY HISTORICAL  
SOCIETY

Preserve, Protect, Promote

VOLUME 13 ISSUE 3

Late Winter/Spring 2023

## Special Points of Interest

- 86 lifetime, new and renewed members strong
- Annual Dinner planned for June
- Trent Tye fundraiser
- Cemocheechebi artifacts complete

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## THE 1974 CEMOCHEECHOBEE DIG

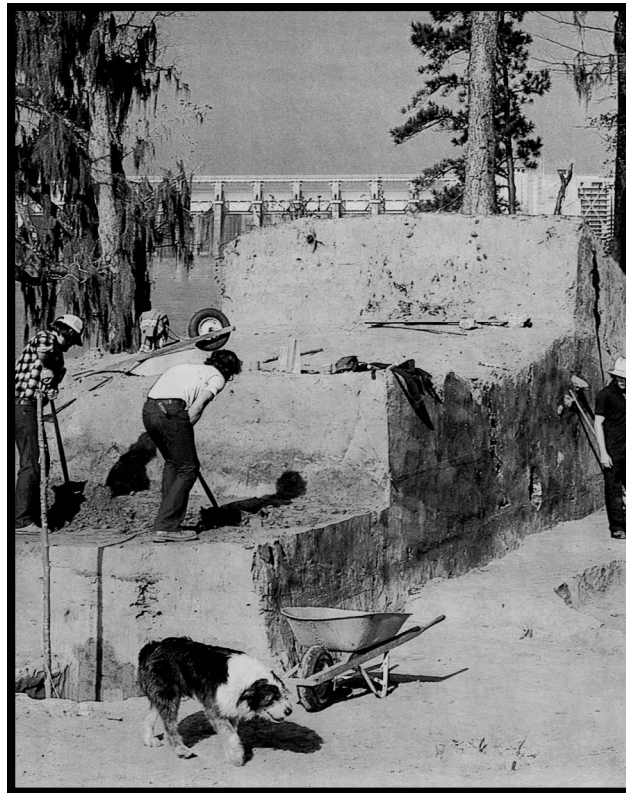


Photo from the files of J.E. Coleman

Archaeologist Frank Schnell and others working on Mound C.

The scholarly monograph Cemocheechee - Archaeology of a Mississippian Ceremonial Center on the Chattahoochee River is a detailed account of the 1970's archaeological excavation of what remained of a prehistoric village on the edge of the Chattahoochee. It was named for the creek that ran beside it that empties into the river. It had been initially noted in 1958 by scientists from the Smithsonian in a survey of areas to be cleared for construction of the Walter F. George Lock and Dam and was described as " a large village surrounding a group of

three adjacent platform mounds." The Smithsonian stated the complex covered approximately 25 acres and recommended further study. Despite that, only two 10 x 10 test excavations were done at the time. About two thirds of the Cemocheechee village area was bulldozed for construction of the dam.

Fast forward to 1974 when the Army Corps of Engineers realized that the three platform mounds on the East bank of the Chattahoochee just south of the dam were eroding into the river at an alarming rate. The Columbus Museum of Arts and Sciences, Inc. was hired and began a federally funded excavation of the site under the direction of archaeologist Frank Schnell. He and his band of scientists and students concentrated their efforts on what they dubbed the "Nuclear Zone" of the site. ( cont. pg 4)

For History Buffs:

CEMOCHEECHOBEE

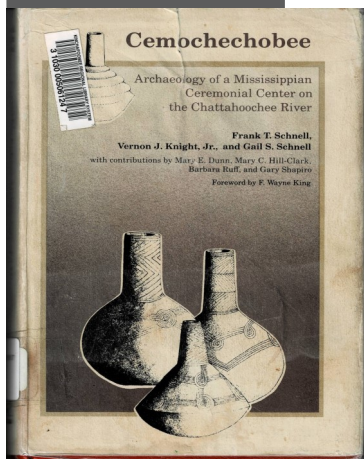
Archaeology of a  
Mississippian  
Ceremonial  
Center on the  
Chattahoochee  
River

Frank T. Schnell,  
Vernon K. Wright,  
And Gail S. Schnell

Cemocheechee  
(sumochi chobi)

was a prehistoric community consisting of a large village and three platform mounds on the Chattahoochee River. In 1974, the Columbus Museum of Arts and Sciences began an archaeological dig of the site which dated back from A.D. 900 to 1400.

This monograph chronicles that process.



# News and Notes

- The next **Board Meeting** of FG/CCHS will be held at the Sutton's Corner Museum at 4PM on **Monday May 1, 2023**. All meetings are open to the public and we invite you to attend.
- If you or your group would like a tour of the **Sutton's Corner Museum** please call **229-231-5498** or stop by the library and talk to Dustin.
- We are currently **planning the Annual Dinner Meeting** for all members for late June. Look for a separate mailing concerning same in early June.

## GIFT ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- |                     |                |
|---------------------|----------------|
| Betty K. Mills      | Joe Best       |
| Linda Morgan        | Cyndie Coleman |
| Ken & Diane Johnson | Lisa Shivers   |
| Robert Williams     | David Stone    |
| Peggy Brown         |                |

## WE HAVE OUR ARTIFACT REPLICAS !!!



On Sept 7, 2022, State archaeologist Karen Black delivered the last replicas of Native American vessels that had been on display at George Bagby Lodge for many years before being removed by the Corp of Engineers when the state leased the property to a private company. Board member Linda Morgan and State Representative Gerald Greene worked for years to locate the artifacts and get them returned to Clay County. This issue of the newsletter is about the Cemocheechee Creek archaeological dig that unearthed those artifacts, the history of the era and the people that created them.

# KNIFE FUNDRAISER



## Knives Hand Forged by Trent Tye

These blades are made right here in South Georgia, even sporting handles made from windfall Pecan trees. A 1075 blade makes for a durable and sharp tool, while the hand made leather sheath provides a handsome way to carry it. They are made by Trent Tye, former Host for Discovery Channel and a Forged in Fire Alumnus. The special knives are made to help support the work of the Fort Gaines/Clay County Historical Society and will even have a custom stamp!

See the enclosed order blank with pertinent information for each size and mailing instructions for your order.

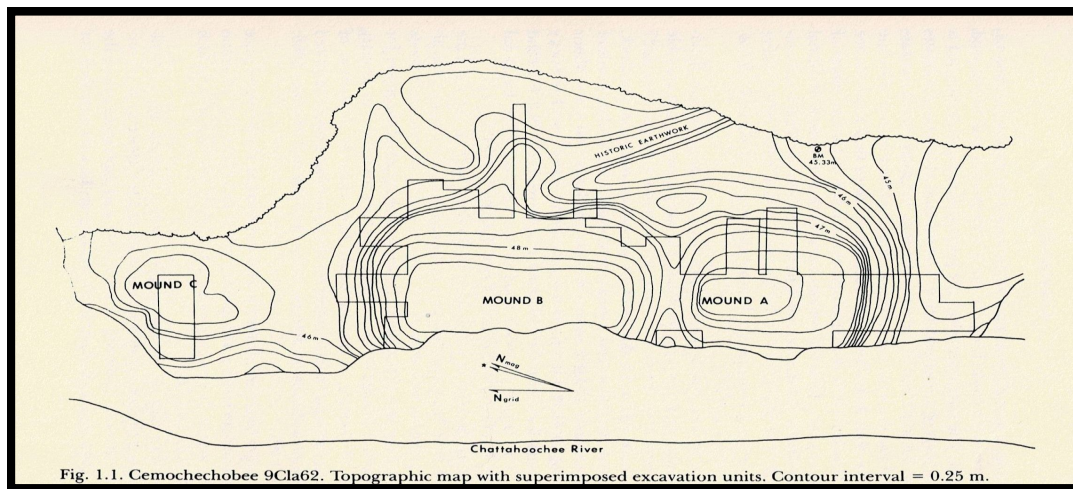




The Zone (comprised of the mounds and the immediate environs around them) consisted of four recurring elements: a mortuary complex, elite domiciles, a circular “hot house”, or council chamber and a ceremonial area. Archaeologists found that the village dated back to 900 AD and was occupied almost continuously for about 450 years until around 1400 AD. There were 19 stages of mound building which lasted about 21 to 24 years each. Each stage saw slight rearrangement of the positions and size of the various components. At the end of each phase the mounds were capped by a mantle of clay and sand. Sometimes when rebuilding started burial remains were dug up to be placed in the new mound addition. Pottery buried in the strata showed trends and identifiable improvements through time. The structures atop the mounds (domiciles and council chamber) were oriented “69 degrees to 83 degrees east of north and correspond to sunrises from April to August.” Archaeologists surmised that, “It may have been important that ceremonial structures and elite domestic residences face the rising summer sun exactly with its position perhaps measured each time new construction was planned during the ceremonial season.”

Two features are worth noting from the pre-mound stage and earliest establishment of the community. One was a dominant large vertical pole (a chunk pole) “around which ritual activities might have taken place and which might have been the focus of various games.” Another interesting feature was an “outdoor puddled clay hearth where finger marks in the clay were clearly visible. This hearth, which is unique to Cemocheechee, was ideally suited for the maintenance of ceremonial fires which might have been perpetually tended.”

Below: Fire pit in a domicile. Right: Aerial view of mound excavation. Note post holes indicating walls of structures.



Left: Topographic map showing all three mounds. The western flanks of Mounds A and B had completely collapsed into the Chattahoochee, leaving a nearly vertical profile of both mounds along the western edge of excavation. Profiles suggested that about a fourth of each mound (A and B) was destroyed by erosion.

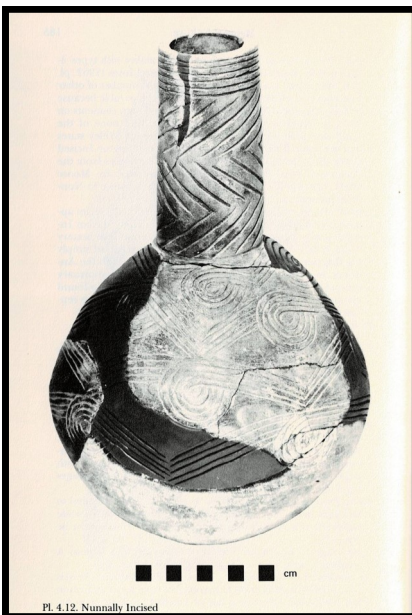
Fig. 1.1. Cemocheechee 9Cl62. Topographic map with superimposed excavation units. Contour interval = 0.25 m.

Included in the monograph was an analysis of the human burials analyzed from the excavation written by Mary C. Hill-Clark. She noted that thirty-four burials were recorded . The data gathered revealed “although no infants were interred, a total of five children, ages 6-10 years old, and one adolescent, age 12-15, were recovered. There were separately designated areas for the deposition of adults and children. The older individuals of the population represent two distinct categories: young adults (represented by 10 individuals, ages 18-25 years) and older adults (represented by 7 individuals , ages 30-50 years). Eleven adults of undetermined age were also interred. Males and females are represented in the adult categories.” In the individual descriptions of each burial it was sometimes noted that children and adults alike had teeth stained by a reddish-black vegetable dye.

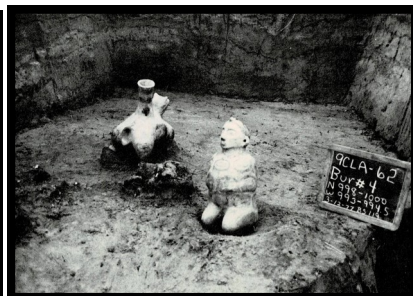
Among the grave goods of the burials were pottery effigies, vases, and ritually “killed” vessels. The “killed” vessels consisted of only a few sherds broken ceremonially. One of our replicas here at the museum closely resembles one of these fragmented “killed” vessels. (See picture bottom left.)

Other sections in the monograph appendix contained fascinating lists of all the flora and fauna found in the strata of the mounds and their individual amounts and weights giving a vivid picture of daily prehistoric life.

After the mounds were excavated, the Corps of Engineers provided funds for limited testing of the portions of the village area on federal property. Archaeologists were hampered by the small size of the land available for exploration as well as the disturbance of the village area by modern man. A grid system was established that tied into the one used for the mound group. Crossing the village area from north to south was a railroad trestle and embankment that was the eastern edge of federal property. An artificial road bed, power line cut , large borrow pits and the remains of a large 19th century brick kiln industry as well as surface erosion along two ravines made the work of finding evidence of the prehistoric village challenging. Nevertheless, village test excavations found evidence of middens (rubbish heaps) and “considerable pottery sherds and chipped lithic debitage (stone and flint chips and flakes).” Another “limiting factor” noted by the archaeologists in their final summary was that “much of the village area remains on private property, east of the embankment. We did not attempt to investigate this area.”



Above: Original pieces of a “killed” pottery vessel are placed on a clay mold to aid in reproduction.



Center top left: Seated effigy and vase from burial #4.



Center bottom left: Small effigy just plucked from grave site still covered with mud.



Bottom right: Intact pottery cache.

Photo from the files of J.E. Coleman

Note: All pictures in this article are from the Cemocheechee monograph except where specifically noted.

Frank Schnell, Vernon Wright, Gail Schnell, *Cemocheechee: Archaeology of a Mississippian Ceremonial Center on the Chattahoochee River*. Gainesville. University of Florida Press. 1981.



# THE MOUND BUILDERS



**The article below is a condensed version of Adam King's overview of the Mississippian Period in the New Georgia Encyclopedia.**

The Mississippian Period in the midwestern and southeastern United States, which lasted from A.D. 800 to 1600, saw the development of some of the most complex societies that ever existed in North America.

Mississippian people were farmers. They grew much of their food using simple tools like stone axes, digging sticks, and fire. Corn, beans and squash (the three sisters) plus sunflowers, goosefoot, sumpweed and other plants were cultivated. They also ate wild plants and animals, gathering nuts and fruits and hunting game such as deer and turkeys. Mississippians also collected fish, shellfish, and turtles from rivers and streams.

Mississippian people were organized as chiefdoms or ranked societies. People belonged to one of two groupings, elites or commoners. Elites, who made up a very small percentage of the population, had a higher social standing than commoners. Elites were also looked on as religious leaders. For example, the Natchez of Louisiana, believed that their chief and his immediate family were descended from the sun. The Natchez believed that their chief could influence important events like the spring rains, and the fall harvest. Because of these beliefs, elites received special treatment. Their houses and council chambers were placed on the platform mounds and their dead were interred within the mounds. They had special clothing and food and were exempt from everyday work like food production. The much more numerous commoners were the everyday producers of the society. They grew food, made crafts, and served as warriors and laborers for public works projects.

A typical Mississippian village consisted of a central plaza, residential zone, and sometimes defensive structures. Mississippian towns containing one or more mounds served as capitals of chiefdoms. The mounds were made of locally quarried soils and could stand as tall as 100 feet. Houses for the commoners were built around the plaza and placed around small courtyards that probably served the households of several related families. Villages rarely had more than a few hundred people.

Some of the most impressive achievements of Mississippian people are the finely crafted objects made of stone, marine shell, pottery, and native copper. These items belong to what is known as the Southeastern Ceremonial

**Complex (SECC).** The SECC is a set of objects and symbols usually found in ritual settings or as offerings in elite graves. Rather than being art simply for arts sake , many of these were important ritual items or parts of elite costumes.

In Georgia the Mississippian Period is divided into Early, Middle, and Late subperiods. The early Mississippian subperiod (A.D. 800-1100) was the time when the first chiefdoms developed.

During the Middle Mississippian subperiod (A.D. 1100-1350), large, powerful chiefdoms centered at imposing mound towns dominated the landscape. By far the largest and most impressive chiefdom capital at this time was the Etowah site, located in northwestern Georgia near Cartersville.

By the late Mississippian subperiod (A.D. 1350-1600), the large chiefdoms had broken apart into smaller chiefdoms whose centers were evenly distributed across Georgia's river valleys. Near the end of this period, from 1539 to 1543, Hernando de Soto and his army of Spaniards traveled through the Southeast in search of riches. Descriptions left behind tell of powerful chiefs ruling over territories that stretched for hundreds of miles. These paramount chiefdoms were loosely united confederacies of individual chiefdoms spread over large areas. The paramount chiefdom of Coosa had as many as seven smaller chiefdoms, all under a powerful chief living at the town also known as Coosa.

The Mississippian Period in Georgia was brought to an end by the increasing European presence in the Southeast. European diseases introduced by early explorers and colonists devastated native populations in some areas, and the desire for European goods and the trade in enslaved natives and ,later, deerskins caused whole social groups to relocate closer to or farther from European settlements. The result was the collapse of native chiefdoms as their populations were reduced, their authority structures were destroyed by European trade, and their people scattered across the region. Many remnant populations came together to form historically known native groups such as the Creeks, Cherokees, and Seminoles.

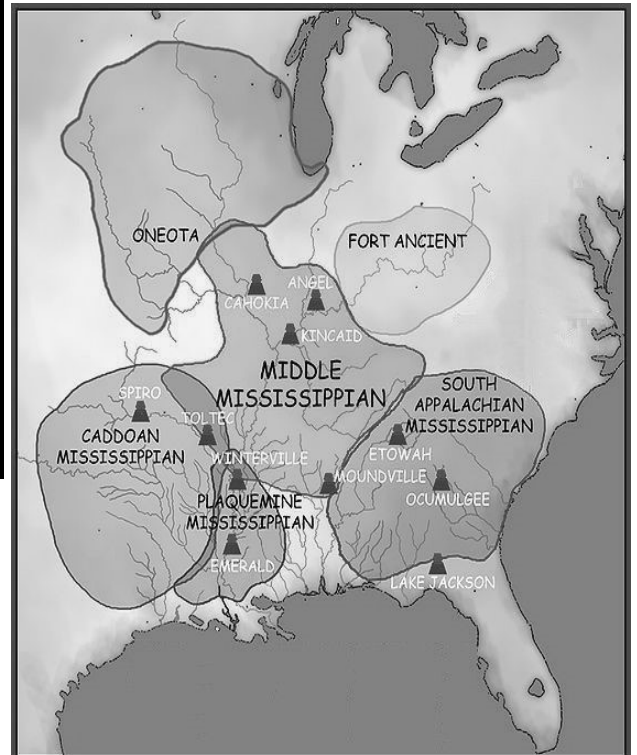
King, Adam, "The Mississippian Period." New Georgia Encyclopedia, last modified Jan. 6, 2021. Retrieved Mar. 6, 2023.

Pictures from Google Images



Above: Etowah Mounds State Park near Cartersville, Georgia.

Left: Regions of the Mississippian Cultures in North America. Maize (corn) based agriculture supported large populations and craft specialization. Widespread trade networks extended as far west as the Rocky Mountains, north to the Great Lakes, south to the Gulf of Mexico, and east to the Atlantic Ocean.



# Fort Gaines/Clay County Historical Society, Inc.

Fort Gaines/Clay County Historical Society, Inc.

159 Wilson St. Suite 7

Fort Gaines, GA 39851

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