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Early Choctaw settlement discovered in Mississippi

Exciting archaeological discoveries made this summer and fall in the Choctaw Homeland are helping us to learn more about our history. The Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation Department is collaborating with archaeologists in Kemper County, Mississippi, to study several recently discovered Choctaw sites that date to the 1700s and early 1800s. This is the first time that Choctaw archaeological sites dating to the earlier part of this time range have ever been studied, and work at these localities is providing us with a rare glimpse into the lives of our ancestors during the decades before the Trail of Tears.

Over the last few years, Mississippi Power, Liberty Fuels and North American Coal have been planning and conducting preliminary work on the construction of a new power plant and an associated lignite mine in Kemper County, Mississippi. This project, overseen by the U.S.

Department of Energy, falls under the National Historic Preservation Act, a federal law which requires the overseers of federally supported projects to make careful consideration of potential impacts to historic sites and Native American sacred sites before work begins. More than a year ago, the Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation Department was notified about the project, and has since been consulting with the Department of Energy concerning the project's potential for impacting important ancestral Choctaw sites. To further comply with the law, North American Coal also contracted with Mississippi State University to survey the lignite mining area, while Mississippi Power Company contracted several cultural resource management firms to conduct archaeological surveys at the future plant site and along all gas and transmission lines supporting the plant.

The archaeologists examined site records, early aerial photographs, and the topography of the area. They also conducted systematic shovel tests to see what types of material lay below the soil. Through these techniques, they located many archaeological sites; some thousands of years old, some only a few decades old.

At least 10 of them are Choctaw sites dating from the 1700s-1800s. Of these 10, some are significant, and portions of the proposed project have been moved to avoid damaging them. Work



Photo courtesy Hunter Johnson

A crew from Tennessee Valley Archaeological Research surveys one of the sites.

demonstrated that some of the other Choctaw had been previously disturbed, or were very ephemeral in nature. This left four other potentially substantial Choctaw sites sitting within the proposed lignite mine area and requiring further study.

The area in which these sites are located is right in the heart of the Choctaw homeland. Although we will not give details on these sites' exact locations in order to protect them from the threat of vandalism or looting, their location corresponds almost exactly with Henry Halbert's geographical description and map coordinates for hunting lodges and possibly other outposts of the Choctaw town of Shomo Takali (Hanging Moss).

This outpost was located about two miles away from the village itself, in a particular stream valley that abounded in springs and salt licks that attracted deer. According to Halbert (n.d.), speaking of the upland portion of this outpost; "These lodges occupied a most picturesque position, standing amid the massive moss clad oaks which the high hills were crowded, and overlooking the deep open valley of... to the west, which even in mid-winter was always clothed with a green luxuriant growth of vegetation."

Basic testing was conducted at the four sites to determine if they may be eligible for the National Register of Historic Places, as localities that have the potential to provide new information



Photo provided

Skyler Robinson prepares to do a ground penetrating radar (GPR) on one of the sites.

about American history. At the request the historic preservation departments of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma and the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians, Ground-Penetrating Radar (GPR) studies were also conducted to take a non-invasive look at what is buried under the soil, and to ascertain the possibility of Choctaw graves being located at the four sites. Skyler Robinson and James Carver from the Choctaw Nation Historic Preservation Department took Choctaw Nation's ground penetrating radar unit to Kemper County Mississippi and assisted with the survey.

The ground penetrating radar survey, combined with the shovel tests, and a few very small excavations, has turned up a number of interesting things at the sites. All four of the sites have many buried features: things such as hearths, filled in trash pits, and house foundations. At one of the sites, a large, anciently filled-in post hole was encountered and partially excavated by archaeologists. As they excavated it, they uncovered four large Choctaw clay pots, probably dating to the mid 1700s. Other than a few small fragments, this is the first time that Choctaw pottery dating to this time period has ever been uncovered by archaeologists. Studying these early pieces will help modern Choctaw potters to learn the techniques and design styles of our ancestors and aid in efforts to revitalize Choctaw traditional ceramics.

At another of the sites, a small, anciently filled pit was partially excavated. In the fill, archaeologists found Choctaw-made metal jewelry, glass beads, stone tools, fragmentary Choctaw ceramics, early 1800s European ceramics and glass, and plant materials including acorn shells and nuts, hickory hulls, corn, as well as possible remains of black walnut, squash rind, and a persimmon seed. Pig bone and eggs shell were found in the pit fill as well.

From just this small excavation, we learn a little bit about the activities our ancestors were conducting at the site, and a lot about the foods they were eating. These foods represented a diet that consisted of a combination of indigenous plant foods supplemented with domesticated animals that the Choctaw communities obtained from Europeans and then raised themselves. This, as well as the range of artifacts recovered supports a few rare written sources from the time period that suggest Choctaw communities during these decades were eclectic, maintaining some elements of

traditional life, and adopting others items and traits from Europeans to suit their preferences.

This work confirmed that at least three of the four sites are Choctaw, and that all four have extensive archaeological deposits capable of providing a lot of new information about Choctaw history. All four are eligible for listing on the National Register, because of their potential to provide new information about Choctaw history.

The time period to which they date is particularly significant. Archaeology has been able to give us a lot of information about the history of our ancestors 1,000s of years ago, but has told us very little about Choctaw life from AD 1600-1800. The "missing" period from 1600-1800 was a critical point in Choctaw history, in which our ancestors fought to maintain their sovereignty in the face of colonial powers, adopted smaller, weaker Tribes into the larger body of Choctaws, and created a society whose members traveled to Oklahoma and established the Choctaw Nation as it is today.

We don't currently know a lot of details about this period, but it would be nice to learn, because it was such an important time in our history. Of course, to many Choctaw people these sites also have value far beyond the information that they contain, representing physical traces of Choctaw ancestors' homes, and a Choctaw traditional lifeway that is the foundation of today's Choctaw traditional culture.

The newly discovered Choctaw archaeological sites have a great potential to tell us about our ancestors and history. However, we must never lose sight of the fact that they were made and lived in by our ancestors, and are in a sense, sacred. The next step is for the ground penetrating radar data to be synthesized and thoroughly analyzed to see if any of the sites may contain Choctaw burials. Then, a plan of action will be created to minimize impacts to possible burials, and at the same time to gather as much information as possible from the rest of the sites about the lives of our ancestors before mining activities impact them.

Much is yet to happen, but thanks to what our ancestors left at these sites, in a year or two we may know much, much more about Choctaw history and the lives of our forebears than we do today.

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Above, a 1700's Choctaw ceramic vessel recovered from one of the sites (courtesy TVAR). At right, an artistic rendering by Ruby Bolding of another one of the recovered vessels.



Photos provided