Exploratory Archaeological Excavations at the Shelton Mill Site, Chattanooga, Tennessee

By
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Research Contributions, Number One
The Jeffrey L. Brown Institute of Archaeology
University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

1986
PREFACE

In 1977 Dr. Jeffrey L. Brown, then Director of the Institute of Archaeology and a member of the faculty in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, wrote and produced an in-house publication on test excavations he had supervised at one of Chattanooga's most important archaeological sites. Entitled "Exploratory Archaeological Excavations at the Bluff Furnace Site," the report was intended to be the first in a continuing series of research publications centering on Institute projects. It was produced as a small booklet and was labeled as "Miscellaneous Publications #1." Brown's untimely death in 1980 prevented the appearance of subsequent publications.

As the present Director of what is now the Jeffrey L. Brown Institute of Archaeology, I feel it is time to revive the publication effort begun by my predecessor. For over ten years the Institute has been vigorously involved in all three areas of its intended mission—education, research, and service—and the concrete results of this involvement need to be shared with the community that ultimately supports and sponsors its work. Besides being of use to professional archaeologists, the new publication series is intended to make local archaeology more accessible to nonspecialists who share an interest in this area's unique history and prehistory. I am preoccupied enough with my own field to believe that archaeology provides one of the best ways, and sometimes the only way, to answer some of the most important questions that we can ask about ourselves: where did we come from, how did we get here, and why do we behave in the ways in which we do? It is in attempting to answer such basic and interesting questions that archaeology continues to define its place as a meaningful field in the social sciences.

The new publication series bears the name "Research Contributions" and will be applied to any non-contractual project carried out or supported by the Institute. The present report, authored by R. Bruce Council, Research Assistant with the Institute, is a wonderfully appropriate choice for initiating the series. He documents a one-day test excavation carried out at a 19th century flour mill in downtown Chattanooga. Thirty high school students enrolled in a National Endowment for the Humanities regional history project provided equal amounts of enthusiasm and labor for the fieldwork; the Institute provided supervision, expertise and equipment. Thus, the project contributed to the educational enrichment of local students while at the same time achieving a fuller and more accurate understanding of Chattanooga's urban industrial development.

Future reports planned for the series include the results of grant-funded research by the Institute; reports on excavations carried out by students enrolled in the UTC Archaeological Field Methods course; and a variety of individual student research projects. I can't think of a more fitting tribute to the memory of the Institute's founder.

Nicholas Honerkamp
Director
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to acknowledge the following individuals and organizations for their assistance in the research effort at the Shelton Mill Site. The Tennessee Valley Authority kindly gave permission to excavate the site, which is located on their property. In Chattanooga, Chris McDowel and Henry Crine, Jr., of the TVA Management Support Staff coordinated our efforts and helped draw up an excavation agreement between their agency and the Institute. Also assisting us were Jill Elmendorf and Bennett Graham of TVA's Cultural Resources Program. Thirty high school students enrolled in an NEH Youth Project (GZ-222S3-86) were involved in the research; almost all of them were introduced to fieldwork by excavating large amounts of cinder and demolition fill under what can only be described as adverse conditions. The effort and energy of these fieldworkers is greatly appreciated. The NEH participants were: David L. Adams, Ellen Ashton, Brooke Beaty, Tassi R. Betts, Alan Burton, Roderick Chappell, LaShawn Crenshaw, Stacy Davis, William Eiseltstein, Krista Harris, Jonathan Haynes, Melana Heinss, Raymond Howard, Chris Hubbuch, Martha Kropff, David Lowe, Marcus Lyons, Tara Maddock, Michelle McCurdy, Karyn McKinney, Gary Miller, Jana Parrish, Kimberly Price, NaJuana Reid, Jennifer Roberts, Pam Scoggins, Vaughn Stanford, Camille Stulce, Melanie Stulce, and Erica Willocks. The course was directed by Drs. Robert Fulton and Lucien Ellington; Dr. Fulton became deeply involved in the excavation.

The cost of this publication was borne by the Institute's Gift Fund. The friends and contributors who continue to support our work, and who made this report possible, are gratefully acknowledged.
INTRODUCTION

As part of a National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) Youth Project entitled "Chattanooga: Doing Regional History," 30 local high school students under the direction of University of Tennessee at Chattanooga faculty engaged in an intensive historical research orientation program in June, 1986. One facet of this program was an introduction to the discipline of archaeology. Drs. Nicholas Honerkamp and Robin Smith of the Jeffrey L. Brown Institute of Archaeology, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, made presentations to the NEH students on archaeological research methods and regional overviews in prehistory and the historic period. In order to (1) carry out survey-level archaeological research at a significant urban site while (2) simultaneously providing practical field experience in historical and industrial archaeology for the NEH students, the Institute of Archaeology conducted a one-day exploratory archaeological excavation on a tract of land owned by the Tennessee Valley Authority in downtown Chattanooga, Tennessee.

Demolition and clearing around a historic 1895 brick flour mill, originally known as the Shelton Mill, and most recently occupied by the S&M Supply Company of Chattanooga, provided access for a short reconnaissance excavation around the mill structure. Previous archaeological research conducted by the Institute in adjacent areas (Council and Honerkamp 1984) provided valid research questions which could be addressed in an exploratory format. The objective of the excavation was to evaluate the archaeological potential of the terrain around the Shelton Mill, principally to determine if modern construction has affected the preservation of mill and pre-mill related cultural deposits. Permission was obtained from the Tennessee Valley Authority to undertake a reconnaissance excavation at the Shelton Mill Site. This report summarizes the excavation.

The phrase "project area" is used below to denote the tract of land in incorporated Chattanooga, Tennessee, bounded on the east by Broad Street, south by 13th Street, and west and north (south of 12th Street) by the track right-of-way of the Southern Railroad; similarly, "test area" is used to denote the northeastern portion of the project area around the Shelton Mill proper. The larger project area is a portion of the Tennessee Valley Authority's Phase II construction area associated with their recently-completed Chattanooga Office Complex north of 12th Street.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Prior to the excavation, historic maps and documents were consulted to determine the nature of past improvements within the test and project area (as defined above). This information, in conjunction with the findings of earlier archaeological projects in the vicinity, was used to predict the location of specific features which could be targeted during the exploratory excavations. Development of the project area is discussed in detail in Council and Honerkamp (1984).

The project area was sparsely developed prior to the Civil War. In the ante-bellum period, the southern limit of the town was along 9th Street or M. L. King Boulevard. The development of the area south of the city proper was structured largely by the construction of the Western and Atlantic and the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroads. Both railroads shared common passenger facilities and freight yards in the area between Market and Chestnut Streets on the east and west and 9th and 12th Streets on the north and south. The tracks of the Western and Atlantic entered the yards from the southeast and the Nashville and Chattanooga entered from the southwest. The tracks joined above a connecting curve, forming a "Y," the stem of which lead to the Union Depot train shed. The project area falls inside the curve of the Y.
Maps and photographs made during the Civil War provide the first documentation of improvements south of the railyards. The homestead of Judge Robert Hooke was situated (in part) in the project area. A plan of Chattanooga drawn by occupying Federal troops in late 1863 and a photograph of the same date (see Council and Honerkamp 1984: 17-18) illustrate this homestead and the open grove of trees in the project area. Thirteenth Street was an existing right-of-way in 1863, but the 12th street right-of-way through the railyards area was not created until 1980. Substantial improvements were made in the project area during 1864 by the construction corps of the United States Military Railroad (USMR). Principal among the structures built in or immediately east of the test area was a timber blockhouse. This fortification consisted of a four-pronged lower story of rectangular bastions surmounted by catty-cornered square upper story (see Figure 1). Most if not all of these structures were demolished in the Fall of 1865.

After the Civil War, the project area was utilized for residential and commercial purposes. The firm of Wisdom and Owen built large stables in the middle and along the west and northwest flanks of the project area. One boarding house and a half dozen tenement houses were built along 13th Street. In the test area, adjoining the railroad tracks, was one small building of unknown function. It is conceivable that it was built by the USMR and retained as a watchman's shanty by the N&C railroad or as a private residence. This structure appears in the 1871 perspective view of Chattanooga by A. Ruger. In the 1886 Norris, Wellge and Company perspective view (Figure 2), and in the 1889 G. M. Hopkins and Company platbook of Chattanooga, there are two small buildings in the vicinity of the test area.

Detailed documentary research on the S&M Supply Company structure has not been undertaken by the Institute; only a brief summary of the structure can be presented here. Clement Clay Shelton arrived in Chattanooga in 1871 and was engaged in the grocery business until 1876, when he constructed a flour mill on the east side of Market Street between First and Second Streets. Wilson (1980:172-173) describes Shelton's early activities in Chattanooga and also presents a picture of a crew of workmen inside the 1876 mill. The two and three story brick structure on Broad Street was built by C. C. Shelton in 1895 as a steam-powered flour mill. The following account is from the July 14, 1895 issue of the Chattanooga Times:

The New Shelton Mills

The handsome brick structure a short distance west of Market Street, adjoining what is known as the railway "Y" is nearing completion, and when in operation will be known as Shelton's mills. The main structure is 104 feet by 50 feet, three stories high, seventeen feet each story and there is an enormous brick smoke stack, engine house, boiler house and warehouse. The brickwork has been done in the most substantial manner by Fisher & Brown and the carpenter work has been done by the day under the supervision of John Herdeck. When in running order these mills are expected turn out about 500 barrels of flour daily. The brick used in the building were manufactured at the Chattanooga River Brick company's works, and from roof to foundation is Chattanooga material.

C. C. Shelton, in operating this mill, will introduce an entirely new system of flour making known as the Bavarian process, which has never been seen in use before south of the Ohio river. The very best results are confidently expected.

The 1901 Sanborn Fire Insurance Map edition for Chattanooga provides a detailed summary of the mill complex (Figure 3). The main structure consisted of two integrated brick buildings sharing common stone footings and lower walls. A two story warehouse abutted the
three story mill; the fourth story of the mill consisted of an attic space lit by gabled dormers. The brick walls rested on limestone footings which enclosed a utilized basement space. Throughout its history as a mill, grain was delivered to the plant by rail; a spur off the main lines was situated on the north side of the mill. A one-story structure on the north side of the mill and warehouse sheltered loading and unloading operations from rail cars. Wooden loading ramps were situated on the north and east sides of the structure. A steam power plant in an adjoining structure was structurally segregated from the mill to minimize fire hazards. A 200 horsepower steam engine fed by two boilers powered the mill; an 85 foot smoke stack provided the draft for the power plant. The power transmission to the mill was presumably mechanical. A small structure with an ironclad roof situated at the southwest corner of the mill yard may have been a water closet or privy. Peak and Thomas and Sons were the proprietors of the mill, and the Sanborn map provides details about the mill machinery (see Figure 3). Between the mapping for the 1901 edition of the Sanborn Fire Insurance map and for the 1914 G. M. Hopkins Company map of Chattanooga a small addition was constructed along the south wall of the mill. The structure appears to shelter a small loading dock and can be seen in a 1918 photograph which appears in Heiner (1961: 90).

In 1928 Broad Street was extended south from 9th Street (now M. L. King Boulevard) through the railyards of the Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis Railway and passed immediately east of the mill warehouse. This street construction gave the mill commercial frontage on a major thoroughfare. In this period the Shelton Mill advertised its "Hungarian System" flour products which included "Shelton's Best", Hungarian Purity Flour" and "Matchless Flour" (Connelly Directory Company 1925: 248). The milling operation may have been suspended in 1936; in that year the Security Feed and Seed Company took over the structures at 1201-15 Broad Street (Rothberger Directory Company 1936). This company occupied the property until 1956-7 (Rothberger Directory Company 1957). In 1958 the S&M Supply Company occupied the structure as a building materials warehouse (Rothberger Directory Company 1958). The structure was vacated in 1984.

The Tennessee Valley Authority is currently developing a parking facility in the project area to serve personnel in the Chattanooga Office Complex. Excepting the Shelton Mill building and several unrelated 20th century structures south of the mill and fronting on Broad Street, the standing architecture in the project area has been razed. The covered loading dock on the north side of the mill was removed in the early 1980s. During the last several decades the additions on the south side of the mill had been consolidated under one roof; this low addition was removed recently, as was a portion of an early 20th century refrigeration plant southwest of the mill proper (see Figure 6). In September, 1986, a parking lot was constructed south of the test area, impinging somewhat on the excavated areas on the south and west sides of the mill building.

THE EXPLORATORY EXCAVATIONS

Some limited archaeological testing was done in the project area by the Institute of Archaeology in 1981. Results of the testing program at the "Mock-Up Site" are included in Council and Honerkamp (1984:118-132), a document which summarizes the major archaeological research program performed by the Institute on the tract of land under the office complex north of the project area. In the Union Railyards excavations substantial remains from the Civil War period were encountered. Soil aggradation by the accumulation of industrial waste (coal cinder and clinker, primarily) had buried and preserved these features which provided information on period railroad construction practices, industrial and technological change through time, and industrial site ecology.

The test excavations at the Shelton Mill Site were intended to be of a very restricted, exploratory nature. Only one day was available for excavation and recording at the site. The
archaeological reconnaissance of the site was restricted to areas immediately adjacent to the S&M building (the test area as defined above). The overall objective of the exploration was to determine the archaeological research potential of the site, specifically, to observe if soil profile aggradation had preserved evidence of the Civil War blockhouse discussed above (or related activity) and later industrial site utilizations, particularly the mill itself.

There were several specific objectives of the field program. Excavations in the adjacent Union Railyards Site in 1980 had uncovered stone-lined, cedar-capped drains tentatively dated to the Civil War. These drains ran north to south, and were followed south through the right-of-way of 12th Street; the termini of these drains were not found. The line of one of these drains was projected to pass c. 7 m off the southwest corner of the mill building. One search trench was designed to determine if, in fact, the drain continued into the Shelton Mill vicinity. Another test unit was placed as close as practicable to Broad Street to observe site stratigraphy and possibly encounter footing trenches for the blockhouse. A third trench on the south side of the building was situated to observe site stratigraphy and changes in ground surface levels through time, i.e., site aggradation. In all three trenches it was anticipated that features and debris from the mill would be encountered.

Extremely warm weather conditions, the lack of intensive crew training, and the one-day time limit on the program severely limited the size and intensity of the excavations despite the large size of the crew. Field recording of the excavations consisted principally of photographic documentation and narrative note-taking. The fieldwork was supervised by Drs. Nicholas Honerkamp and Robin Smith of the Institute of Archaeology, Dr. Robert Fulton, and R. Bruce Council, Research Instructor, Institute of Archaeology.

The facades of the Shelton Mill were photographed prior to the excavation (Figure 4 and 5). Windows lighting the ground floor of the structure had been bricked in at some point in the past, and the ground floor elevation at the time of the excavation was about three feet below grade; this relief may have been much greater prior to machine clearing in the area. Soil stains on the south facade of the mill suggest removal of about 30 cm of fill during demolition activities. Various aspects of the initial reconnaissance strongly indicated aggradation of the ground surface around the mill after its original construction.

Three search trenches were laid out around the building (Figure 6). Trench A was situated on the north side of the building abutting a brick loading dock; this trench was positioned to (possibly) encounter the blockhouse. The trench was 2 m wide and 4 m long. Trench B was placed on a magnetic east-west line extending from the approximate midpoint of the west wall of the mill. The excavated trench commenced at a point approximately 4.1 m west of the mill (along the diagonal) and was carried to length of 14 m. Trench B was intended to encounter the subterranean cedar-capped drain from the adjacent Union Railyards Site. The trench was 1.5 m wide. Trench C was situated on the south side of the building and was 2 m wide and 4 m long; it was situated to observe ground level changes with respect to the Shelton Mill/S&M building.

Removal of the compacted surficial gravel in Trench A (Figure 7) revealed four in situ railroad crossties from a recently abandoned railbed. These four ties were removed. The ground beneath the railbed was quite compacted and difficult to remove by hand. Approximately 1 m of cinder fill was removed until time constraints dictated that the area of the excavation be halved. No features other than the modern railbed were encountered in the trench.

Excavations in Trench B produced four features of late 19th century origin. In the east end of the trench a limestone wall footing designated Feature 2 was exposed. Immediately west of the footing was a brick and timber construction designated Feature 3. Feature 3 was more fully exposed by an extension of the trench to the south. A narrow brick footing surrounded a heavy reinforced timber framework (see Figure 8). On the east and west elements of this timber
framework were bolted heavy cast iron bearings or pillow blocks. These pillow blocks had served as mounts for a short horizontal axle attached to a gear, pulley or flywheel. The width of the wheel pit inside the timber joists was 82 cm. The maximum diameter of the wheel, pulley or gear mounted in the pit could not have exceeded 1.18 m. The interior fill of the feature was not removed due to time constraints. Both Features 2 and 3 had been covered by a concrete pad of modern origin. Feature 4, exposed in the west end of Trench B, was a limestone wall footing similar in dimensions and construction to Feature 2. South of this footing was a continuous brick floor, designated Feature 5 (Figure 9).

Features 2 and 4 are very probably one in the same, specifically, the wall foundations to the mill powerhouse. Based on analysis of the 1901 Sanborn map of the mill, Trench B crossed the northeast corner of the powerhouse engine room. Feature 5 is evidently the floor to the powerhouse; heavy steam boilers in the structure rested on a brick-surfaced earthen floor rather than a suspended timber floor. Feature 3 is interpreted as a flywheel or gear/pulley pit; the axle of the pit appears to align with an aperture in the west mill foundation 6 m to the east. It is speculated that the power transmission to the mill was mechanical, via a line shaft from the powerhouse into the ground floor level of the mill. However, there are other power transmission possibilities and the evidence is not sufficient to draw a firm conclusion.

Feature 1, in Trench C, appears to be the foundation of an addition to the mill dating to the period 1901 - 1914 (as discussed above). The feature consists of various brick foundation elements, including a continuous wall footing and several piers (Figure 10). The ground surface adjacent to Trench C had aggraded perhaps 60 cm after the construction of the addition. The basement window(s) had been bricked in before the construction of the addition. Regrettably, constraints did not permit exposing the original 1895 construction trench to the mill; these data would have permitted an assessment of the total aggradation at the site since 1895.

Only a limited number of artifacts were retrieved during the excavation, and none of the items were recovered from controlled contexts; only the machine-disturbed surficial layers of fill were removed in most cases before features were encountered. Artifacts generated by the excavation are permanently curated at the Institute of Archaeology. For safety and liability reasons, the open excavations were backfilled by heavy equipment within a few days of completion of the project.

CONCLUSIONS

Due to time constraints, subsurface exposures around the Shelton Mill were extremely limited. In Trenches B and C, only the uppermost layers of construction/demolition rubble and fill were removed before exposure of features associated with the 1895 Shelton Mill halted the exploration. Although greater depth was reached in Trench A, no features were encountered. In none of the trenches, however, was the culturally-sterile subsoil clay reached. While no structural or artifactual evidence of Civil War activity was observed, the limited tests are not sufficient to demonstrate that such evidences are not present under or around the Shelton Mill.

In summary, evidence of the sought-after Civil War Blockhouse was not found, but the excavations were not intensive or extensive enough to encounter all possible remains. The extension of Broad Street into the project area in 1928 may have impacted remains associated with the blockhouse. The Civil War period drain was likewise not encountered, possibly due to the incompleteness of the exploratory testing. Features associated with the Shelton Mill's steam power plant were encountered in relatively good condition. The excavations adequately documented aggradation of soil profiles in the test area by the accumulation of industrial waste, principally coal cinder and clinker.
Remains associated with the Shelton Mill are now relatively close to the present ground surface immediately surrounding the mill building. Further grading or subsurface alterations around the mill will deleteriously affect mill-related structures such as the power plant and loading docks formerly attached to the structure. Any renovation of the Shelton Mill should be conducted with sensitivity toward buried archaeological resources associated with or predating the mill.

The exploratory excavations at the Shelton Mill Site demonstrated the archaeological potential of the area, however. Aggradation due to the accumulation of industrial wastes over the last century has buried the cultural landscapes of 19th and early 20th century Chattanooga. The resultant aggradation has created an "underground Chattanooga" of considerable archaeological research potential. Unlike adjoining areas tested during the Mock-Up site excavations in January, 1981, (Council and Honerkamp 1984:18-132) the immediate vicinity of the Shelton Mill does not seem to have been degraded by 20th century construction or recent demolition activities.

Modern residents of the city may not be aware of the reason for deliberate aggradation or building up of the ground surface. Periodic flooding of low-lying areas within the city limits was common until the Tennessee Valley Authority completed its system of dams on the Tennessee River. The project area has been inundated by floods three times since careful records were initiated in the mid-19th century; in 1867, 1875, and 1886. In Chattanooga's greatest flood, in March, 1867, locomotives standing in the railyards north of the project area were nearly completely covered by the flood waters (see Tennessee Valley Authority 1959). During the late 19th and early 20th centuries industrial fill, such as locomotive cinder and clinker from the downtown railyards, has been deliberately used to raise the grade of low terrain in the economically-valuable properties in and around the city. It is highly probable that the first floor of the Shelton Mill stood at ground level in 1895 although it is now a semi-subterranean basement.

More intensive excavations, employing heavy machinery as needed and targeting specific structures depicted on 19th and early 20th century town plats, could contribute to significant new data on the Civil War period in Chattanooga and industrial development of Chattanooga's urban landscape. The historic status of the Shelton Mill has been recognized by the Tennessee Valley Authority and the State of Tennessee; although no formal nomination has been prepared, the Shelton Mill is considered by TVA to be potentially eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places. It is hoped that the historic structure will be preserved through adaptive reuse and that further archaeological research will be conducted at the site.
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Figure 1. Federal blockhouse south of the Chattanooga railyards, 1864. This elaborate timber blockhouse was constructed by Federal troops to protect the southern approach to the railyards through which critical materiel and troops were being transported during the Atlanta campaign. The fortification stood south of the "Y" linking the Western and Atlantic Railroad and Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad. The blockhouse and adjacent structures built by the United States Military Railroad were demolished after the cessation of the Civil War.
Figure 2. Detail from the Norris, Wellge and Company perspective view, "Chattanooga, Seat of Hamilton County, Tennessee, 1886." Approximate location of test area is circled. Most of the project area was occupied by the stables of Wisdom and Owen; residential cottages and a boarding house were built along 13th Street. Broad Street did not bisect the railyards and the area south of the "Y" until 1928.
Figure 3. Detail from the 1901 edition of the Sanborn Fire Insurance Map of Chattanooga. The discontinuity cutting across the powerhouse at left is a cut-and-paste revision dating to c. 1914; the revision does not affect the powerhouse. This detail, facing north-northwest, notes the details of the machinery employed within the mill proper.
Figure 4. North facade of the Shelton Mill / S&M Supply Company building off Broad Street. This view faces southwest.
Figure 5. South facade of the Shelton Mill. This view faces north-northwest toward 12th Street and the new Chattanooga Office Complex of the Tennessee Valley Authority. The bricked-in basement windows through the walls of the limestone foundation can be seen at present ground surface.
Figure 6. Plan of trenches at the Shelton Mill. Demolition of structures indicated with dashed outlines opened previously inaccessible areas of the site to archaeological exploration.
Figure 7. High School students from the NEH Youth Program excavating in Trench A.
Figure 8. Features 2 and 3 in Trench B. The fieldstone foundation of the powerhouse, Feature 2, is at right. Feature 3 consisted of a timber framework surrounded by a light brick footing. The pillow or bearing blocks mounted the axle of a gear, pulley or flywheel associated with the steam-powered mill engines.
Figure 9. The limestone footing, Feature 4, (in the background), encloses the brick flooring, Feature 5, at the west end of Trench B.
Figure 10. Feature 1 in Trench C consisted of various elements of a brick structure situated against the south mill house wall; the elements include a continuous footing on the south, west and north, and two small pier bases (above the shadow line). Note the bricked-in window which lighted the basement story of the mill.
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