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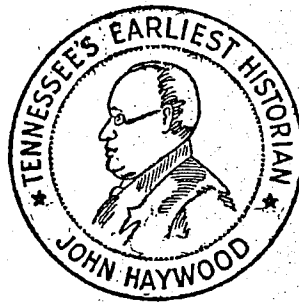
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An Adventure into the Prehistory of the Memphis Area

BY KENNETH L. BEAUDOIN

Prehistory in Shelby County and the Memphis Area is that legendary time prior to 1542, the events of which can only be inferred from the remains of the people who occupied the area prior to the coming of De Soto.¹ This poses the problem of differentiating between prehistoric sites which existed prior to De Soto's arrival and the historic sites known to have been occupied by the Chickasaws in Shelby County, Western Tennessee, and Northern Mississippi since 1542. Inasmuch as most of the Chickasaw villages were involved in the bear oil trade with the French after 1733, these sites are relatively easy to date, since historic contact material (or European trade articles) are invariably found on historic² sites and a general degeneracy of the once highly developed primitive arts is evident. The dating of sites subsequent to 1542 and up to 1733, which was a period during which only very limited trade relations existed between the French traders and the aborigines, is much more conjectural and much less satisfactory. To establish a site as prehistoric one must rely on such evidence as that found at the Nodena Site in Eastern Arkansas, where in 1897 a tree with nearly six hundred rings was removed from the top of a mound on the site. This establishes the fact that it started growing in the 13th century and that

¹ The present author believes that the United States De Soto Expedition Commission (see John R. Swanton's final report of this commission in *House Exec. Docs.* 71, 76th Cong., 1 Sess., 1939) erred in interpreting the evidence on De Soto's crossing of the Mississippi. The Commission places the crossing at present-day Clarksdale, Mississippi, but it seems likely that the De Soto party, travelling as it did with 800 pigs and several hundred Indian slaves over a country through which there were no roads, would have selected a highland route rather than travelling in the lowlands to Clarksdale. The highland route will not carry one to the Mississippi River except in the vicinity of Memphis. It is the author's belief that De Soto left the highlands near present day Walls, Mississippi, surprised the inhabitants of Chisca or Quisqui at what is known as the Irby Site in De Soto County, Mississippi, and proceeded either to Walls Site or to the T. O. Fuller Site near Memphis. The towns which were situated on the Walls or Fuller Sites most closely fit the description of the capital city of Chisca in the de la Vega account. For a more detailed explanation, see Kenneth L. Beaudoin, *Some Ceramic Clues to the Boundaries of the Empire of Pacaha*, unpublished manuscript.

² As used here, the term historic will denote that period subsequent to the first known contact between the aborigines and the whites; the term prehistoric will refer to that period prior to De Soto's expedition in 1542.

the mound had been built prior to that date. Although such evidence still leaves the actual date of the site somewhat indefinite, it probably is not too much to infer that the surface occupation of the site had been from a date prior to the planting of the tree in the 13th century until some date considerably after the time the tree started growing on the mound.

Such adventures into the prehistory of Shelby County and the Memphis area as can be made at this time must be based upon evidence which the author uncovered at the T. O. Fuller Site in the course of the Memphis Archaeological and Geological Society excavations; upon material which was uncovered there many years ago by Mr. G. E. Barnes, who worked on the site before it was owned by the State, and when it was known locally as the Barrett Farm; and upon material from other sites in the vicinity. The T. O. Fuller Site and the people who occupied it will have to be the ones around whom our inferences will be oriented, because they are the group about whom more is known than any other group in the area except the Nodena Culture in Eastern Arkansas and the Walls group in De Soto County, Mississippi. The latter group seems to be closely related to the Fuller group.

The T. O. Fuller Site, unlike many others in the area, is located in the highlands—on the heights to the South of the confluence of Nonconnah Creek with Tennessee Chute. The village itself was a fairly extensive one (possibly 200 or more dwellings), and was laid out in plaza arrangement around two very impressive mounds which obviously were the ceremonial center of the village. This rather establishes the village as what is known as a typical Mid-Mississippian Temple Mound period site which would date the village as having had its surface occupation, in all probability, sometime between the early 13th century and the middle 16th century.

The people can be classed as agricultural. Carbonized corn removed in the course of the Memphis Archaeological and Geological Society excavations has been studied by Volney H. Jones of the University of Michigan, who has classified it as either a variety of Guatemalan Tropical Flint type corn or a hybrid between the Eastern Complex corn usually associated with Mid-Mississippian sites and the Hohokam basket maker type corn, thus further fixing the date of occupation of the site's earliest Mississippian occupation as possibly the early part of the 13th century. Cultivated beans, persimmon seeds, hickory nuts, plum seed and carbonized cane oc-

curred in the midden with sufficient frequency to establish them as important adjuncts to the Fuller people's diet.

The Fuller people were hunters and fishermen as well, and the list of faunal remains removed from the midden indicates that the area was rich in game at the time of their occupation. The presence of whole deer skulls in the midden suggests the use of ruses while hunting deer, a common practice among other historic and prehistoric groups. Bone fish hooks in the Barnes Collection suggest that at least some of the fish were caught by the hook and line method still in use today. The type of arrows found in the midden suggest that the Fuller hunters were bowmen rather than spear throwers.

Deer, turkey, box turtle, and cat fish were probably very important items in their diet. Examination of the faunal remains did not establish any dietary taboos on their part, though some of the animal and bird remains found may have been more important for their feathers and their skins than as items in the Fuller people's diet. It is hardly likely that the limited quantity of skunk, reptile, owl, and eagle remains found in the midden represent items in the Fuller people's diet unless, which is possible, they were eaten ceremonially to get the "medicine" from the animal involved.

An examination of the skulls uncovered at the site establishes the people racially as Mongoloids, as most American Indians were and are. Judging from the skeletal remains, they were a relatively small people, averaging in height about 5 feet 2 inches. Some of the burials were "bundle reburials," which suggests that many people died away from home either on hunting trips or on war parties. One bundle reburial was of a mother and her infant child buried together, an indication that infanticide may have been practiced in cases where mothers with young children died on the hunt or away from home. An arm bone of still another skeleton, a hunch back, showed evidence of syphilis in an advanced stage.

Some indication of the type houses occupied by the Fuller people may perhaps be given by a description of one that was uncovered. This house was more or less square, measuring 20 by 28 feet, and was made of wattles plastered on both sides with mud. The sole entrance to this house was in the northeast corner and was protected by a windbreak. Carbonized thatch removed from the midden indicates that the house may have had a thatched roof. The hearth was located roughly in the center of the dwelling, just out of range of the sup-

ports for the roof pole. Small post molds following the outside wall suggest that sleeping platforms may have been used by these people. An overlay of more than five distinct house patterns in an area of ninety square feet is evidence that the houses may have been demolished from time to time, and then rebuilt. It is known that many of the historic Indians burned their houses when they got to smelling too badly, and that they then built new ones on top or near the previous structure.

Less can be conjectured of the Fuller man's apparel than of many other items of his economy. The abundance of animal skin shows that he probably dressed in skins and that there was only a limited use of fabrics *per se*—although one impression of a woven fabric was found on a piece of hardened clay. Human effigies of clay pretty well establish the fact that the Fuller man wore his hair in a bun at the back of his head. He used ear plugs. Beads of bone, shell, bear claws and other animal claws, were in common use and probably had a taboo or "medicine" value as well as an ornamental value. One vessel in the Barnes Collection shows the use of feathers as hair decorations in the bun; and in the course of the excavations a carved deer toe bone (carved into an effigy of a dog with a carved and hollowed base and dorsal drilling) was found, which easily could have been mounted on a wooden pin and used as a most spectacular feather mount. Another vessel in the Barnes Collection, and one of the most unusual vessels found in the Memphis area, shows a beautifully modelled head wearing a headdress or cap which is very much like one of the fur bordered fez-type caps worn by Turkestan chieftains even to this day.

The pottery of the Fuller people is some of the finest that has been made by prehistoric man in North America. The best effigy work, such as that represented in the Barnes Collection, comes from levels below fifteen inches in the midden, thus suggesting that the highest cultural virtuosity occurred in those levels which can be identified with the Walls-Pecan Point focus, thus dating it at about 1300 A.D.-1350 A.D. This applies to the Walls engraved vessels in the collection and to the spectacular Rhodes incised vessels. A somewhat cruder ware occurs in the upper levels which is more like that found in the St. Francis area which is usually thought of as being later than the classic Walls-Pecan Point manifestations; and in the bottom levels a grit and clay tempered ware occurs which is foreign to the great body of the pottery found on the site, thus

suggesting an earlier occupation of the site by perhaps a woodland horizon people who may have been related to peoples who occupied the sites along Nonconnah Creek. The surface pottery seems to be related to pottery found on other Mid-Mississippian sites in Shelby County and in the Memphis area.

If animal and bird effigies found on the site can be said to have totemic implications or to suggest clan symbols, the following clans were extant on the Fuller Site: Human (Chieftain, Mingo?), Swan, Duck, Wood Duck, Frog, Fish, Cormorant, Deer, Dog, Bat, Opossum, Otter, and Eagle. This, according to John R. Swanton of the Bureau of American Ethnology, would suggest that the Fuller man may have been a prehistoric Muskogean (possibly Natchez or Chickasaw) with a strong Shawnee influence showing up in his clan system.

The Fuller man's economy was a typical new stone age economy. He lived in dwellings of mud and wattle; he used stone weapons and implements and was a competent stone workman. He also made bone and in all probability wooden vessels, tools, and implements. He was a fine potter, and may have made basketry and woven fabrics as well. He practiced a limited agriculture and lived in an area then rich in fish and game which furnished a part of his diet and were supplemented by native fruits and nuts such as persimmons, plums, and hickory nuts. Presence of the bones of the domestic dog found in the midden indicate that he may have domesticated or brought with him from wherever he came the domestic dog. His pottery allies him with the people who lived on many of the neighboring sites in the Memphis area. His village was probably one of many federated villages in the area. He may have been a citizen of "Quisqui" or "Chisca" which figures in the De Soto expedition's accounts of the area; or his town may have been one of the components of the empire of "Pacaha" mentioned in the Garcillaso de la Vega account of the De Soto expedition. The failure of the Memphis Archaeological and Geological Society excavations to uncover positive historic contact material does not preclude the possibility of such material being discovered at some future time on this very interesting site, particularly in view of the fact that the top fifteen inches of the midden shows a very strong relation in potsherds and pottery types to other types which are conceded by several archaeologists to represent the latest prehistoric culture in the area.

When a more complete picture of the earlier Tunica is established archaeologically it will be interesting to compare him with the Fuller

man. When this time comes it may be possible to carry Memphis prehistory back to sometime in the 12th or 13th century when the Mid-Mississippian peoples who occupied the area arrived at the Fuller Site. Evidence points indubitably to the migration of these people from another place; they were not a culture which developed on the site, although their occupation of it may have extended over a considerable period of time—even as long as two or three centuries. Artifacts and culture trait items suggest that they may have been ancestors of the Natchez Indians, who later hunted in the area; and Natchez legendry at least supports the possibility that there may have been a strong and extensive prehistoric Natchez Federation north of the Natchez Old Fields in Mississippi.

These, of course, are suppositions which could apply as well to the prehistoric Chickasaws and Tunicas as to the Fuller people. A great deal more work will have to be done in the Memphis area before these tentative conclusions can be proved or disproved. Perhaps, someday, further studies and excavations such as those at the Fuller Site will make it possible to write with greater certainty the story of these prehistoric peoples in the Memphis area.