PROSPECT HILL: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE ON GREENVILLE'S BEGINNINGS

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The present-day political unit of Greenville County, encompassing 789 square miles, was part of the ancient domain of the "Lower Townes" division of the Cherokee Indian polity. When contacted by English colonists during the late 1600's, all of their settlements were upon various major streams of the headwater basin of the Savannah River. Though living upon the upper Savannah, they controlled most of the South Carolina Piedmont eastward to the Broad River and south to the Fall Line.

Friendly relations with the Carolina colonists were maintained from the start and a thriving trade in peltries, chiefly deer skins, was started in 1711. In 1755, Governor James Glen negotiated a treaty with the Indians whereby two forts were erected in their country and they relinquished to Carolina a major portion of the Piedmont region. This area was opened up to settlement and a flood of Scotch-Irish immigrants moved down from the north during ensuing decades.

The Cherokees maintained for themselves that portion of northwestern South Carolina now comprising Oconee, Pickens, Anderson, and Greenville Counties. The boundary of part of this domain agrees roughly with the present eastern and southern boundaries of Greenville County. Though they had not lived in Greenville County for several centuries, they retained it as part of their support territory.

Misbehavior on the part of traders, misunderstandings, and outright treachery by Gov. William Henry Lyttleton, provoked the Cherokee War of 1763. The lower townes were destroyed and the Indians sued for peace. Trade was re-established, the townes were rebuilt, but not on the same scale as before for many Indians had moved away to their brethren in the Middle and Upper townes of North Carolina and Tennessee.

In their weakened position, the Lower Cherokee now were fair prey for designing whites who made forays across the boundary into Indian lands. One of these was Richard Pearis, who moved in without permission and took up residence on the present site of Greenville sometime between 1766 and 1768. An educated Irishman who had married a Cherokee woman, he established a trading post, grist and saw mills at Reedy River Falls.

Through his wife and son, Pearis laid claim to a vast tract of wilderness which included the present site of Prospect Hill, but he was loyal to the British and lost his whole enterprise during the American Revolution. Since the Cherokees also sided with the British and were again defeated, they relinquished most of the remainder of their territory, including Greenville County.

With the conclusion of the Revolution in 1783, the county of Greenville was established and much of the land was granted to soldiers for payment due them by the state. In 1784 Col. Thomas Brandon of Union County became the first official owner of the Prospect Hill locality. Later in 1788 he sold his land to Lemuel James Alston who constructed an imposing two-story mansion on top of what is now Prospect Hill.

For its time and place on the expanding frontier, the house known as Prospect Hill was noteworthy. In 1806, Edward Hooker of Connecticut, a journal keeping visitor, recorded in his journal:

> Arrived at Co. Alston's about 12:00. His seat is without exception the most beautiful that I have ever seen in South Carolina. The mansion is on a commanding eminence which he calls Prospect Hill. Fronts the village of Greenville from which it is distant just six hundred yards; and to which there is a spacious and beautiful avenue leading, formed by two rows of handsome sycamore trees planted twenty-four feet apart--the avenue being 15 rods wide. In like manner another handsome avenue formed by cutting a passage through the woods, leads from the north front of the house to the mountain road, about a quarter of a mile in length. The cultivated grounds lie partly on the borders of Reedy River, south and west of the house.

In a February 4, 1934, article in the *Greenville News,* Mrs. Hattie M. Finlay described the house thusly:

> The plan of the old house is of interest for its uniqueness. It was built of logs covered with weatherboarding, which was the mode of construction at that time. The circular driveway led by a flight of stone steps to a square porch with two narrow wings beneath canopied windows. The upper porch corresponded to the middle portion of the lower one.

> A wide door opened into a square reception hall done in papering with coaching scenes, imported from England, directly back of the hallway was the large drawing room with three exposures and a wide fireplace facing the door; a window on either side of the fireplace looked westward toward the long chain of the Blue Ridge.
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> The north and south sides had three windows each. The dining room opened to the right of the drawing room through doors that folded back like a sheaf. Two bedrooms occupied the front corners of the house.
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> A winding stair led from the lefthand side of the lower hall to the upper one. There were four rooms upstairs, with two steps leading down to the two front ones.
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> The brick basement, the store of which we have noted, had gained a story above ground and contained the kitchen, from which the food was brought to the dining room immediately above.
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> The iron bannisters of the front steps and the nails with which the boards were fastened on, were made by hand in the shop of Peter Cauble. The heavy timbers of the house were fastened together with wooden pegs.

Within site of his thriving plantation, Alston laid out a plat for a village he called "Pleasantburg." Development of this village was slow, and after losing his Congressional seat, he sold all his holdings (including a sawmill, grist mill and ironworks) and moved to Alabama. Vardry McBee of Lincolnton, N.C., purchased the house as an investment, and rented it to Edmund Waddell who operated it as a hotel.

In 1836, Vardry McBee moved to Greenville, made Prospect Hill his residence, and took an active interest in the educational, religious and social life of Greenville. He donated land for churches and helped bring Furman University to Greenville in 1850. Later he was instrumental in bringing the Columbia and Greenville Railroad Line to the county.

In 1869, four years after Vardry McBee's death, his son Alexander sold Prospect Hill to John Westfield and later it became the property

of Westfield's daughter, Mrs. Mark A. Morgan. In 1888 Central School was erected on the grounds immediately south of the historic old house, and the structure then saw service as auxiliary class rooms. Around the turn of the century it stood unoccupied for a while and local superstition held that it was so haunted that people couldn't reside there.

The historic structure was demolished when old Central School was remodeled to form Greenville High School around 1920. In 1938 it became Greenville Junior High School which closed in 1965. When Sterling High School burned in September 1967, it housed the student body and faculty until 1970 and after that was demolished. Recently, a monument had been erected in a small park on the site.

In a compacted urban environment, sites are built on time and again and evidence of earlier usage often is destroyed. Like most people, I had assumed that school construction had erased all evidence of Alston's old home. But I knew that possibly something was left and therefore had an interest in the archaeological potential of the locality.

The Greenville Water Commission had acquired the property and construction had started on their new headquarters building. I was unaware of this turn of events and took no action to investigate the site beforehand. The hole for the new building was largely dug when the situation was brought to my attention.

On the evening of September 13, 1990, I received a telephone call from Chris Schwarz, a reporter at the *Greenville News.* He had gotten wind of a rumor circulating that some kind of axe and pot had been found on the site. I was referred to him by Mrs. Anne McCuen, Chairman of the Greenville County Historic Preservation Commission, as the person to authenticate the finds.

He also alerted me to the construction operation and I determined that I must have a look to see if anything of archaeological interest was exposed. I made a quick visit to the site to see just what had been done and if historic remains were revealed. On arrival, I found a huge gaping hole that already had been cut, with more work needed in its western quarter. Briefly, I walked around the southeast corner area and observed a few sherds of 19th century china lying on the surface of the ground near the southern edge of the excavation.

Late that evening, the reporter and I located the finds and before my eyes was one of the finest prehistoric Indian grooved stone axe

heads I had ever seen from the up-country. This type of axe was used for wood cutting during what archaeologists call the Savannah River phase of the Late Archaic Period, ca. 3,000-1,000 B.C. The "pot" was a lead glazed stoneware ink bottle made in England ca. 1870's. Both artifacts had been uncovered fairly close together in the south-eastern corner area of the construction pit.

A few days later, I inspected the floor of the construction pit, first, searching for evidence of a filled-in well hole, but none was observed. Then, exposed in the south wall of the hole my eyes discerned a discolored area of soil that I recognized immediately as a filled-in pit feature, dissected open to view by excavation of the construction pit. Sherds of china and glass pulled from its face dated from the early 1800's.

I called Mr. Merv Muller of the Water Commission on Monday morning and informed him of the find, requesting permission to salvage the feature and was given three days. The South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology informed me that the matter was in my hands entirely, as they couldn't help. Other contacts for help also proved fruitless, so on Tuesday I called Anne McCuen with the Greenville County Historic Preservation Commission, who agreed to meet me at the site.

She arranged for a grant to replace necessary equipment which had been stolen and offered her services as my assistant. I spent the rest of the day rounding up needed tools and supplies, constructing a screen that evening to sieve the soil. We met in our work clothes at the site Wednesday morning and set to work, but this was the last of the three days.

The top portion of the fill proved to be very compact and difficult to dig and a mattock was used to break up the soil, all of which was screened by Mrs. McCuen. Artifacts were produced immediately and the Water Commission agreed to a few more days of work, but were very concerned about holding up their contractors. Contact was made with Dr. Bryan Siegel, Anthropologist at Furman University, and he gladly agreed to assist with the dig. He and Anne ably assisted me that day and we completed the initial cut into the face of the pit feature. Numerous other volunteers gave valuable assistance during the remainder of the dig.

The feature proved to be the remains of the cellar of a small outbuilding or dependency, dating from the time of Lemuel Alston's mansion house, Prospect Hill. Apparently, it was a food storage

facility, serving as the refrigerator of the day. Foodstuffs were kept cool by storing them below ground in a stone walled and dirt floored structure like this.

All historic artifacts recovered from five different strata of the pit fill, date from the late 1700's or very early 1800's and fall within the time of Mr. Lemuel Alston. Broken sherds of thin window pane glass and mirror glass were recovered, with the latter identified by remnants of adhering silvering. Only a few sherds of bottle glass, one deep cobalt blue, were present. Also one sherd from the rim of a beautifully hand engraved crystal wine glass was found. Probably made in England, only a gentleman of Mr. Alston's status would have had such stemware here on the primitive frontier of that time.

Portions of a white glazed Liverpool Ware pitcher as well as green shell edged plates were found. These were manufactured in England, the latter in the famous Staffordshire Pottery District. A porcelain saucer, probably German, and portions of a porcelain Chinese Export punch bowl were also high status items found.

Non-ferrous artifacts such as a metal eye hook button, a brass pendulum and brass keyhole plates from chests and doors were found. One keyhole plate shows that an enormous sized key was used. An interesting specimen was a hand-wrought box-like container fashioned from sheet lead, cut and bent into shape.

Numerous hand forged iron artifacts include nails, spikes, strap hinges for shutters and doors, wagon wheel hubs, various tools, and a plowshare. The plowshare is the largest artifact recovered and is a very interesting device because it is the oldest one known from this region. Records show that Mr. Alston operated an ironworks near Reedy River Falls and these were probably produced there.

Also recovered from two strata were about one dozen pie shaped bricks with an outer curving edge. They were of a very low fired laterite (red clay) soil and crumbly to the touch. Such bricks would be used in constructing a column, but there were no brick columns, so their use remains a mystery.

Also exposed were sherds of decorated ceramic ware dating from Vardry McBee's time (ca. 1836-1864). East of the cellar was found part of the basement of the Central School with related artifacts. In addition, parts of the walls of the school built about 1888 were discovered.

Recovered from all main levels of fill in the cellar hole were ten prehistoric flaked stone points and flakes produced when tools were chipped out. These had been gathered up with the soil from elsewhere on the site and dumped in the hole. All specimens recovered date from various phases of an early Indian culture which lasted over eight thousand years from about 9,500-1,000 B.C.

During this time known as the Archaic Period, Indians lived in small bands and were primarily hunter-gatherers. Camping on hilltops and knolls, these clan based bands of people hunted local game and gathered vegetal products from the deciduous forest. The flaked points were used not only to tip their weapons but served as knives for cutting and butchering as well.

These Archaic Period Indians did not use the bow and arrow, but hunted with a spear-like dart hurled at their prey by a two foot long spear thrower. This device had a hand grip on one end and a hook on the other to engage the butt end of the dart. The effect was to make the arm two feet longer and give more thrusting power.

Time and again over long periods these Indians would camp on eminances which their ancestors also had used, though centuries might pass between visits. Each time lost and discarded toolse and waste products from their manufacture would be left behind. Finding these tools buried in different levels of occupation, buried one atop the other, at sites in alluvial stream bottom lands, reveals the chronological order of these styles.

Gradually, over very long periods, the favored style of fashioning these tools would change. One style of point might last centuries or several thousand years before changing into a new style. Radiocarbon dating of rare organic remains associated with the artifacts give relative dates.

These people didn't use pottery either, cooking instead by placing heated stones into leather and basketry containers of broth. Theirs was a mobile existence and heavy pots are hard to transport. Only essential tools of the chase and for gathering/processing vegetable foods were in order. With wintertime base camps in sheltered coves and stream valleys, upland locations were utilized while foraging during summer and fall seasons.

A Palmer point, ca. 9,000 B.C. from early in this period was recovered from the site. A complete Stanly point, ca. 7,500 B.C., also was found. This style is somewhat rare in the inner Piedmont region.

Two Morrow Mountain points, ca. 7,000-4,000 B.C.; four Guilford points, ca. 5,000 B.C.; and a Savannah River point, ca. 3,000-1,000 B.C., complete the inventory of stone tools. The grooved stone axe mentioned earlier dates from the period of this last point.

The Archaic Period ended about three thousand years ago, when the bow and arrow, pottery, and the beginnings of agriculture were developed. The Indians became more sedentary and this new lifeway is termed the Woodland Period. Whether these early Indians were direct ancestors of the Cherokees found here during the 17th century is unclear. Definitely, the Cherokees had such ancestors wherever they originated.

These artifacts, both prehistoric and historic, are part of our long cultural heritage and belong to all of us. Hopefully, they will be shared through public display and interpretation. Then, the labors of all who assisted with the Prospect Hill dig will be rewarded.