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Title: Archaeology at Old Town (40WM2): A Mississippian Mound-Village Center  
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**ARCHAEOLOGY AT OLD TOWN [40Wm2]  
A MISSISSIPPIAN MOUND-VILLAGE CENTER IN WILLIAMSON COUNTY,  
TENNESSEE**

Kevin E. Smith

ABSTRACT

*Tennessee Division of Archaeology personnel have salvaged archaeological data from a privately-owned Mississippian mound-village complex on the Harpeth River on two occasions over the past decade. The results of these limited salvage projects, along with a review of antiquarian observations of the site are presented and interpreted below. Primary occupation of the site area is interpreted as occurring during the Thruston Phase (ca. A.D. 1250-1450), based on diagnostic artifacts and a single radiocarbon date.*

General Jackson drank and looked about him. "Why this is Old Town. I remember now. Mr. Perkins and I went over the place once. It is filled with Indian mounds far older than the Indians we know. There is one of the mounds yonder. Somehow the sight of something old always stirs me strangely, fills me with a sort of sublime sadness."

-- Alfred Leland Crabb, 1948

**Introduction and Background**

As the opening fictional epigraph indicates, the "Old Town on the Big Harpeth River" has long played a central role in the "mythological history" of Middle Tennessee, and has been recognized for over a century as a fascinating aspect of the region's prehistory. The forty-one acre Mississippian civic-ceremonial center contains two pyramidal mounds (A,B), a small circular burial mound (C) and another possible burial mound upon which the Brown family mansion was erected. Two other small rises in the yard area (D,E) probably represent low burial mounds or raised "cemetery platforms," although this has never been verified. Located near the interface of the Western Highland Rim and the Central Basin of Tennessee, Old Town is of particular importance to an understanding of the sociopolitical structure of the societies along the upper Harpeth River during the late prehistoric period (see Figure 1).

Most of the available information for this site comes from historical records of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly those of Joseph Jones (1876:8,36,82-88,110-111,138,142), and W.G Polk (1948). Gates P. Thruston (1890) also discussed the site

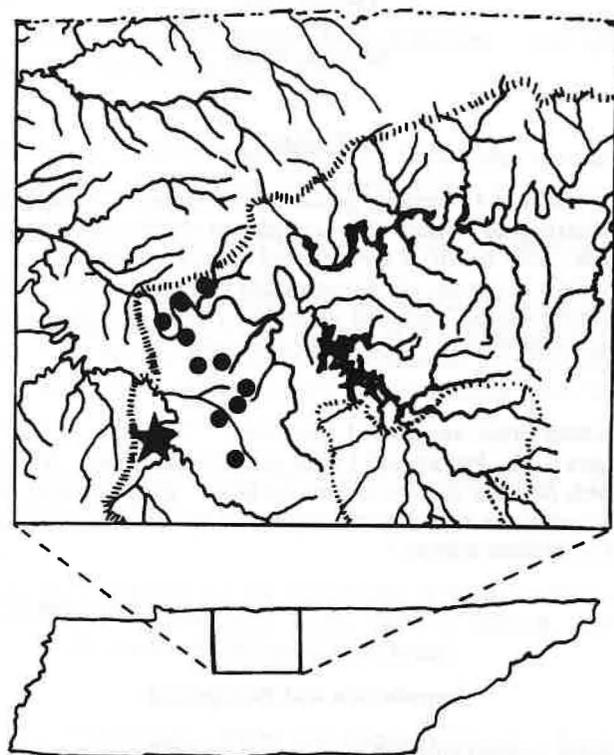


Figure 1. Distribution of known Thruston-phase sites in the Central Basin (after Smith 1992, Figure 97)

briefly in his widely cited *Antiquities of Tennessee*, but the majority of his information appears to have been derived from Jones' previous work rather than from personal observations.

Jones described the site as consisting of 2,470 feet of geometric earthworks enclosing twelve acres, two pyramidal "sacrificial" mounds, a circular burial mound, another possible burial mound, a large spring, and numerous stone-box graves (see Figures 2-3; Table 1). In the 1860s, the height of the inclosing earthworks varied from two to six feet, although Jones noted that "they have been much worn down by the ploughshare....and they are said to have been so steep and high thirty years ago that it was impossible to ride a horse over them" (1876:81). Limited field observations by representatives of the Tennessee Division of Archaeology tend to support Jones' description, although some of the details he recorded have been obscured through modern land use practices.

Table 1. 1876 Mound Dimensions – Old Town (in m).

Mound	Length	Width	Height
A	34.1	19.8	3.4
B	21.3	18.3	2.7
C	9.1	6.1	0.8

Jones conducted fairly extensive investigations at the site between 1868 and 1869 when he served as Health Officer for the city of Nashville, and the results of these investigations are summarized below. Following the common practices of his day, Jones' excavations focused primarily on mounds and cemetery areas. Although he attempted to excavate portions of the circular burial mound described above, he met with some opposition since "three-fourths of it lay within the flower garden of Mr. Brown, and the family would not consent to have it disturbed" (1876:83). If the flower garden also encompassed Mounds D and E, Jones might have failed to note the low mounds during his work at the site. He did manage, however, to "acquire" a single Bell Plain frog-effigy bowl from a stone-box grave on the side of Mound C outside the flower garden. Although Jones was unable to investigate this particular mound further, he did "open" more than fifty stone-box graves in and around the site, particularly along the adjacent Harpeth River. The exact number of excavated graves cannot be determined, but "about fifty stone graves along the bank of the river, and on the sides of the hill beyond, [were] opened without discovering any pottery or implements" (1876:83). Given the fact that typically only about 20% of stone-box graves contain mortuary offerings (Smith 1992), an estimate of sixty to seventy-five excavated graves would probably not be too much in error.

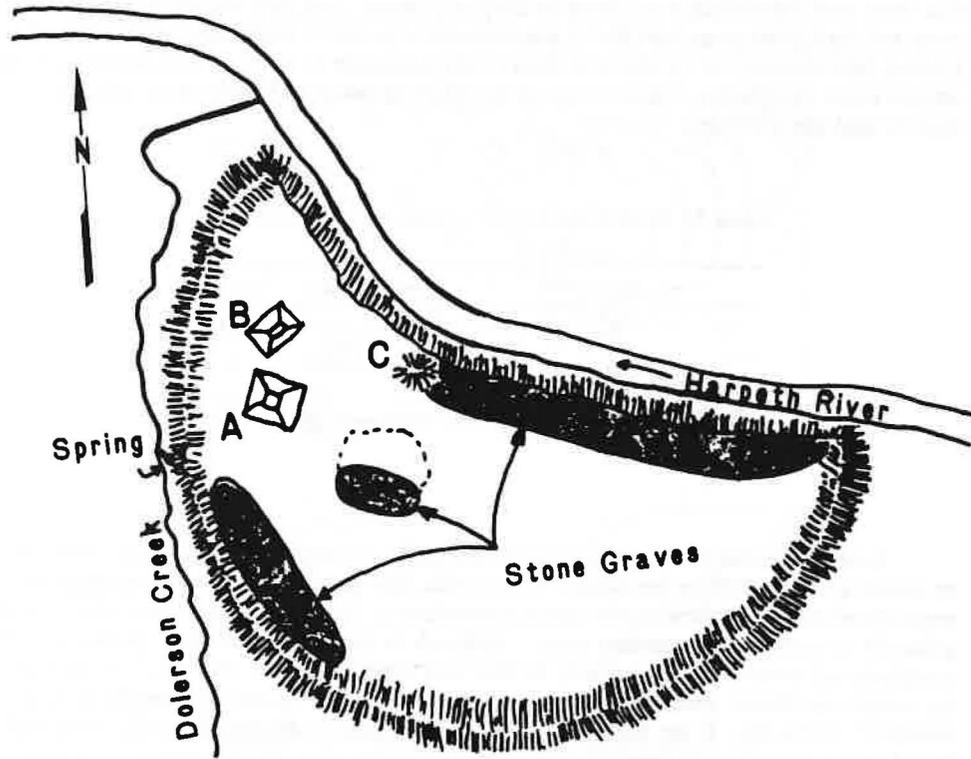


Figure 2. Map of Old Town (After Jones 1876).

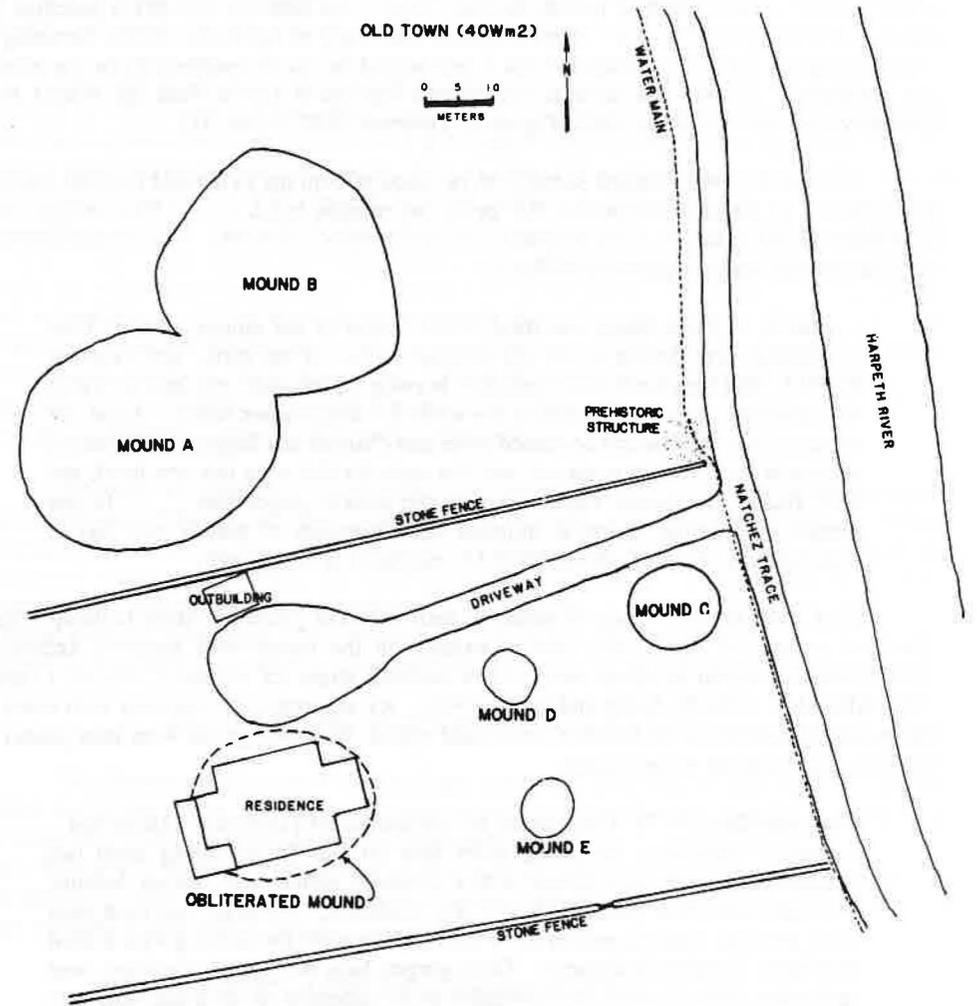


Figure 3. Map of Old Town (After Stripling map, 1984).

Although individual burial descriptions are lacking, a wide variety of stone-box grave forms is evidenced in Jones' discussions, including primary single and multiple interments, flexed burials, and secondary "bone" burials. Ceramic vessels were found in several of these graves, primarily at the head of the grave by the skull but also occasionally by the feet. The primary observation concerning human skeletal remains that deserves reiteration concerns the practice of cranial modification. Jones indicated that many of the skulls exhibit flattening to "various degrees," and he hypothesized that it represented the use of cradleboards during infancy and childhood. At least one ceramic cradleboard figurine is known from the related Noel Cemetery site [40Dv3] (Smith 1991, Figure 8; Thruston 1890, Figure 31).

In addition, Jones "caused sections to be made of both the pyramidal mounds standing in the portion of the inclosure nearest the spring and running brook . . . [T]he sections were each about 45 feet in length, 5 feet in width, and 12 feet deep" (1876:86). The internal structure of these mounds was interpreted as follows:

a quantity of earth, about one-third of the height of the mound after its final completion, was thrown up on the original surface of the earth, and carefully levelled. Hot fires were kept constantly burning on this *altar*, the heat of which was sufficient to bake and redden the earth for some inches below. Upon the surface of the *altar*, which contained ashes and charcoal and fragments of pottery, another layer of earth was placed, and fire again kindled upon this new level; and thus, finally, the mound was elevated to the present proportions . . . In one portion a collection of gravel mingled with fragments of pottery two feet in diameter was observed. (Jones 1876:86, emphasis as in original).

Thus, both mounds appear to reflect at least two, and potentially three building stages. The few mounds of similar size and appearance in the region with recorded excavation information also appear to reflect two or three building stages (cf. Mound J, 40Ch8, O'Brien 1977; Mound B, 40Dv39, Smith and Dowd 1992). As was apparently the case with many of the pyramidal mounds in the Middle Cumberland region, stone-box graves were later placed on the sides and flanks of these mounds.

Two years later, W.M. Clark noted in "Antiquities of Tennessee" (1878) that I obtained some very interesting relics here [at Old Town] among them two beautiful pieces of ivory carved with a precision seldom seen among Indians. They are made from a tusk, probably of a Mastodon. The larger one must have come from the tusk of a monster, for to furnish material for such a gorget it must have been 12 inches in diameter. These gorgets have two holes in the edge, near each other, and they were most probably worn suspended on the breast, and may have been emblems of authority. One of them was in the grave of a giant, for a large man could pass the lower jaw bone around his face; and the thigh bone was 4 inches longer than that of a man 6 feet 2 inches high.

Although Clark's observations are apparently (or perhaps obviously) exaggerated, the presence of mastodon ivory artifacts on the site is not entirely out of the question, since several of the local mastodon fossil find spots have been along nearby portions of the Harpeth River. However, some of the conch shell artifacts found in the local area resemble ivory to a superficial degree, and Clark may have mistaken the material used to create the gorgets.

The next major observations of Old Town were made by W.G. Polk (1948): "during the summer of 1928 I was told that while constructing a bridge at the junction of Dolerson Creek with the Harpeth River six miles northwest of Franklin, county road machinery had encountered a large Indian burial grounds" (1948:24). Polk examined about 80 stone box graves before their destruction by machinery. He described several artifacts recovered from the graves, including a sandstone pendant, five conch shell vessels "in a bad state of decay," and several pottery vessels. One "small square grave contained a small effigy bottle 3 inches high . . . and two skulls, no other bones being present." Another stone-box grave was of unusual size, being 7 feet in length by 2 1/2 feet in width, with a paved floor of broken pottery. An adult male and female were interred therein, along with a sandstone celt. These limited observations suggest that the wide variety of graves observed by Jones in the 1860s was commonplace at Old Town--a situation very comparable to that observed at the Gordontown [40Dv6] site during more recent salvage excavations (Tennessee Division of Archaeology 1991).

Although no controlled excavations have been conducted at the site in recent years, private owners of the property have generously allowed the salvage of information and artifacts during construction activities on two occasions over the past decade. Contextual data on the recovered materials is limited, but some conclusions can be drawn from analysis of these materials, particularly in terms of establishing relationships with other similar sites within the Central Basin of Tennessee. This information, along with cautious, informed use of the data recorded by antiquarians, allows us to sketch an initial picture of this important site.

#### Summary of 1984 Waterline Excavation Salvage Project

The Tennessee Division of Archaeology conducted some limited data-recording at Old Town during the spring of 1984 as a consequence of privately funded waterline constructions (Fielder et al. 1988). A three-foot-wide waterline trench was excavated through a portion of the site, bisecting a number of stone-box graves and an intact, burned Mississippian structure (Structure 1). Although no excavation was possible at this time, a "grab bag" sample of artifacts was recovered from trench backdirt (see Table 2).

#### Summary of 1991 Porch Excavation Salvage Project

Most recently, renovation of the existing antebellum home constructed between 1846 and 1852 by Thomas Brown required the placement of twenty-two approximately one-cubic-meter footings for an enclosed porch addition to the rear of the house. During the course of excavating these footings, workers encountered quantities of ceramic, bone, and lithic artifacts

Table 2. Artifacts Recovered during the 1984 and 1991 Salvage Project.

ARTIFACT CLASS analytical type	1984 Project	1991 Project All Contexts	1991 Project Feature 1
<b>LITHICS</b>	63	227	135
Debitage	47	56	31
Angular Debris/Shatter		153	100
Core/Core fragment		15	3
Utilized flake			1
Biface fragments	13	2	
Sandstone abraders	2		
Incised Limestone	1		
<b>CERMANICS</b>	412	308	168
Mississippi Plain	274	253	134
Bell Plain	82	18	6
Matthews Incised/Beckwith	18	4	4
Kimmawick Fabric Impressed		4	
Kimmawick Plain		9	6
Old Town Red		1?	
Daub	38	18	18
Ceramic discoidal		1	
<b>FAUNAL</b>	258	343	178
Animal bone	214	324	174
Human bone	40	-NT-	-NT-
Shell	4	19	4
<b>BOTANICAL</b>	0	20	13
Wood		2	
Float Samples/C14		5	
Wood/Nut shell		13	13
<b>HISTORIC</b>	0	75	0
Historic		69	
Brick		2	
Mortar/Plaster		4	
<b>TOTALS</b>	733	986	494

NT = Analysis of skeletal material is incomplete for the 1991 project.

which were subsequently collected for analysis by members of the Tennessee Division of Archaeology. Profiles of footing walls were drawn, and a single partially destroyed pit-type feature (Feature 1) was excavated in a balk separating two of the footings. In addition, a single stone-box grave (Burial 1) was discovered as a result of construction activities.

Burial 1 was not excavated or further disturbed pursuant to Tennessee cemetery statutes, but field observations suggest that the interment was a juvenile male with an extensive abscess in the mandible which may have contributed to the death of the individual (Emanuel Breitburg, personal communication, 1991). The grave was mapped and recorded, and provisions made to avoid further disturbance, at which point the remains were covered with original soil and protected from further construction activities.

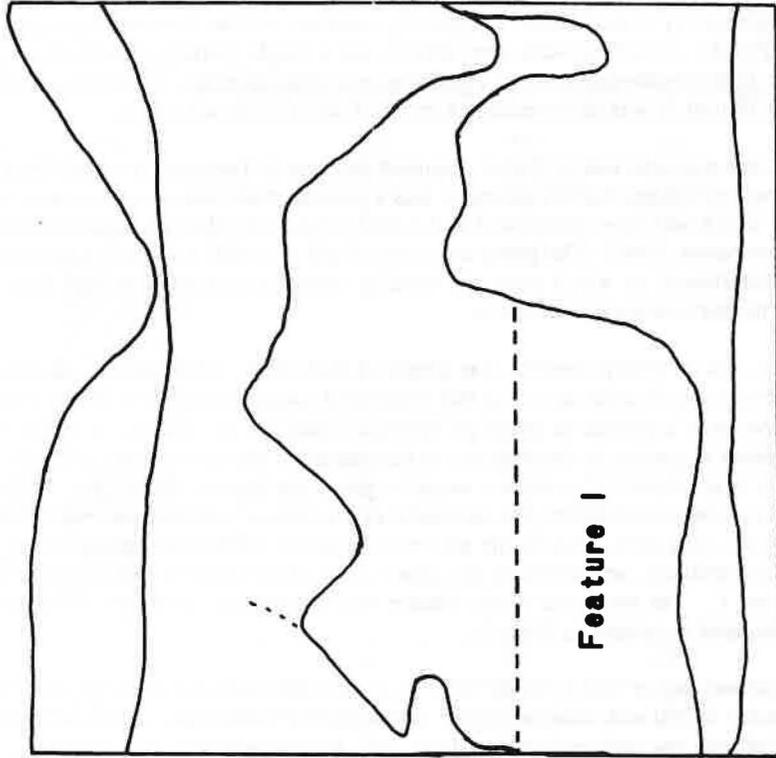
Feature 1, a large pit-type feature, was identified in the walls of Footers B2 and C4 (see Figure 4). Although construction activities had obliterated substantial portions of the feature, it appears to have been a circular or ovoid pit ultimately used for the disposal of trash. The feature is interpreted as prehistoric in origin due to the absence of intrusive historic artifacts, and the location of a large portion of a ceramic vessel in situ at the base of the feature. With the permission of the owner and architect, the remainder of the feature located in the balk between the two footers was excavated. Due to the presence of historic intrusions (represented by 57 nineteenth century artifacts), artifacts from the upper 25-30 cm of deposits were not tabulated as part of Feature 1. The remainder of the feature was excavated in arbitrary 10-cm levels (artifacts are tabulated separately in Table 2).

A radiocarbon date of  $760 \pm 70$  BP (TX-7414; corrected date of A.D. 1214(1263)1282 [Stuiver and Becker 1986]) was obtained from a single piece of wood charcoal recovered from feature fill. Although one radiocarbon date from such an extensive site does not allow any substantial conclusions to be drawn, the date is suggestive of a general placement in time for the occupations beneath and around the Brown Mansion. In general, the date tends to corroborate other radiocarbon dates from the local area in that mound centers with associated villages appear to date prior to A.D. 1300, while palisaded villages appear to reflect a slightly later pattern of settlement found throughout the Central Basin of Tennessee (Smith 1992). The close similarities between diagnostic ceramics from the 1984 and 1991 projects suggest a tentative placement for the major occupation of the site between A.D. 1250 and 1450.

Although the entire area under investigation had been disturbed by the activities of the past one hundred-fifty years, several versions of a brick patio served to protect portions of the midden deposits and features. The oldest version of the brick patio and sidewalk apparently predates the turn of the century, based on the presence of cut nails and the complete absence of wire nails in deposits immediately underlying the existing patio. Approximately 20% of the deposits in the area bounded by the porch were destroyed by construction activities, but the remaining deposits will be preserved and protected for potential future research.

Investigations did not confirm the presence of the mound proposed by Jones, but field observations suggest that if such a mound were present, it may have been located towards the

North Profile



West Profile

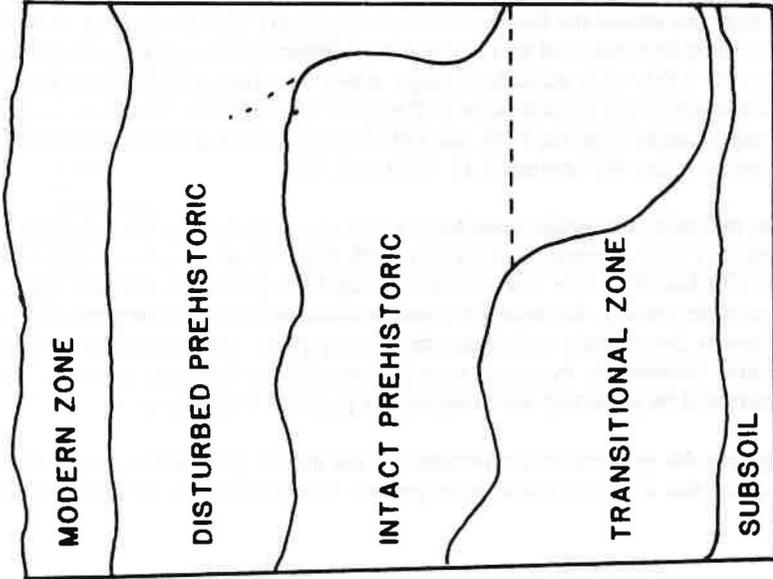


Figure 4. Profiles of Footer B1 showing Feature 1.

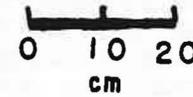
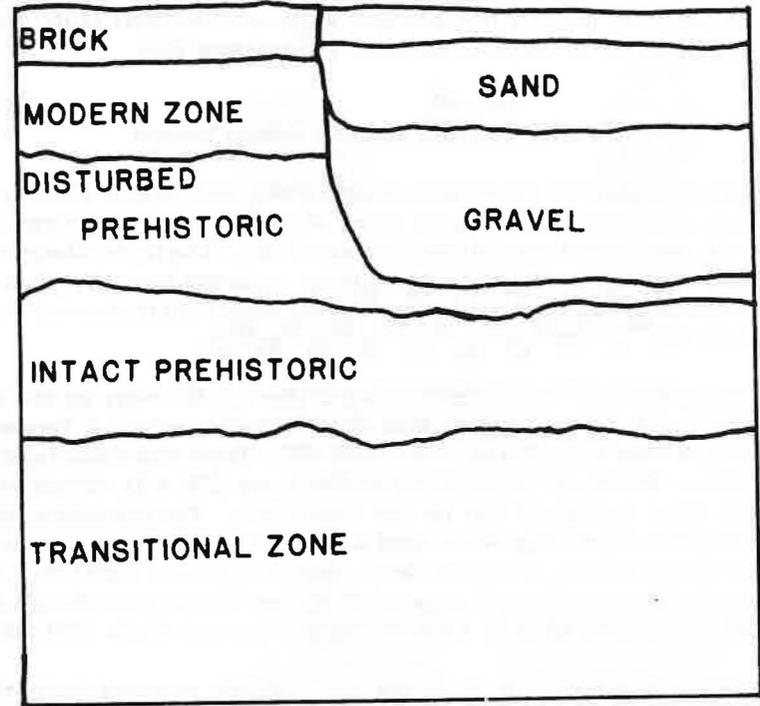


Figure 5. Generalized Area Profile from the 1991 Porch Footer Project.

front of the house where a small rise can still be visually identified. The deposits investigated could represent displaced mound fill, but profiles (see Figure 5) and the identification of prehistoric features suggest the presence of undisturbed prehistoric midden deposits. Stratum 2 ("Disturbed Prehistoric") represents an upper disturbed midden zone, portions of which may have been placed or displaced during construction of the existing home. Stratum 3 ("Intact Prehistoric") appears to represent an occupational midden zone, disturbed only in specific areas by recent subsurface intrusions (i.e. planting holes, postholes). If a mound once existed adjacent to the area investigated, the single stone-box grave (and some isolated human skeletal elements located in disturbed areas) probably represent later additions to the flanks of the mound, an apparently common practice at Old Town and other Thruston-phase sites.

#### Artifacts from the 1984 and 1991 Salvage Projects

Although provenience on the artifacts collected during both projects was only loosely controlled, some conclusions concerning the dating of the site can be constructed through comparisons with other better-known Middle Cumberland sites. Due to the salvage nature of the collections and the disturbed contexts of most artifacts, no attempt has been made to provide individual descriptions of artifact classes, although overall patterns can be observed in the data provided in Table 2.

The most significant of the recovered artifacts in terms of chronology are the ceramics. The majority of ceramic forms recovered from these excavations support a Thruston-phase occupation dating between A.D. 1250 and 1450 (Smith 1992). Bowls with notched applique rim strips and *Matthews Incised var. Beckwith* jars indicate a post-1200 A.D. occupation for the portions of Old Town investigated thus far (see Figures 6-7). The radiocarbon date from Feature 1 is interpreted as providing an associated date for *Matthews Incised*, variety *Beckwith*. Although these types have not, to my knowledge, been directly dated elsewhere within the immediate area, the "Matthews Horizon" proposed for the Central Mississippi alluvial valley has been tentatively placed within the A.D. 1200-1400 range (Morse and Morse 1990:158).

In addition, the identification of a "head pot" fragment recovered during the 1984 waterline excavations provides additional support for these conclusions (see Figure 8). "Head pots," or globular jars with modeled appendages representative of the human face and head, have generally been assigned a protohistoric date in the Central Mississippi valley, particularly the classic examples from several eastern Arkansas sites (cf. Holmes 1903, Plates XXIX-XXXII). The protohistoric context of the Central Mississippi valley vessels remains uncertain, however, with few, if any, examples having been recovered during controlled professional excavations. A somewhat distinct variety of "head pot" has been minimally documented from the Wickliffe Mounds site in Kentucky. Although similar in general concept to the classic "head pots," the Wickliffe vessel is negative painted, and shows numerous variations from the proposed protohistoric vessels (Wesler 1991). The admittedly small fragment of the Old Town vessel appears to have been executed in a style resembling that of the Wickliffe vessel, which has been tentatively dated to circa A.D. 1350. Unfortunately, the small size of the sherd

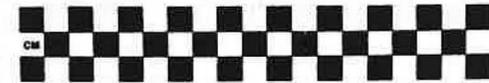
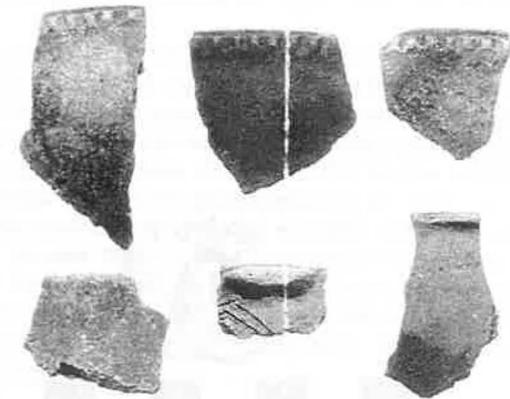


Figure 6. Selected Rim sherds from 1984 Project: upper, Bell Plain var. Noel; lower left and right, bowl fragments; lower center, *Matthews Incised* sherd with rim lug.

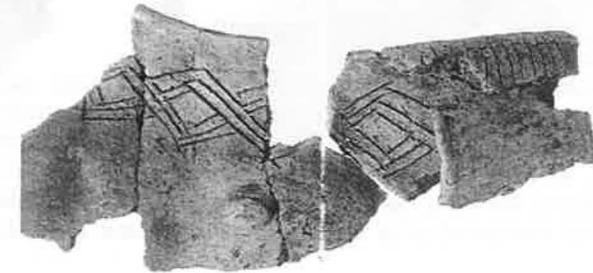


Figure 7. *Matthews Incised var. Beckwith* partial vessel, 1984 Project.



Figure 8. Ear from "head pot," 1984 Project.

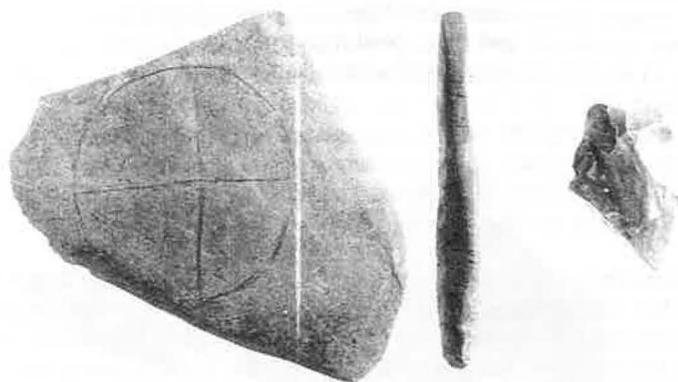


Figure 9. Selected Lithic Artifacts, 1984 Project: left, biface; center, Dover chert adze; right, incised limestone tablet (design highlighted for photography).

prevents identification of negative-painting or other decorative techniques, although modeled "hair" or a "headdress" may be represented on the upper portion of the sherd.

Of additional interest is the recovery of a scratched or lightly-incised piece of thin limestone (see Figure 9). The motif represented is a widely represented symbol in the Southeastern Ceremonial Complex--the equal arm cross within a circle. This type of artifact is rare on local Mississippian sites, but is represented in excavated collections from the Arnold site [40Wm5], investigated by Robert Ferguson (Ferguson 1972; Broster 1988). The Arnold tablet was recovered from an adult male burial accompanied by an "owl effigy water-bottle with negative painted sun-circles around the base [and] a limestone slab . . . at which the base of the individual's skull rested" (Broster 1988:6). The tablet appears to depict a variant of another Southeastern Ceremonial Complex motif, the skull-and-forearm bones (see Figure 10). Dates for Arnold range from  $720 \pm 80$  BP (GX-1079, corrected date of A.D. 1228[1279]1381) to  $270 \pm 65$  BP (GX-0452, corrected date of 1518[1645]1664), although the latter sample was considered contaminated (Ferguson 1972:42).

Several local Mississippian sites have also produced Dover chert chisels and/or adzes comparable to that depicted in Figure 9. Four similar artifacts (2 Dover, 2 Fort Payne) were recovered from burial contexts at the Averbuch site [40Dv60], dating roughly between A.D. 1200 and 1450 (Kline 1984a, 1984b). A "set" of similar artifacts was recovered from Gordontown [40Dv6], dating between A.D. 1250 and 1450 (John Broster, personal communication, 1990), along with a similar set from the Ganier site [40Dv15], with a single radiocarbon date of  $700 \pm 95$  (GX-0871; corrected date of 1232(1280)1389). Numerous other sets of these artifacts have been recovered from sites exhibiting similar types of diagnostic ceramics, including the Horseshoe Bend [40Wm87] (DuVall and Dowd 1987) and Noel Cemetery [40Dv3] sites (Thruston 1897). These data are also supportive of the general dating of the primary occupation of Old Town during the A.D. 1250-1450 period.

#### Discussion

The Old Town site [40Wm2] contains significant intact deposits reflecting a Mississippian-period occupation ranging tentatively from A.D. 1250 to 1450. Unfortunately, the information currently available does not allow firm chronological placement of the site, nor can we interpret the full extent of remaining deposits. However, a review of the available literature and the results of some very limited data-recording on the site do allow a picture of the site to be constructed, and some tentative conclusions to be drawn from this picture.

Although situated on the upper Harpeth River drainage not far from the major Mound Bottom-Pack Complex [40Ch8-40Ch1], the Old Town site is qualitatively and quantitatively different in its artifactual assemblages. The burial practices and ceramic artifacts recovered from Old Town are very similar to those of the majority of Mississippian village sites within the Central Basin of Tennessee, and probably reflect the southwesternmost fringes of Thruston-phase village occupations (Smith 1992), rather than a center secondary to Mound Bottom or Pack. The presence of several rare or unusual artifact types at the site indicates the importance of the site in a regional context, and promises tremendous potential for future research.

In terms of private ownership, Old Town and the nearby Fewkes site [40Wm1] represent the only significantly intact mound-village complexes along the upper Harpeth River drainage.

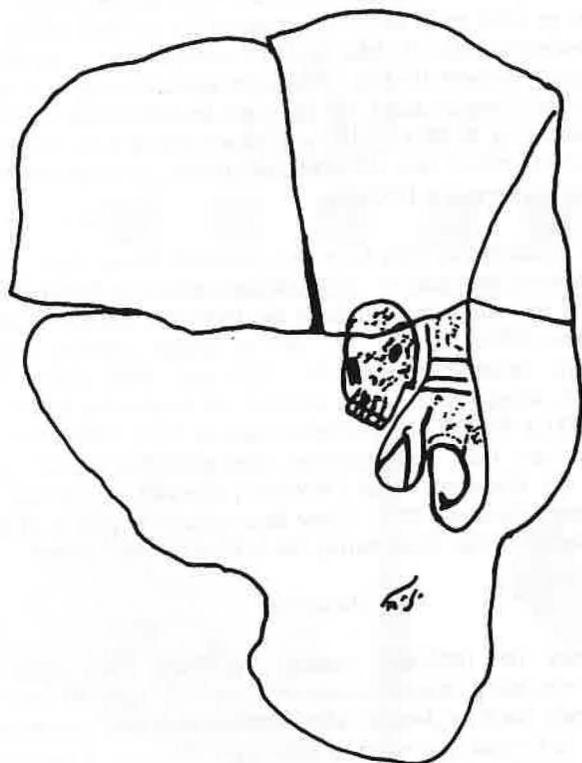


Figure 10. Line Drawing of the Arnold Tablet.

The vast majority of Mississippian sites in the Central Basin and adjacent Western Highland Rim have been strongly impacted by farming, urban expansion, and extensive looting over the past several decades, and it is only through the concerned efforts of private landowners that the remaining sites will be preserved. I would like to express my gratitude to those landowners who have attempted through various means to preserve portions of sites on their property, and allow the salvage of some information during construction activities. In general, the sacrifice of a couple of days of time for archaeology can contribute a tremendous amount of information--information available through no other means. For these and similar reasons, I would like to encourage other private landowners to consult with the Tennessee Division of Archaeology or other local professional archaeologists to determine ways in which they may also preserve or record these important facets of our regional history. Although current state legislation does not provide incentives to encourage private landowners to protect and preserve these sites, I hope that some concerned landowners will begin to consider some alternatives in the use of their property that will save a small portion of our Tennessee prehistory for the future.

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