

Piedmont Village Tradition and Mississippian in North Carolina

Prior to European Colonization, there were two primary groups of societies that inhabited the Carolina Piedmont and Western Foothills. These were the Piedmont Village Tradition—egalitarian, village-dwelling hunter-gatherers and farmers living in the Northern and Central Piedmont who were the ancestors of the Eno, Shakori, Occaneechi, Sauras, etc.,¹ and the “Mississippians” of the Southern Piedmont² and Catawba Valley³, participants in the broader Mississippian culture that spanned much of Eastern North America. The Mississippians built earthen platform mounds, tended to rely more heavily on agriculture, especially maize, and (sometimes) had more stratified and hierarchical sociopolitical organizations⁴. The Upper Yadkin River valley was located in the “frontier zone” between these groups.

Forbush Creek

Forbush Creek was a large Pre-Colonial village (8+ hectares) occupied by the Piedmont Village Tradition located in the Upper Yadkin River valley. It was the target of salvage excavations to make way for US highway 421 in 1957 and 1972. Despite the enormous amount of material excavated from the site, a full report was never published. A few works have looked at some of the ceramics⁵, lithics⁶, botanical remains and burials⁷, but the site is poorly understood overall, especially in terms of how it fits into the long-term history of the valley.



Figure 1: View of part of the site during the 1972 excavations.

Research Objectives and Methodology

This study had several objectives, including:

1. To build a large and detailed database of pottery recovered from archaeological contexts excavated at Forbush Creek. I combined some previous work with my own extensive analysis to produce a database including information on the characteristics of over 15,000 potsherds and at least 259 vessels or diagnostic rim sherds.
2. To understand the occupation history of the site. When does it date to? I combined non metric multidimensional pottery seriation, radiocarbon dating, and manual feature assemblage analysis to infer site chronology.
3. To understand interaction between Piedmont Village Tradition people and Mississippians at Forbush Creek. For this I focused on the characteristics of “complicated stamped” vessels, which index the movement of Mississippian potters.
4. To reassess and synthesize previous research conducted at Forbush Creek and across the Upper Yadkin River Valley to better understand the long term trajectory of sociocultural change here, specifically how the emergence of agriculture in this valley around A.D. 1000 affected lifeways, how Mississippians and Piedmont Village Tradition people interacted in this frontier area and how this changed over time, and why Mississippian society and culture did not spread throughout the rest of the Piedmont.

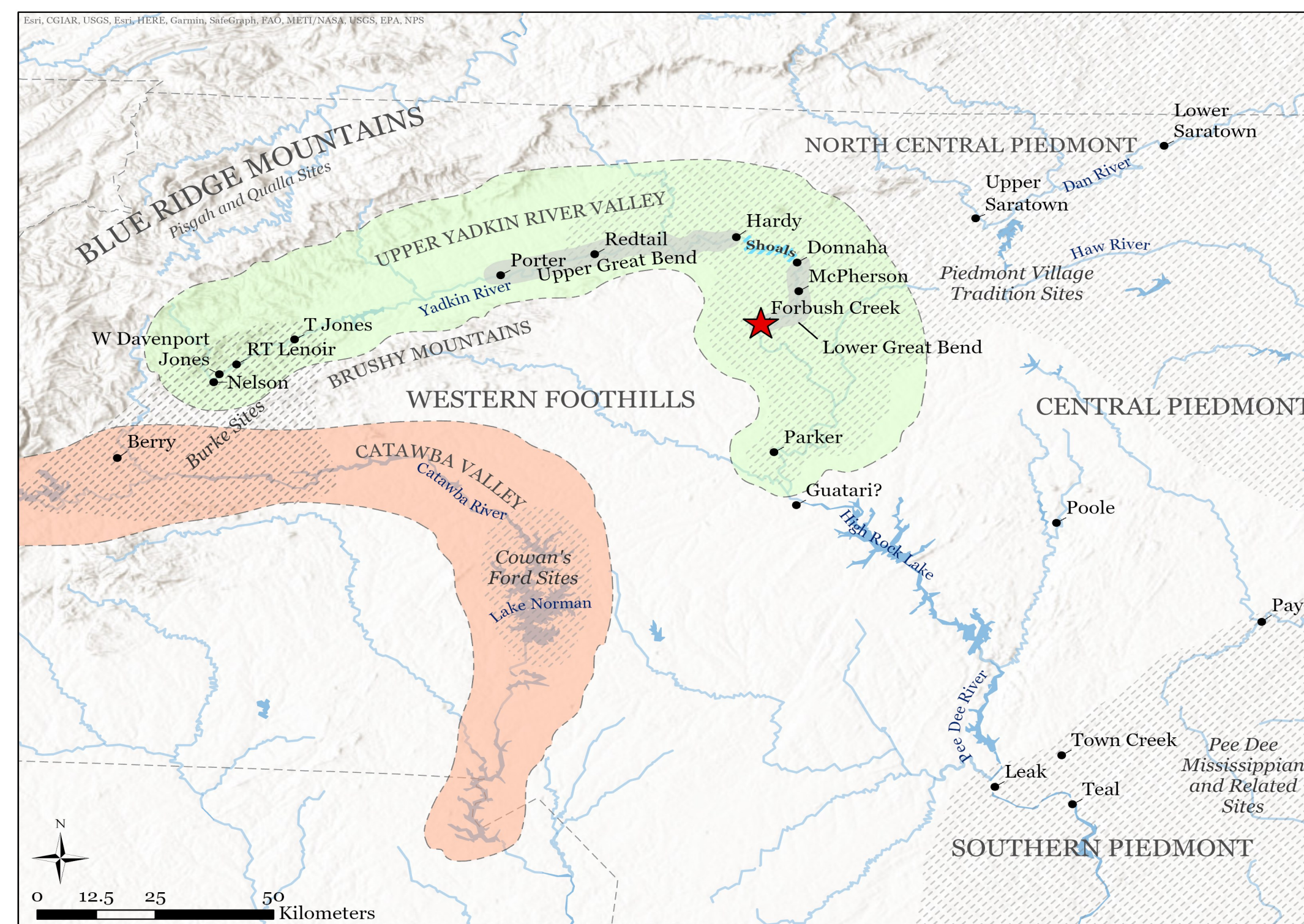


Figure 2: Map of the Upper Yadkin River Valley and surrounding areas with major archaeological sites, cultures, and phases.

Results

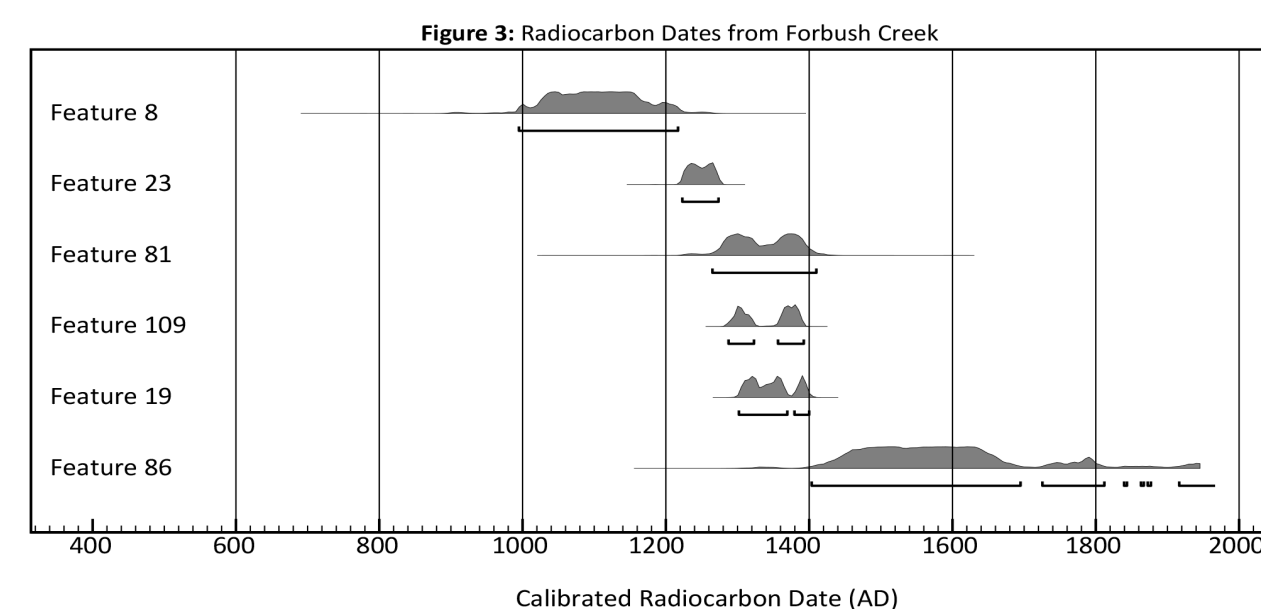


Figure 3: Radiocarbon Dates from Forbush Creek

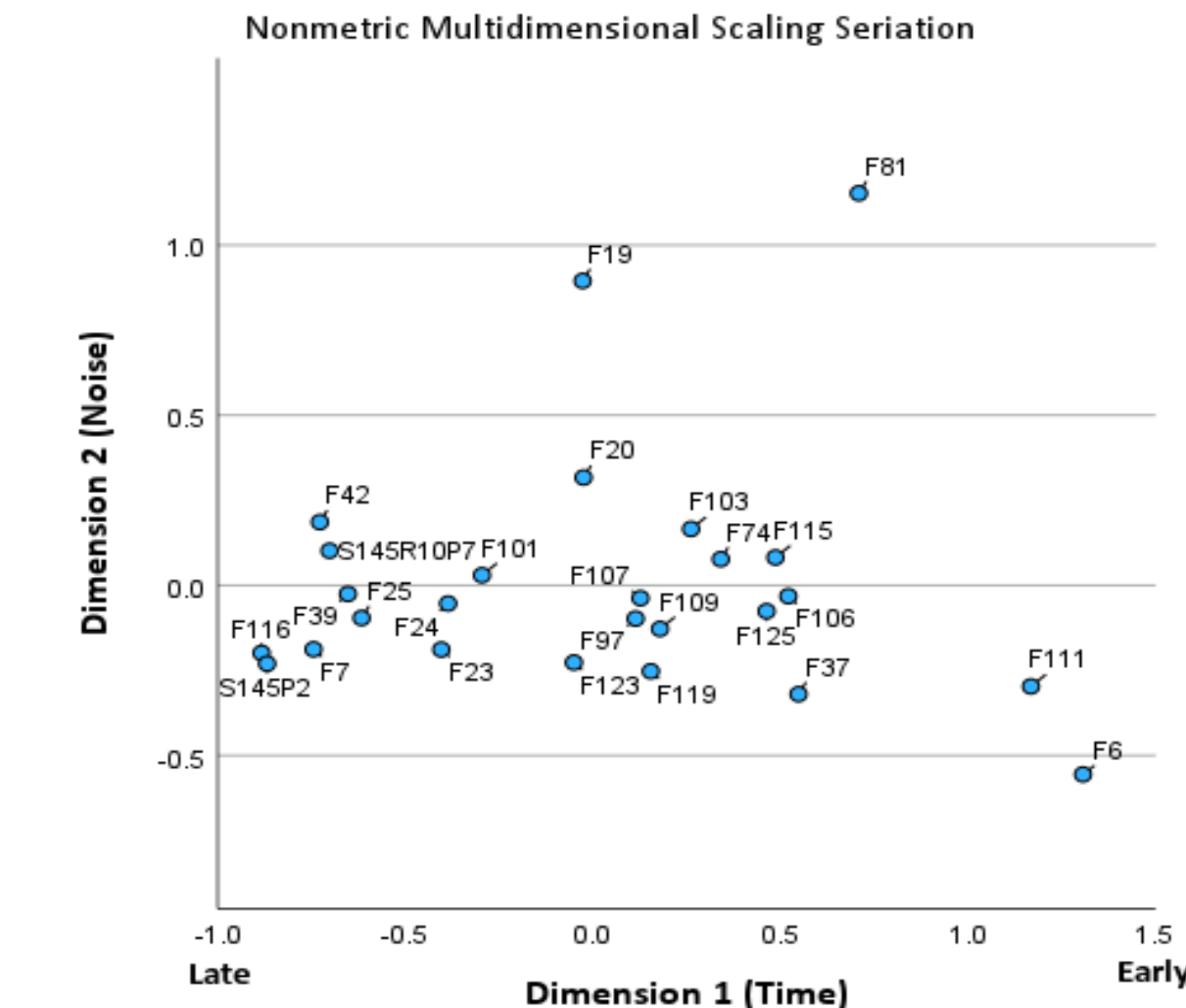


Figure 4: Nonmetric Multidimensional Scaling Seriation



Figure 5: Examples of diagnostic rim sherds.



Figure 6: Examples of complicated stamped sherds.



Figure 7: A typical Great Bend series cooking/storage jar.

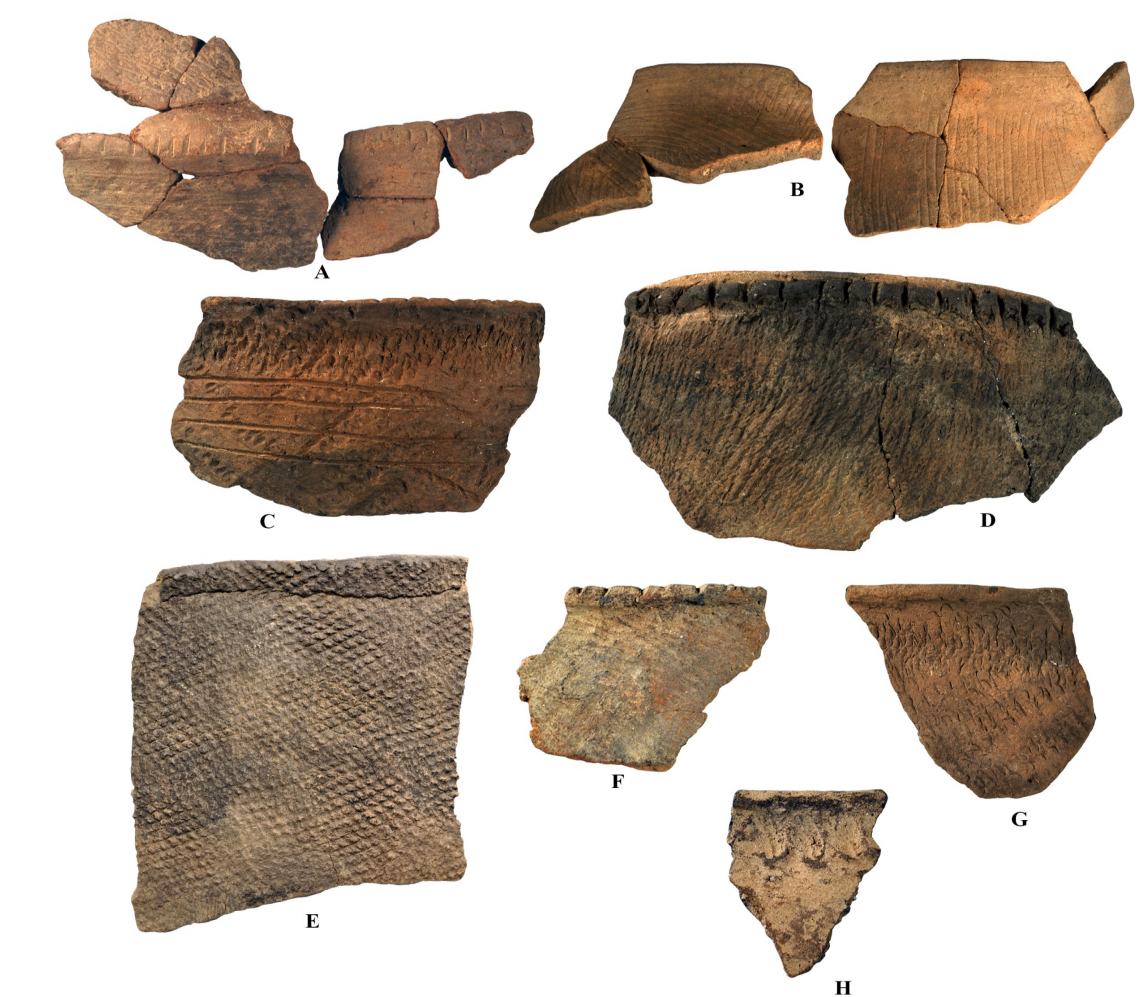


Figure 8: Examples of Great Bend series ceramics.

Key Findings and Interpretations

1. A new ceramic series, the “Great Bend” series was defined postdating the Uwharrie series based on my analysis of the Forbush Creek collection and published data from previous research⁸ in the area.
2. While multiple occupations are probably present, the excavated portion of Forbush Creek largely dates to A.D. 1200-1400, contrary to previous studies⁹ which believed it to be an earlier site based on a poor understanding of the site’s chronology.
3. The inhabitants of Forbush Creek were engaged in low-level intermarriage and probably formed kinship alliances with Pee Dee Mississippians in the Southern Piedmont.
4. A previous theory which suggested that the Lower Great Bend was abandoned after A.D. 1200¹⁰ due to violent interaction with Mississippians and/or tensions within communities was comprehensively disproven in light of new evidence and reanalysis of old evidence.
5. The emergence of agriculture in the Upper Yadkin River Valley was gradual and marked by increased interconnection and co-dependence between villages, rather than a significant increase in violence and territorial behavior as some previous studies¹¹ suggested based on faulty assumptions and incomplete evidence.
6. The unique political ecology of the Upper Yadkin River Valley combined with the decentralized and egalitarian sociopolitical organization of the Pee Dee Mississippians compared to other Mississippian societies further west¹² are probably responsible for the slow pace at which Mississippian practices spread in the Piedmont.

Recommendations and Acknowledgements

More extensive analysis of the lithic and botanical assemblage will shed more light on the emergence of agriculture. The site itself is still in good condition and additional surveys and excavations could tell us much, much more, especially in collaboration with descendants.

Sigma XI and the North Carolina Archaeological Society provided a combined \$1300 in funding for radiocarbon dates. Dr. Dru McGill advised, Dr. Steve Davis provided additional advising, Drs. Heather Lapham and Mary-Beth Fitts provided advice and access to the collection.

References

1: Ward, H.T., & Davis, R.P.S. (1993). *Indian Communities on the North Carolina Piedmont AD 1000 to 1700*. Chapel Hill: Research Laboratories of Anthropology, Ward, H.T., & Davis, R.P.S. (1999). *Time Before History: The Archaeology of North Carolina*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 2: Boudreaux, E. (2007). *The Archaeology of Town Creek*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press. 3: Moore, D. (2002). *Catawba Valley Mississippian: Ceramics, Chronology, and Catawba Indians*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press. 4: Pauketat, T. (2004). *Ancient Cahokia and the Mississippians*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press. 5: McGehee-Snow, K. H. (1998). "A Ceramic Analysis of the Uwharrie Phase Forbush Creek Site(31YD1), Yadkin County, North Carolina." Senior Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 6: McManus, J. (1985). "An Analysis of the Lithic Artifact Assemblage from the Forbush Creek Site (31YD1), Yadkin County, North Carolina." Senior Thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. 7: Berger, S. & Graham, A. (2022). "Conflicted Landscapes: An Integrative Bioarchaeological and Archaeobotanical Study of the Forbush Creek Site, North Carolina." In *Ancient Foodways: Integrative Approaches to Understanding Subsistence and Society*, edited by C. Margaret Scarry, Dale Hutchinson, and Benjamin Arbuckle, 235-254. Gainesville: University Press of Florida. 8: Woodall, J.N. (1990). *Archaeological Investigations in the Yadkin River Valley, 1984-87*. North Carolina Archaeological Council Publication No. 25. North Carolina Archaeological Council, Raleigh. 9: Jones, E. (2017). "The Ecology of Changing Settlement Patterns among Piedmont Village Tradition communities in Southeastern North America, AD 800-1600." In *Settlement Ecology of the Ancient Americas*, edited by Lucas C. Kellet and Eric E. Jones, 29-56. Oxfordshire: Routledge, Berger and Graham (2022). 10: Jones (2017), Berger and Graham (2022). 11: Woodall (1990), Berger and Graham (2022). 12: Pauketat 2004, Boudreaux (2007).