



Charity Hall: A Foundational Report of a 19th-Century Chickasaw Mission

Tara Nicole Skipton

University of Florida

Faculty mentor: Charles Cobb, Florida Museum of Natural History

Abstract

Toward the end of the 18th-century, the newly independent United States deliberated solutions to the “problem” in which Natives occupied lands that Euro-American settlers desired. The Civilization Fund Act was implemented in 1819 as one of the solutions, and it supported groups, like missionary organizations, to instruct Natives in Western culture. Charity Hall, a Presbyterian mission to the Chickasaws, was created as a result of the Act and can offer information regarding Native American accommodation and contestation to Western practices. Analyzing historical records yielded valuable information, like the daily operations at Charity Hall and the experiences of the Native children. Supplementing this, archaeological investigations recovered contemporary artifacts that verify Charity Hall’s location.

Keywords: archaeology, culture studies, anthropology, indigenous studies

Introduction

Having finished the War of Independence, the United States refocused on moving increasingly westward into Native territories. This increased contact between Natives and Euro-Americans led to violent skirmishes in some places, but it also pressured the federal government to respond. There were two primary options on how to remedy this situation: remove Natives from their lands or “civilize” Natives to assimilate to Western culture. In practice, these methods did not operate separately, but instead occurred in conjunction with one another.

Removal efforts started around 1803, when President Thomas Jefferson purchased Louisiana from the French (Billington 1949). Encouraged by Jefferson, many Southern tribes ceded their lands to head westward into this new area. While this sounds voluntary, state governments concurrently created legislation that made Natives’ daily lives so miserable that they would rather leave (Perdue 2001). Fueled by notions of Euro-American superiority, removal efforts sought to open fertile lands on which Euro-American settlers could grow lucrative crops, such as cotton.

Policies of “civilization” started with economic programs that provided Natives with materials like livestock and farming equipment to enter the Western economy as the ultimate compensation for Native lands. The underlying assumption was that Natives would realize that

Euro-American culture was superior to theirs and would prefer to adopt it (Berkhofer 1978). Additionally, in 1796, Congress established a system of trading posts within Native territory to facilitate Western trade (Perdue 2001). These programs acted in conjunction with land cessions and sought to create economic ties between the government and the tribes as a way to incorporate Natives into Western society.

One of the most significant “civilization” programs was the Civilization Fund Act. In 1819, Congress passed the Act to provide “against the further decline and final extinction of the Indian tribes,” expand frontier settlements, and teach Natives “the habits and arts of civilization” (Civilization Fund Act of 1819). Those of “good moral character” were to teach agriculture, reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as other Western customs, usually on Native territory. Congress appropriated a total of \$10,000 per year to organizations under this program. The Department of War oversaw the Fund and was the primary contact for the regular progress reports that organizations sent as per the requirements.

Missionary schools built in response to the Civilization Fund Act marked a pivotal moment, especially for southeastern tribes in the last decades before removal in the 1830s, and served as a foundation for future Indian boarding schools in the late 1800s. Charity Hall, a Presbyterian mission to the Chickasaws in northeastern Mississippi, created in 1820 by the Cumberland Presbyterian Missionary Society, is the second Civilization Fund Act mission to be studied. Focused around children, Charity Hall functioned as a boarding school where Chickasaw children learned reading, writing, arithmetic, Christianity, and Western customs for months at a time. This paper details the first archival and archaeological studies of this mission. Its aims are to reveal information about the operations of Charity Hall, the buildings present, and the daily lives of the students as well as to archaeologically discover the mission and locate activity areas.

Historical Context

To understand Charity Hall effectively, an extensive literature review was conducted to explore the context in which Charity Hall operated, while specifically focusing on differences between Chickasaw and Western cultures and the organization of the missionaries.

Chickasaw Lifestyle

Prior to the 19th-century, the Chickasaws had extensive contact with European powers. In fact, at this point, the most powerful and wealthiest families were of mixed-blood – the most notable being the Colberts. James Colbert, an English trader, produced many children with several different

Chickasaw women (Gibson 1971). Their family had been influential throughout the Chickasaw tribe, as James had led Chickasaw military efforts in several wars and became an honorary Chickasaw chief in 1782. By 1816, James' son, Levi Colbert, took over as principal chief and spokesman of the Chickasaws (Atkinson 2004). Though the Chickasaws had already adopted many Western customs, like clothing and building styles, "civilization" under the Civilization Fund Act called for many more cultural changes, like the reversal of some gender roles. In Chickasaw culture, women typically supervised cultivation because they knew the songs that kept the crops growing. Additionally, they oversaw the slave labor since the enslaved performed similar tasks. Men hunted, engaged in warfare, and conducted slave raids when necessary. Similar to Western culture, however, Chickasaw women would primarily take care of children and make clothing (Gibson 1971). "Civilization" would mean that women were limited to household duties, such as caring for children, cooking, sewing, and maintaining the house, while men would take over agriculture, use draft animals, and sell the crops for profit. Additionally, Natives that raised crops traditionally grew primarily corn, but it was more "civilized" to grow wheat or cotton. Finally, "civilized" children would go to a school that taught Western subjects (Perdue 2001).

Institutional History

Although the Civilization Fund Act was available for any entity of "good moral character," the main organizations that participated were missionary societies (Civilization Act of 1819 Funds Distribution, n.d.). Missionary organizations were better equipped than other entities to enact the goals of the Act as their own goals of conversion already provided a mode of contact with Native tribes. To the missionaries, the Act was a source of extra funding in exchange for more of a focus on Western customs. Under the Act, missionary societies were expected to balance federal goals of civilization and mission goals of Christianization. In other words, Christianization was not an explicit goal of the Civilization Fund Act. As per the requirements for using the Act, missions were expected to send regular reports to the Secretary of War and provide information when asked (McKenney 1829). Some missionary boards would also frequently visit their missions to make sure things were running well. Additionally, while missions differed on whom they educated, those that focused on educating children also faced pressure from some tribes to prioritize Western education. In this way, these missions were expected to make progress on several goals and were held accountable by several entities.

In 1820, Reverend Robert Bell and several other ministers of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church met Levi Colbert at his house in Cotton Gin Port with other tribal leaders and discussed establishing a mission school. In this arrangement, Bell would teach “mechanic arts and agriculture, as well as...the literary course,” while the Chickasaws would offer protection and land for cultivation (McDonnold 1899). Bell and his wife taught in Colbert’s house for about four weeks, while Charity Hall was being built southward on Colbert’s land. The Chickasaws went on to have a total of five Presbyterian missions on their territory: Charity Hall (1820-1832), Monroe (1822-1830), Tokshish (1824-1834), Martyn (1826-1832), and Caney Creek (1826-1832) (Gibson 1971).

Archival Investigations

My research on the history of Charity Hall is largely derived from letters between Reverend Bell and various entities, such as the Missionary Board and the Department of War. Most of the letters describe the financial hardships that the mission faced due to inadequate funding from both the Missionary Board and the Civilization Fund Act. Therefore, Bell relied on donations from Euro-Americans and Natives in the area until funding finally came in 1823 (William Moore to Robert Bell, April 5, 1820; Robert Bell to Cumberland Missionary Board, September 15, 1823).

According to an undated letter, Bell reports that there existed two dwelling houses, a school house, five cabins for student lodging, and a smokehouse. Each of these structures had a clay chimney and the cabins had tin roofs (Robert Bell to Unknown, n.d.). It is evident that lodging was an important factor for Chickasaw children to continue going to school. For example, in 1822, 21 students had attended Charity Hall, but many did not return because the cabins were incomplete and thus, there was no option for boarding (Robert Bell to John C. Calhoun, October 21, 1822). Additionally, the Missionary Board allotted funds for boarding only 20 students at Charity Hall for free, but Bell routinely went over that number (Robert Bell to Thomas McKenney, October 2, 1826).

Geographically, the mission was not located at a Chickasaw center, but instead was on a previously unoccupied plot of land to the west of the Tombigbee River in Mississippi where Chickasaw parents would send their children to stay for the duration of the school year; however, several Euro-American families lived in its vicinity and most of them took a role in the school’s operations (Robert Bell to John C. Calhoun, April 19, 1821).

During its lifetime, Charity Hall had 61 different students. In May 1825, fellow ministers David Foster and James Guthrie reported on Charity Hall on behalf of the Missionary Board. They reported that there were currently 30 students that attended regularly. Charity Hall only taught reading, writing, arithmetic, and English grammar (James Guthrie and David Foster to the Cumberland

Missionary Board, May 20, 1825). Bell would have taught more subjects, like science, but in his opinion, most, if not all, of the students could not move past literacy (Robert Bell to Elbert Herring, September 29, 1831). Academically, the students did better in spelling, reading, and writing than they did in grammar.

In their same report, Foster and Guthrie reported that Bell's family and the students followed this schedule daily:

About daylight the trumpet is blown – the signal for all to rise; in half an hour it is again blown, that all may attend family worship in the dining room, within five minutes. As soon as worship is over Mr. Bell with the boys repairs to the field, until 8 or 9 o'clock and Mrs. Bell with the girls to sewing or other employments [when] they are then all called to breakfast, where Mr. Bell is seated at the head of the table, the girls on one side and the boys on the other; from him portions are served to all at the table. When breakfast is over they then repair to school until 12. After an hours refreshment they are called by the trumpet to dinner; when this is over they repair to school until 4, when they break up and go to the field until night and they are called to supper and worship (James Guthrie and David Foster to the Cumberland Missionary Board, May 20, 1825, 2).

Based on this excerpt, it is evident that Charity Hall followed the guidelines set forth in the Civilization Fund Act: boys and girls both learned classroom subjects such as arithmetic, reading, and writing, but they were separated when it came to practical skills. More specifically, boys learned farming and engineering, while girls learned how to sew, spin, and cook. Additionally, agriculture at Charity Hall was a central pillar not only because it addressed the federal goal of implementing an agriculturally based economy, but also because it provided additional funds that Bell desperately needed.

Using these primary sources, there is not any explicit historical evidence of children resisting the adoption of these Western cultural practices. However, this could be a reflection of authorial bias. Bell would not have wanted to mention to the Department of War nor the Missionary Board that some students were troublesome, as it would undermine the success of the mission and perhaps cause a (further) reduction of funding. Alternatively, this could reflect Bell not knowing much about the personal lives of the students. Though Bell and the students spent most of the day together, the students could converse amongst themselves in their shared lodging about things of which Bell would not have approved.

Charity Hall suspended school operations in 1830, but officially closed in 1832 due to the federal suspension of aid and lack of funds. However, right around the same time, the Chickasaws were

finalizing their last land cession to the U.S. Government, causing the remainder of their better-funded missions to close shortly afterward (Gibson 1971).

The historical record offers extensive information about Charity Hall and the wider context, but there is a gap of valuable information about the indigenous perspective.

Archaeological Investigations

Archaeological methods could remedy this disparity in the historical record by uncovering the material culture that did not make it into the historical record. The archaeological investigations carried out in 2018 identified the locality of the site, while spatial analysis further narrowed the desired study area.

Contemporary Studies and Hybridity

The only archaeological study of a mission built in response to the Civilization Fund Act is that of the Cherokee Valley Towns Baptist Mission near Peachtree, North Carolina, which opened its doors in 1821. The Valley Towns study yielded indigenous pottery around the kitchen building, which shows that the missionaries at least tolerated the retention of some indigenous culinary practices (Riggs 2017). The Valley Towns as well as the Charity Hall studies focus around the topic of hybridity, or the idea that assimilating communities can adopt “donor” culture in different ways – not just through total domination nor total rejection. Stephen Silliman (2013) summarizes how current researchers use the term hybridization as a general term to “apply to situations when a group (1) encounters or has sustained interaction with another group or its material culture, whether by force or by choice, and (2) adjusts to or incorporated new material, practical, genetic, and symbolic elements associated with the encountered group in experimental, creative, or seemingly imitative ways, again whether in coercive or equitable relations” (490). Hybridity can be evident, for example, in material culture, practices, languages, and other representations of culture and could reflect resistance from the assimilating communities, or accommodation or the assimilation goals of the “donor” community. An example of material evidence supporting the idea that mission children resisted Western culture is the presence of Indigenous objects or altered Western objects in more hidden locations, like their dorm.

Site Geography

Charity Hall is located north of Aberdeen, MS on private property (see Figure 1). This area used to be farmland, but the owner has since consolidated, and this area has grown into a forest, consisting of hardwood, shrubbery, and leaf litter has also been used for hunting periodically.



Figure 1. General site location

One of the most notable features about the geography of the site is that it is located at the base of a steep slope on the western margin of the Tombigbee River Valley. The entrance to the site, which used to be an old road, is located at about 95 meters above sea level (masl), while the base of the slope, where the site is located, is at about 60 masl. Around 30 meters from the bottom of the slope is a monument dedicated to Charity Hall, erected in 1915 by the Missionary Women of Bell. The road continues and splits into two directions: one going northwest and the other going southeast. These two offshoots separate the forested area from the pine plantation established by the Army Corps of Engineers.

Field Work

In June 2018, researchers conducted field work with goals of officially narrowing down exactly where the mission was located, since the Mississippi Site Files incorrectly had two listings for its location: one at the monument and another to the southeast. First testing the site with the monument, all archaeological investigations mentioned in this article took place at this site. Another goal was to pinpoint the mission's structures. Material evidence associated with the presence of buildings in the early 19th-century include contemporaneous bricks, nails, and glass, but Bell's letters also mentioned that there was clay from the chimneys and tin roofing. After

performing a preliminary inspection of the site, researchers were unable to find any sign of ruins from the surface. Subsequently, a series of shovel tests was conducted along a total of 10 transects, at 20-, 10-, or 5-meter intervals. Each shovel test was about 30 cm in diameter and dug to a depth of sterile subsoil (usually around 40 cm deep). The soil from each shovel test was screened through ¼-inch wire mesh. Transects 1 and 2 extended into the pine plantation, an area which yielded less material, while Transects A and B explored an area with an iron nail concentration to the west. Simultaneously, since iron nails are one of the materials that could represent the existence of buildings, the study area was surveyed with a metal detector and recovered positive readings. After all shovel tests and metal detecting were completed, researchers recorded the Global Positioning System (GPS) coordinates of each shovel test and positive metal detector reading with a Trimble GPS unit.

Artifact Analysis

Overall, the field work yielded artifacts that were contemporaneous with the occupation of Charity Hall. All of the historic ceramics recovered were classified as Late Refined Earthenware but were separated into the subcategories of Creamware and Pearlware. Creamware (ca. 1760 to ca. 1810) is yellow or cream in paste and glaze color, though it sometimes appears greenish in places where the glaze pools. Pearlware (c. 1780 to c. 1825) has a whitish glaze with a blueish tint and pools of blue (Kwas 1999). The pearlware recovered was also handpainted with blue decoration. The two kettle fragments recovered are made of iron and one of the pieces includes a type of handle. There was a total of 30 nails recovered, which were all classified as being cut nails (c. 1790 to c. 1890). Cut nails were made by cutting a flat sheet of metal and are identified by their two tapered and two parallel edges. Cut nails can be further classified and thus more accurately dated into three subcategories: Early (c. 1790 to c. 1820), Transitional (c. 1810 to c. 1840), and Modern (c. 1835 to c. 1890) (Phillips 1993). This differentiation depends on the nail head and the grain of the metal; however, due to the rusted state of what was recovered, it is impossible to make this distinction. Also recovered were three pieces of thin, flat glass, which are presumed to have belonged to windows during this time period. Additionally, there was about 400 grams of brick recovered. The final category of artifacts includes personal items such as buckles and a button. There were also indigenous artifacts recovered, including lithics and one sherd of prehistoric ceramic. One lithic was classified as a formal endscraper, but other lithics fell into the categories of complete flakes, flake fragments, core fragments, and debitage.

Geographic Analysis

Using the GPS data, researchers were able to spatially visualize the recovered artifacts using a Geographic Information System (GIS). In this way, it is easier to see that there is a concentration of brick, iron nails, personal items, and historic ceramics closer to the monument (see Figures 2-5). The distribution of iron nails is of particular interest since their primary use in construction can indicate the boundaries of structures. This provides information on where to start for the next

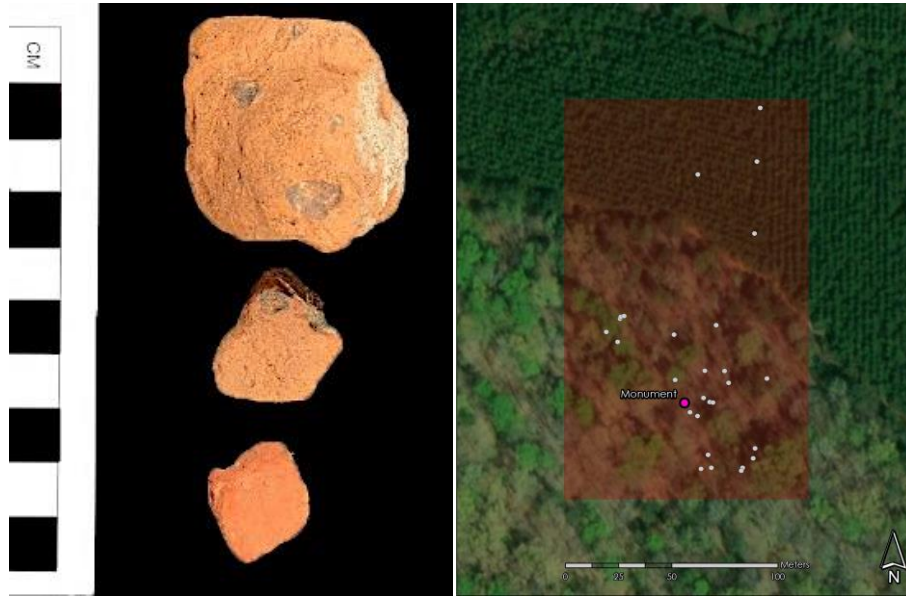


Figure 2 Brick Fragments and Distribution

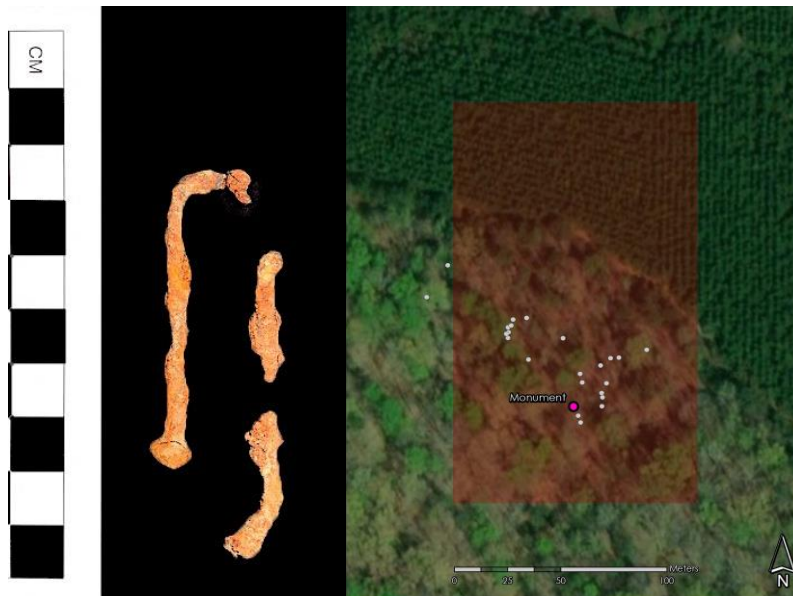


Figure 3 Iron Nails and Distribution



Figure 4 Buckle (Personal Item) and Distribution

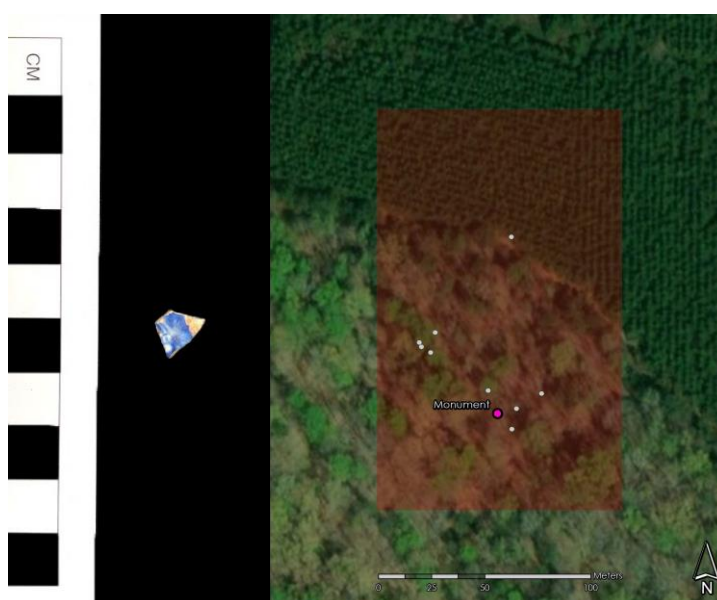


Figure 5 Handpainted Pearlware (Historic Ceramic) and Distribution

field session to continue narrowing down where the buildings were exactly located through more intensive field survey methods.

The field work conducted also largely aligned with Charity Hall's historical record. One example is the mission's vicinity to Levi Colbert's home. While searching through map records in the Library of Congress database, I found a historic map titled "Lands in Mississippi Ceded by the Chickasaws to the United States in 1832 & 1834" and dated 1835. The map used a township and range system that is still used today in Mississippi, so it was easy to georeference, or apply

geographic coordinates. This map provided several points of interest, like Levi Colbert's house. Charity Hall had been reported as being three miles south of Colbert's home, and this map validates that fact (Atkinson 2004). Additionally, the material recovered (most specifically, the historic ceramics and iron nails) coincide with the dates during which Charity Hall operated (1820-1830). Finally, the artifact distribution shows that the mission's buildings were most likely located near the 1915 monument.

Archaeologically, researchers found that the true site of Charity Hall is near the monument and uncovered material that is contemporaneous with the mission by using shovel test and metal detecting methods. Although the archaeological field work conducted was not as extensive as to yield answers to large questions such as whether the children at Charity Hall resisted mission practices, it did provide valuable foundational information, like confirming the location of the site. Additionally, the artifact distributions help narrow down areas of interest for future field sessions.

Conclusions and Future Work

In order to get a thorough understanding of the mission experience at Charity Hall, it is important to incorporate a combination of historical and archaeological methods, especially when the perspectives of key figures, like the Chickasaw children, did not appear much in the histories. Archival investigations from this study has provided information about Charity Hall's operations and its physical environment, while archaeological investigations have demarcated a more distinct study area. In the future, researchers plan on returning to Charity Hall to conduct more intensive field work. Using data from this past summer's work, researchers hope to be able to narrow down, for example, where the children lived, to ask deeper questions about whether they resisted mission practices.

References

- Atkinson, J. R. (2004). *Splendid land, splendid people: The Chickasaw Indians to removal*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press.
- Bell, R. (1821, 19 April). *Robert Bell to John C. Calhoun* [Letter.]
- Bell, R. (1822, 21 October). *Robert Bell to John C. Calhoun* [Letter.]
- Bell, R. (1823, 15 September). *Robert Bell to Cumberland Missionary Board* [Letter.]
- Bell, R. (1831, 29 September). *Robert Bell to Elbert Herring* [Letter.]
- Bell, R. (1832, 29 September). *Robert Bell to Thomas McKenney* [Letter.]
- Bell, R. (n.d.). *Robert Bell to Unknown* [Letter].
- Berkhofer, Jr., R. F. (1978). *The white man's Indian: Images of the American Indian from Columbus to the present*. New York, NY: Vintage.
- Billington, R. A. (1949). *Westward expansion: A history of the American frontier*. New York, NY: The MacMillan Company.
- Civilization Act of 1819 Funds Distribution. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://uploads.knightlab.com/storymapjs/ef302b45fe690d798810f28b8f474bbd/civilization-act-of-1819-funds-distribution/index.html>
- Civilization Fund Act of 1819, 3 USC § 516.
- Gibson, A. M. (1971). *The Chickasaws*. Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Guthrie, J. and Foster, D. (1825, 20 May). *James Guthrie and David Foster to the Cumberland Missionary Board* [Letter.]
- Kwas, M. L. (1999). A guide to the identification of historic refined earthenwares. Fayetteville, AR: Arkansas Archaeological Survey. Retrieved from <http://users.clas.ufl.edu/davidson/Material%20Culture%20course/Material%20Culture%20Fall%202017Readings/Week%2011%20Ceramics/Kwas%201999%20Ceramics%20guide.pdf>
- Lusher, H. M. (1835). *Lands in Mississippi ceded by the Chickasaws to the United States in 1832 & 1834* [Map].
- McDonnold, B. W. (1899). *History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church* (4th ed.). Nashville, Tennessee: Board of Publication of Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Retrieved from <http://www.cumberland.org/hfpc/mcdonold/index.htm>
- McKenney, T. L. (1829, November 17). Annual Report for 1829 from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Office of Indian Affairs, Department of War.
- Moore, W. (1820, 5 April). *William Moore to Robert Bell* [Letter.]

- Perdue, T., & Green, M. D. (2001). *The Columbia guide to American Indians of the Southeast*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Phillips, M. K. (1993). 'Mechanic geniuses and duckies,' a revision of New England's cut nail chronology before 1820. *APT Bulletin: The Journal of Preservation Technology*, 25(3/4), 4–16.
- Riggs, B. H. (2007). Archaeological investigations at the Valley Towns Baptist Mission (31CE661). *North Carolina Archaeology*, 66, 1–26.
- Silliman, S. W. (2013). What, where, and when is hybridity. In J. J. Card (Ed.), *The Archaeology of Hybrid Material Culture* (pp. 486–500). Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press.