

Edited by
Mark Williams
and **Daniel T. Elliott**



A World Engraved

Archaeology of the
Swift Creek Culture

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Preface

Perhaps the best carvers of wood in prehistoric North America lived in the southern Appalachian region of the United States between 1400 and 1800 years ago. These Native Americans, certainly represented by many different unknown ethnic groups, have come to be known to archaeologists as the Swift Creek people. Unfortunately, and certainly ironically, not a single wood carving from these people has survived the ravages of time and been preserved to the twentieth century. All that we know of their magnificent wood-carving tradition comes from the images of carved wooden paddles that were impressed into the wet clay walls of their ceramic vessels. These pots, when fired, preserved a decorative art style that is timeless in its beauty and evocative of a different and fascinating way of seeing the world.

The first recognition of this Swift Creek pottery as a distinct and special ware occurred in 1936 near Macon, Georgia. Archaeological excavations took place on a small Indian mound near the banks of Swift Creek, an obscure little stream just northeast of Macon. The excavations there were a small part of a major depression-era archaeological project designed to put people back to work in simple government-sponsored projects. The pottery from this site was immediately recognized by Arthur R. Kelly, who was in charge of the excavations, as unique and distinct from the pottery of any other site excavated in the central Georgia area.

Over the next fifty years research on the Swift Creek culture progressed slowly at best. Occasionally another site would be tested, and eventually the geographic range for this pottery was better understood. Some progress was also made on dating the Swift Creek sites. In all this time, however, there were no detailed or extended attempts to summarize what had been collectively learned about these sites and the people who produced them. It was with this in mind that the Lamar Institute decided to conduct a small conference in the spring of 1993 with two explicit goals. The first goal was to summarize the history of our knowledge of Swift Creek, and the second was to bring together the full range of Swift Creek scholars to present new prob-

lems and directions for what we might term *Swift Creek studies*. This volume is the result of that conference.

The Lamar Institute Swift Creek Conference took place on May 28 and 29, 1993, at Ocmulgee National Monument in Macon, Georgia. The detailed conversations of the conference were taped, transcribed, and recently published by the Lamar Institute for those who wish additional details about Swift Creek. The attendees at the conference included the following archaeologists: David Anderson, Keith Ashley, Judy Bense, Dave Davis, Dan Elliott, Rita Elliott, Ricardo Fernandez-Sardine, Jennifer Freer, David Hally, Bennie Keel, Teresa Paglione, Dan Penton, David Phelps, Rebecca Saunders, Betty Smith, Don Smith, Frankie Snow, Karl Steinen, Keith Stephenson, James Stoltman, Mark Williams, Dean Wood, and Jack Wynn. Additional attendees at parts of the conference included Ann Coolidge, Sylvia Flowers, David Smith, Ford Smith, Michelle Smith, and John Wilson. The chapters of Alan Marsh (Chapter 2) and Betty Smith (Chapter 8) were not written explicitly for the conference but are included here because of their importance and relevance. The chapter by Jones, Penton, and Tesar (Chapter 13) grew from a paper presented by Penton at the conference. All of the other chapters are revised versions of papers presented at the conference.

We thank Ocmulgee National Monument, superintendent John Bundy, and Sylvia Flowers for the use of their Discovery Room and help with the meeting. We thank Rita Elliott for taping the proceedings, the Macon Coliseum for the loan of tables, and the Department of Anthropology, University of Georgia, for the loan of film equipment.

The first two chapters of this volume provide a historical background for modern Swift Creek studies. Following these chapters, we have chosen a simple geographical model to sequence Chapters 3 through 14 from north to south within the Swift Creek region. The specific range of subjects of these chapters is widely varied and we applaud this variety. Swift Creek archaeology is still a youthful inquiry. The final chapter, authored by David Anderson, provides a summary of our knowledge of this important archaeological culture to the present day. The attendees and supporters of the 1993 conference clearly believe, as we do, that Swift Creek was a special archaeological culture and that knowledge of it should be shared and nourished. We hope this book is just the beginning of serious future Swift Creek studies.

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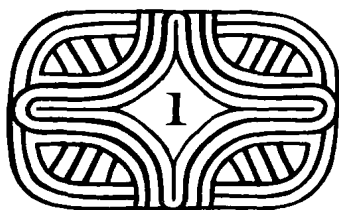
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Swift Creek Research

History and Observations

Mark Williams and Daniel T. Elliott

The Swift Creek period in Georgia and the surrounding states is recognized almost exclusively by the distinct pottery associated with the period from approximately A.D. 100 to A.D. 750. The earliest recorded illustrations of what we now know as Swift Creek Complicated Stamped pottery were presented almost 70 years before the type was formally recognized, however. In 1873 Charles C. Jones illustrated at least one sherd of this type in his classic volume *Antiquities of the Southern Indians* (Jones 1873:21, plate XXIX). He did not recognize them as distinct from the other stamped sherds he illustrated, most of which were much more recent in date.

Additional Swift Creek sherds were illustrated in 1903 by William Holmes in his summary volume of the Indian ceramics of the eastern United States (Holmes 1903). Again, he had no idea how old they were and did not recognize them as distinct from other paddle-stamped ceramics from the Deep South. Both of these studies were conducted before the value of ceramics as a dating tool was recognized. Further, relatively little was made of Swift Creek ceramics before this century because they were virtually absent from the multitude of mounds that were opened in the nineteenth century: Swift Creek pottery is not burial pottery. The peripatetic Clarence B. Moore found and illustrated a few sherds of Swift Creek Complicated Stamped pottery from Florida burial mounds in two of his northwestern Florida publications (Moore 1902a:470, 472, 1918:525, 565).

Although Margaret Ashley presented a credible analysis of Mississippian period stamped pottery from the northwestern Georgia Etowah site in her 1932 paper, there were no Swift Creek sherds in her collections from there,

nor have any been found at Etowah since then (Ashley 1932). Indeed, this particular stamped pottery was unrecognized as a separate type by all researchers until the landmark study of Arthur R. Kelly of the excavations at Macon, Georgia, published in 1938. For the first time systematic excavations on a large scale included a site that had this material in profusion. This site was the Swift Creek mound (Kelly 1938). The chapter by Alan Marsh in the present collection (Chapter 2) discusses some of the logistical aspects of its excavation in 1936 and 1937.

This mound was approximately 3 meters high when excavated and had been plowed for many years. Kelly and his wife, Rowena, were reportedly fascinated by the beautiful complicated stamped ceramics found there in abundance. Although he devoted fewer than two pages of his sixty-eight-page report to the description of the excavations, he spent nearly twenty pages discussing the pottery found there. In fact, he devoted more effort to discussing Swift Creek than any other aspect of the Macon Works Progress Administration project, including even the main Macon Plateau site. Further, the Swift Creek site was the only piece of the eight-year massive excavations at Macon that he completed as a site report in his later life. Clearly, it is with Kelly's excavations at Swift Creek that the substance of this book really begins.

Although Kelly presented one small photographic plate of the remarkable Swift Creek pottery in his 1938 report, it was not until the following year that a formal type definition was written and presented by Jesse Jennings and Charles Fairbanks (1939b). Their description was the lead definition in the second newsletter (March 1939) of the then newly constituted Southeastern Archaeological Conference. In addition to the formal description of the type, two plates of sherd drawings by James Jackson, illustrator with the Macon project, were included. As Jennings and Fairbanks noted in their description, the Swift Creek material was similar to material from the Tennessee River valley in northeastern Alabama described by William Haag in the first newsletter (February 1939) that Haag had named Pickwick Complicated Stamped (Haag 1939b). The Pickwick material was tempered with crushed limestone rather than sand and had a more restricted range of designs. The similarity is undeniable, however, and Pickwick still represents the northwestern limit of what is now universally called Swift Creek pottery.

On the Georgia coast, Joseph Caldwell and Antonio Waring recognized

the presence of Swift Creek-like pottery there and named this relatively rare variant Brewton Hill Complicated Stamped in the fifth newsletter of the Southeastern Archaeological Conference, published in August 1939 (Caldwell and Waring 1939). In the report of the excavations at the famous Irene site near Savannah, Caldwell and McCann expanded briefly on the presence of Swift Creek on the Georgia coast, particularly in association with late Deptford materials (Caldwell and McCann 1941:51).

In the period immediately before World War II, Charles Fairbanks, who was still working out of the Macon area, visited the huge Kolomoki site in Early County, Georgia. He was somewhat surprised to discover that the majority of ceramics at the site were of the Swift Creek style. This was surprising because the 18-meter-high mound there was assumed to date, along with the presumed village, to the later Mississippian period. Fairbanks quickly realized and stated that perhaps this was not the case (Fairbanks 1941).

Swift Creek pottery was recognized in eastern Tennessee by Thomas Lewis and Madeline Kneberg in their 1946 publication on the Hiwassee Island sites. In this invaluable report based on their 1937–1939 excavations, they documented and illustrated materials that, while rare at the site, are clearly recognizable as Swift Creek (Lewis and Kneberg 1946:84–85, plates 45 and 46).

Charles Fairbanks completed his classic paper *Creek and Pre-Creek* in 1947, although it was not published until 1952 in the Fay-Cooper Cole Memorial volume edited by James B. Griffin (Fairbanks 1952). In this paper, Fairbanks provided one of the first good summaries of the Swift Creek archaeological culture, albeit mainly from a central Georgia slant, and it should be required reading for anyone interested in the subject.

In the summer of 1940, Gordon Willey conducted an archaeological survey of northwestern Florida that, coupled with his exhaustive analysis of collections made before then by other researchers in the area, led, after the war, to his 1949 publication *The Archaeology of the Florida Gulf Coast* (Willey 1949). Few volumes in any area of the southeastern United States have so thoroughly organized, summarized, and detailed the local archaeological knowledge as did this report. Willey had been heavily involved in the Macon work from 1936 through 1938 and was as familiar with Swift Creek materials as any archaeologist. In 1936, for example, he had excavated the Stubbs mound site south of Macon, which had a significant Swift Creek component

(Williams 1975). In addition, his work at the Cowart's Landing site further acquainted him with the Swift Creek material (Willey 1939). When he began his work in Florida he quickly recognized the presence of a significant amount of Swift Creek pottery there as well, and he observed that the complicated Swift Creek pottery was virtually always found in association with a wide variety of plain, incised, and punctated pottery that had not been present in central Georgia. He named these sherds the Santa Rosa series. Thus he was led to call this distinctive combination of ceramic styles the Santa Rosa–Swift Creek material, and the name has stuck in Florida to the present. The chapters in this collection by Judith Bense (Chapter 14) and by Calvin Jones, Dan Penton, and Louis Tesar (Chapter 13) discuss aspects of this Florida Swift Creek material. In addition, the chapter by Keith Ashley in this volume (Chapter 12) overviews the Swift Creek material from northeastern Florida, an area that was not surveyed by Willey.

From 1948 through 1951, excavations were directed at the Kolomoki site by William Sears, then of the University of Georgia. These excavations were reported by him in a series of four publications between 1951 and 1956 (Adams 1956; Sears 1951a, 1951b, 1953, 1956). All of the excavations were conducted to provide better information about the site because it was being developed as a state park. Although it had been acquired by Georgia in 1935, little knowledge of it existed beyond Fairbanks's information that the site contained Swift Creek pottery. With Sears's excavations at the site one of the longest-running, and now resolved, controversies about Swift Creek began. Sears saw the Swift Creek materials at Kolomoki as distinct from Swift Creek as it was understood at that time, and he named the materials and their associated time period for the site itself. His interpretation of the sequence of cultures at the site, however, made in the absence of clear stratigraphic information at the site, was at odds with that of many other archaeologists. He now has acknowledged his misinterpretation in the article *Mea Culpa* (Sears 1992), and the issue is at rest. Chapter 11 herein by Karl Steinen views Kolomoki in a larger social setting.

Although Kolomoki did not yield clear stratigraphic data, two sites excavated in the lower Chattahoochee River valley to the west of Kolomoki did. As part of the Lake Seminole excavations conducted by the University of Georgia in 1949–1951, Joseph Caldwell excavated Fairchild's Landing and Hare's Landing, both of which produced stratified Swift Creek to