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THE CURRENT STATE OF TOWN CREEK RESEARCH: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED AFTER THE FIRST 75 YEARS?

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The twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of *The Prehistory of North Carolina* provides an opportunity to take stock of contemporary North Carolina archaeology. This chapter considers what we have learned from the Town Creek archaeological site (31Mg2 and Mg3) since excavations ceased there in 1984. Town Creek is a multiple-component site in the southern Piedmont that was occupied during all periods of North Carolina's prehistory and early history. The site is best-known for its Mississippian occupation (ca. A.D. 1150–1400) during which a multiple-stage platform mound was built. The Town Creek site has been a North Carolina State Historic Site since 1955 (Carnes-McNaughton 2002; Coe 1995:31), and it is one of the state's most-visited archaeological sites. Town Creek's prominence within North Carolina archaeology derives from the extraordinary amount of fieldwork conducted at the site under the direction of Joffre Coe—one of the founders of Southeastern archaeology (Griffin 1985; Keel 2002). Town Creek's prominence within the archaeology of North Carolina is reflected by the statement of Ward and Davis (1999:131) that:

With only mild hyperbole, it could be said that the mound on the banks of the Little River has been the center of the archaeological universe in the southern North Carolina Piedmont.

Town Creek is well-known for the extraordinary, “almost mythic” (Ward and Davis 1999:123) extent of its excavations. Fieldwork was undertaken at Town Creek from 1937 to 1984, with the exception of a seven-year hiatus (1942–1949) during and after World War II. These decades of fieldwork were part of what Coe (1995:11) referred to as “A Fifty-Year Program” for the investigation of Town Creek. The scale of fieldwork under Coe's program, and the size of the collections and records this program generated, is truly impressive. With the excavation of over 96,000 ft² in 984 units and the almost complete excavation of the site's platform mound (Boudreaux 2005; Coe 1995:60, 152), Town Creek is one of the most extensively investigated sites in the Southeast. The archaeological materials from these excavations comprise one of the largest collections curated by the Research Laboratories of Archaeology (RLA) at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill (UNC) (R.P. Stephen Davis, Jr., personal communication 2011).

The extraordinary history of field investigations and the outstanding archaeological collections these investigations produced might lead one to think that Town Creek is one of the best-understood sites in North Carolina. Ironically, much remains to be learned about the site. Until recently, some very basic aspects of Town Creek's occupation and material culture had not been thoroughly investigated. Major strides have occurred in Town Creek research in the past 25 years, and this chapter will consider some of these developments. The mid-1980s will be used as a baseline for Town Creek studies, which is appropriate for at least two reasons. First, 1983 saw the publication of *The Prehistory of North Carolina: An Archaeological Symposium*, a work that is used as a bit of a touchstone in this chapter. Indeed, according to the book's back cover, the authors of that volume “offer a contemporary view of what we now know about North Carolina's prehistoric past.” A second reason the mid-1980s are used as a baseline for Town Creek studies

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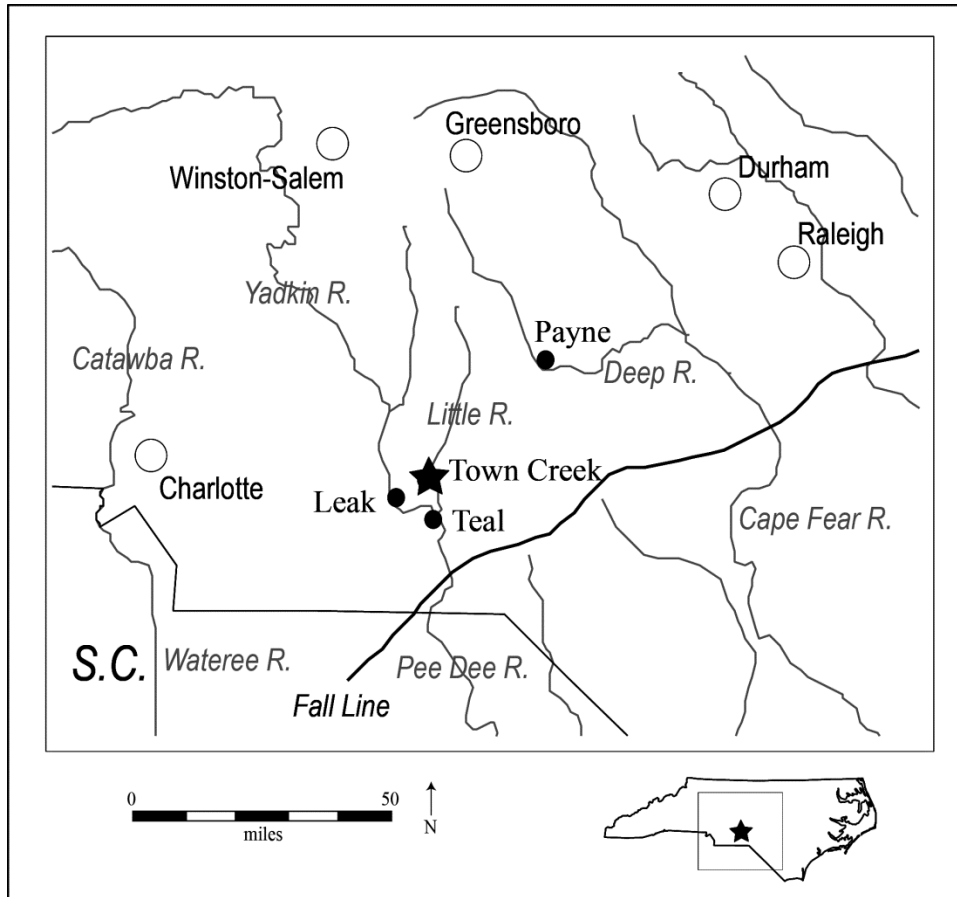


Figure 18-1. Town Creek area map showing sites mentioned in text (base map from Ward and Davis 1999:Figure 4.1).

is that 1984 was the last season of fieldwork at Town Creek under the overall direction of Joffre Coe, closing the fieldwork component of Coe’s (1995:11) Fifty-Year Program for the site’s investigation.¹

BACKGROUND

The Town Creek site (31Mg2 and Mg3)² is located on the Little River in Montgomery County in the southern Piedmont of North Carolina near the town of Mt. Gilead (Figure 18-1). The site’s Mississippian component consists of a 12-ft-tall platform mound that was almost completely excavated (Boudreaux 2005:19–23; Coe 1995:62–77). An area of intense occupation, indicated by thousands of features, is located adjacent to the mound, between it and the Little River which flows along the east side of the site (Figure 18-2). Decades of excavations at Town Creek have resulted in the documentation of over 15,000 features, the identification of approximately 40 structures, the excavation of over 200 burials that contained nearly 250 individuals, and the recovery of hundreds of thousands of artifacts (Boudreaux 2005, 2007a; Coe 1995).

Town Creek’s Mississippian component is included within the cultural unit known as South Appalachian Mississippian, a regional variant of Mississippian culture that is characterized by paddle-stamped ceramics that are not shell-tempered (Caldwell 1958:34; Ferguson 1971:7–8;



Figure 18-2. Town Creek map showing all features documented at the base of plowzone.

Griffin 1967:190). Town Creek is the type site for the Pee Dee cultural unit, a localized Mississippian archaeological culture that occurs in portions of south-central North Carolina and northeastern South Carolina (Coe 1952:308–309; DePratter and Judge 1990:56–58; Kelly 1974; Mountjoy 1989; Oliver 1992; South 2002; Stuart 1975; Trinkley 1980). The Mississippian pottery found at Town Creek and nearby sites is attributable to the Pee Dee series, which is

characterized by paddle-stamped surface treatments, pastes tempered with sand and medium-sized grit, and distinctive rim treatments (Boudreaux 2007b; Coe 1952:308–309, 1964:33, 1995:151–190; Reid 1965, 1967).

Although this chapter focuses on the Mississippian period at Town Creek, it is important to know that many other components are present at the site. Coe (1952, 1995:152) discusses projectile point and pottery types that indicate the presence of Native Americans at Town Creek during all cultural periods in the archaeological sequence of the North Carolina Piedmont (see Ward and Davis 1999:Figure 1.5) from the Early Archaic through Historic periods. The presence of a previously unrecognized Paleoindian component is indicated by the recovery of a Clovis point during excavations conducted in 2009 (Boudreaux et al. 2009). Such evidence of continued and repeated use of Town Creek clearly indicates that it was a good place to live throughout all of North Carolina's human occupation. As Coe (1995:85) points out, the site is located on a broad, flat, elevated terrace that has never been known to flood, and, perhaps, it was the site's elevated location adjacent to the Little River and its floodplain resources that attracted many different people to this location over thousands of years.

ESTABLISHING A BASELINE FOR TOWN CREEK STUDIES

In order to consider what has been learned about Town Creek and Mississippian culture in the southern Piedmont, it must first be established what was known 25 years ago. Ironically, the *Prehistory of North Carolina* volume tells us virtually nothing about the site, even though images of Town Creek's mound grace the book's front and back covers. Although it was the Alpha and the Omega of that volume, Town Creek and Mississippian culture were not integrated at all into Trawick Ward's (1983) fine chapter on the archaeological sequence of the Piedmont. Town Creek is included in a map of the Piedmont (Ward 1983:Figure 2.1), mentioned twice in the section on the history of Piedmont archaeology (Ward 1983:57 and 59), and represented by a single photograph (Ward 1983:Figure 2.3) showing a trench into the mound. The most likely reason for Town Creek's omission is that no one other than Coe would have been able, or, perhaps more likely, would have been willing, to discuss Town Creek, so it was simply not included. Few sites have been as closely associated with one of the founding fathers of Southeastern archaeology as Town Creek has been associated with Joffre Coe (Griffin 1985; Keel 2002). Coe was the clearinghouse for Town Creek data, and therefore information and interpretations, for half a century, so it is not surprising that the site was not discussed by Ward in any meaningful way. Apparently, Coe was not ready to talk about Town Creek because his chapter in *The Prehistory of North Carolina* volume dedicates only a single paragraph (Coe 1983:169-170) and four photographs (Coe 1983:Figures 4.4 and 4.5) to Town Creek, and these are in a section on the history of North Carolina archaeology.

The lack of information and interpretations about Town Creek in the *The Prehistory of North Carolina* forces one to look to other sources to establish a baseline for assessing the current state of knowledge about Town Creek. The earliest of these is Coe's (1952) contribution to the volume *Archeology of Eastern United States* where he first published his ideas about Town Creek and Pee Dee culture. In that chapter, Coe (1952:308–309) established that while Town Creek was similar to Mississippian sites to the south and west, it was different from the cultural traditions of the Piedmont to the north. Pee Dee culture was seen as intrusive to the North Carolina Piedmont, and the Mississippian occupation of Town Creek was interpreted as representing the migration of a foreign people into the region. Coe appears to have maintained

this interpretation throughout his career because this idea is implied, although never explicitly stated, in his book on Town Creek which was published more than 40 years later (Coe 1995:154–155, 159–160, 167).

Two other works that made important, early contributions to Town Creek studies were both written by J. Jefferson Reid (1965, 1967), a graduate student at UNC who analyzed pottery from various contexts within the mound for his master's thesis (Ward and Davis 1999:125). Reid's 1965 publication discussed the similarities that the ceramics at Town Creek shared with Mississippian sites to the south, which suggested to him the existence of cultural similarities among the groups that occupied these sites. Reid's (1967) thesis, which focused on the mound at Town Creek and the ceramics that it contained, used radiocarbon dates to determine that the site's Mississippian occupation had occurred between ca. A.D. 1100 and 1400. Reid (1967) clearly showed that the site changed a great deal during this time, as indicated by significant architectural changes represented in the mound. Reid's thesis was important not only because of the interpretations it presented, but also because it represented one of the only, perhaps the only, presentation of information and data from the Town Creek fieldwork during all of Coe's Fifty-Year Program.

Coe's 1995 publication *Town Creek Indian Mound: A Native American Legacy*, which was published well after fieldwork ended at Town Creek in 1984, presents his ideas about Town Creek based on the totality of fieldwork that occurred there under his direction. A major theme of this book, an idea around which nearly all of its interpretations are centered, is that Town Creek had been largely, perhaps exclusively, ceremonial in purpose. Rather than being seen as the remains of a village (but see Coe 1952:309), the archaeological record of Town Creek was seen as coming from ceremonial activities (Coe 1995:61 96–97, 264; Wilson and Hogue 1995:145, 148) that were largely mortuary-based (Coe 1995:226, 263–278), and from the activities of a small, resident population of ritual specialists (Oliver 1995:108; Trinkley 1995:118).³ Coe's book provides much useful information, including an excellent history of archaeological investigations at Town Creek (Coe 1995:11–41). It also includes chapters on major artifact classes, and some discussions of architecture and site structure. Although Coe (1995:xxv) states that the book is not intended as a comprehensive report of investigations at the site, the absence of such a report limits the book's utility because few data are presented and no data are systematically reported by context. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to use archaeological evidence to evaluate some of the interpretations presented by the volume's contributors.

THE STUDY OF TOWN CREEK AFTER COE'S FIFTY-YEAR PROGRAM

Several notable accomplishments have occurred in Town Creek studies in recent years. One major change in Town Creek research has been the gaining of access to the site's collections by a larger group of scholars. The gaining of access by other researchers is significant because Town Creek is one of the most extensively excavated Mississippian sites in the Southeast, and its archaeological information and collections provide a rare opportunity to investigate an entire Mississippian settlement. Unfortunately, Town Creek has not really been integrated into Mississippian studies. The site's marginal position in Mississippian studies is the result of both the nature of its occupation during the Mississippian period and its modern history of research. Regarding its Mississippian occupation, Town Creek was a relatively small community on the

very edge of the Mississippian world. Regarding its history of research, Town Creek has undoubtedly played a minor role in Mississippian studies because the information available about the site has been fairly limited. Coe controlled Town Creek studies for over 50 years, but he did not publish on the site until 1995, and this publication is problematic. With the exception of the works of Reid (1965, 1967, 1985), information about Town Creek and access to its collections simply was not available to other researchers.

The excavated materials from Town Creek hold great potential for addressing a number of archaeological research questions, and several recent studies have started to tap into the potential of these collections. Recent analyses of Town Creek data and collections have focused on ceramics (Boudreaux 2007b, 2010a), burials and associated mortuary goods (Boudreaux 2010b; Cunningham 2010; Davis et al. 1996; Driscoll 2001, 2002), and architectural remains (Boudreaux 2005, 2007a). These analyses represent significant progress toward better understanding the Mississippian period in the southern Piedmont of North Carolina and the Mississippian occupation of the Town Creek site itself.

These recent contributions can be grouped into three general categories. First, recent years have seen the definition and refinement of a Mississippian regional sequence (*sensu* Willey and Phillips 1958:27) for North Carolina's southern Piedmont (Boudreaux 2005, 2007b; Oliver 1992). Second, Town Creek's local sequence has been refined into a series of temporally restricted occupations that allow for a better understanding of how the site changed throughout the Mississippian period (Boudreaux 2005, 2007a). Third, several mortuary and bioarchaeological studies of the large number of human burials excavated at Town Creek have provided insights into health, activity patterns, and some of the social and political statuses expressed in the site's mortuary contexts (Boudreaux 2005, 2007a, 2010b; Cunningham 2010; Driscoll 2001, 2002).

Mississippian Regional Sequence for the Southern North Carolina Piedmont

Significant progress has been made in establishing and refining the Mississippian regional sequence of the southern North Carolina Piedmont since Coe (1952:308–309) first defined the Pee Dee culture concept. Efforts to subdivide the Mississippian period into smaller culture-historical units such as phases and subphases (Table 18-1), which presently range from 50 to 150 years in duration, represent considerable improvement over the previously undifferentiated span of four to five centuries (see Coe 1995:159). This progress has resulted from the testing of several Pee Dee sites outside of Town Creek, the acquisition of multiple radiocarbon dates associated with discrete ceramic assemblages, and the re-analysis of existing collections (Boudreaux 2005, 2007b; Mountjoy 1989; Oliver 1992). Oliver (1992:235–257) first subdivided the Mississippian period in the southern Piedmont into three cultural phases based on materials he excavated from the Teal and Leak sites. Although the general framework of these phases is still used, two significant revisions have been made. First, the ceramic content of these phases was explicitly defined, which has allowed the identification of diagnostic types, modes, and assemblages (Boudreaux 2005, 2007b). Second, the temporal span of the three phases has been refined based on assemblages and radiocarbon dates from the Town Creek, Leak, Teal, and Payne sites (Boudreaux 2005, 2007b; Mountjoy 1989; Oliver 1992). This process has allowed the Town Creek and Leak phases to be subdivided into early and late sub-phases based on the appearance of diagnostic ceramic types and modes (Boudreaux 2007b).

Table 18-1. Dates (A.D.) for Phases in the Town Creek Area.

Phase	Calibrated Date (A.D.)	Uncalibrated Date (A.D.)	Oliver's (1992) Original Dates
Leak	1300–1500	1300–1550	1400–1600
Late	1400–1500	1450–1550	
Early	1300–1400	1300–1450	
Town Creek	1150–1300	1050–1300	1200–1400
Late	1250–1300	1250–1300	
Early	1150–1250	1050–1250	
Teal	1000–1150	900–1050	950–1200

Town Creek's Mississippian Occupational Sequence

Establishing a chronology and controlling for the element of time has posed, and continues to pose, one of the greatest challenges to investigating the Town Creek site more fully. The large proportion and ubiquity of Pee Dee ceramics at Town Creek indicates that the bulk of the site's occupation occurred during the Mississippian period, and much of Coe's (1952, 1995) efforts focused on interpreting the origins, nature, and timing of the site's Mississippian occupation. Coe (1952, 1995) and Reid (1967) clearly established that Town Creek was occupied during the Mississippian period. It was less clear, however, exactly when the site was occupied during this long period of time and how the site changed during this occupation. One contribution of recent research at Town Creek is that the site's original chronology, based on four radiocarbon dates (Reid 1967), has been augmented by three additional dates (Table 18-2) (Boudreaux 2005, 2007b:Table 15). The span of these dates in combination with cross-dating against ceramic sequences to the south (Boudreaux 2005, 2007b) indicates that Town Creek's Mississippian occupation took place primarily, and perhaps exclusively, during the Town Creek and Leak phases in the centuries between A.D. 1150 to 1400 (calibrated).

This 250-year span is still a very long time, and significant efforts have been made to subdivide this period to investigate how Town Creek may have changed during the Mississippian period. Both Coe (1995) and Reid (1967, 1985) discuss change through time regarding the stratified deposits of the mound area where submound buildings were covered by a multiple-stage platform mound that had buildings on at least two of its summits (Boudreaux 2005, 2007a). Based on the significant amount of change represented in the architecture of the mound area, one would expect the archaeological deposits of the rest of the site to contain comparable evidence for change. Unfortunately, the investigation of discrete contexts within the site's Mississippian component is not as straightforward as one would hope. Part of the problem has to do with the complexity of the archaeological record at Town Creek. The site's extremely long history of human occupation, intensive occupation during the Mississippian period, and lack of stratified deposits has produced an archaeological record in which thousands of features and tens-of-thousands of artifacts from approximately 12,000 years of occupation are encountered in the plowzone and on the same surface at the base of plowzone (see Figure 18-2). In addition to

Table 2. Mississippian Period Radiocarbon Dates from Town Creek.

Sample Code	Context	Age (BP)	Uncalibrated Date	Calibrated 1-Sigma ^a	Calibrated 2-Sigma ^a	Phase Association	References
Beta-184061	Sq. 170L40/Pit	300	A.D. 1650±60	1495–1650	1450–1675	Late Leak	Boudreaux 2005:72
FSU-185/FSU-175	Townhouse I	595	A.D. 1355±50	1305–1405	1290–1420	Early Leak	Reid 1967:62 ^b
FSU-186/FSU-176	Townhouse II	670	A.D. 1280±40	1280–1385	1270–1395	Early Leak	Reid 1967:62 ^b
FSU-145/FSU-154	Townhouse II	600	A.D. 1350±140	1260–1450	1155–1640	Early Leak	Reid 1967:62 ^b
Beta-201468	Structure 4a	820	A.D. 1130±40	1185–1260	1155–1275	Early Town Creek	Boudreaux 2005:157
FSU-184/FSU-174	Level A	745	A.D. 1205±140	1155–1395	1015–1440	Early Town Creek	Reid 1967:62 ^b
Beta-201469	Structure 5a	940	A.D. 1010±40	1030–1160	1020–1185	Teal / E. Town Creek	Boudreaux 2005:157

^a See Stuiver et al. 2005.

^b Dates also discussed in Eastman 1994.

having to contend with “the forest of postholes” (Coe 1995:90) encountered at the base of plowzone, analysis and interpretation is complicated by the excavation methods used at Town Creek. Although the site was extensively excavated and huge portions of its Mississippian community were exposed, approximately half of the features encountered at the base of plowzone were not excavated (Boudreaux 2005:23; Coe 1995:60; Ferguson 1995:xv). One advantage of this approach was that the excavation of only plowzone deposits allowed for rapid, efficient investigations that exposed much of the site’s Mississippian component. Another advantage is that future excavators can plan fieldwork with a reasonable expectation of the features they will encounter in the portions of the site where the plowzone has been previously excavated, a situation that has been likened to having an x-ray of the archaeological deposits at Town Creek (Ferguson 1995:xvi). A significant disadvantage to this approach is that it is challenging, if not impossible, to identify discrete architectural elements, such as structures, in portions of the site where features were not excavated (Boudreaux 2005:96–99).

Coe (1995:90) acknowledged the challenge of identifying architectural patterns in the morass of features at Town Creek, but he did not present any systematic attempt to identify or discuss structures. Instead, he significantly simplified the site’s complex archaeological deposits by focusing on only a few of the clearest examples of architecture (Coe 1995:Figure 5.3)—which he leavened with a heavy dose of Creek ethnohistory—to extrapolate a tidy interpretation of site structure. For example, although he notes the presence of 17 circular structures with interior burials, a type of structure he interprets as a mortuary, he discusses only one of them in detail (Coe 1995:265). This structure (Structure 7 in Figure 18-6), known as Mortuary D in the Town Creek literature (Boudreaux 2005, 2007a), is one of the only structures of this type that was completely excavated, and it is the basis for the mortuary building that has been reconstructed at the site (Carnes-McNaughton 2002:13). Coe (1995:266–268) gives some general interpretations of how these structures were used, presumably based on the complete excavation of this single structure. The use of a single excavated example to define a type of structure also appears to have occurred with a rectilinear building (Coe 1995:Figure 5.10), first identified by Stanley South (Boudreaux 2005:215), along the northern edge of the plaza (Structure 38 in Figure 18-6). Coe (1995:96–97) interpreted this structure as a “shed,” the function of which would have been

analogous to the ceremonial buildings that surrounded the squaregrounds of historic Creek communities. Although Coe (1995:97–98) discusses the difficulty in indentifying additional sheds at Town Creek and he admits that these structures were not neatly arranged around the plaza as they were in historic Creek communities, he leaves the reader with the impression that these structures are present at Town Creek and that the site’s plaza functioned in much the same way as did the Creek squareground. This is certainly the arrangement of structures depicted in Barton Wright’s drawings of Town Creek, which Coe states are accurate with only minor modifications being needed (Coe 1995:Figure 5.11).

One of the greatest challenges to realizing the potential of the existing collections from Town Creek is being able to divide the quagmire of postholes and pits at the site into discrete spatial and temporal units so that meaningful comparisons of synchronic variation and diachronic change can be made. Imposing some sort of order on the chaos of the unstratified deposits away from the mound has been, and probably always will be, one of the greatest challenges for investigating Town Creek. Several recent accomplishments in Town Creek studies have come from attempts to identify architectural patterns in the bewildering mess of features at the site. A necessary first step in this process was a cleaning up of Town Creek’s original site-wide map of archaeological features, a document that was known to contain a number of errors. R. P. Stephen Davis, Jr. of the RLA addressed this problem by undertaking a project that resulted in the construction of a digital photomosaic for the entire site (Boudreaux 2005:99–110; Boudreaux and Davis 2002). A well-known aspect of the Coe-directed fieldwork at Town Creek was that every non-mound excavation unit was photographed at the base of plowzone from a specially constructed tower for the purpose of arranging the photographs of each unit into a photomosaic that showed the archaeological features encountered across the entire site at the base of plowzone (Coe 1995:49–60; Dickens 1968). Although a site-wide mosaic of print photographs was never constructed, Davis designed a project that assembled a digital photomosaic by scanning the prints intended for the original mosaic and arranging these images spatially with geographic information system software (Boudreaux and Davis 2002). Now, for the first time, a site-wide photomosaic—envisioned by Coe at the beginning of fieldwork and contributed to by every on-site archaeologist since then—finally exists (Figure 18-3).⁴

The construction of the digital photomosaic has allowed the original, overall site map (Figure 18-4) to be edited and corrected, which has significantly reduced the clutter in some parts of the revised map (see Figure 18-2). The corrected map was then used as the basis for identifying architectural elements across the entire site, a task that had not been undertaken before (Boudreaux 2005:105–110). Several types of structures, dozens of individual structures, two enclosures, and several palisade lines were identified as part of this process (Figures 18-5 and 18-6) (Boudreaux 2005:Figure 3.15, 2007a:Figure 2.1; Boudreaux and Davis 2002). The superposition and spatial arrangements of these architectural elements were then used in combination with associated radiocarbon dates and diagnostic ceramics to subdivide Town Creek’s Mississippian component into a sequence of occupational stages that shows how the spatial arrangement, form, and function of architecture across the site changed through time (Boudreaux 2007a:44–65). Changes in architecture suggest that Town Creek began during the early Town Creek phase (A.D. 1150–1250) as a village of circular houses around a plaza (Figure 18-7) (Boudreaux 2007a:49–55). The site was transformed around A.D. 1250 by the construction of the platform mound, after which, during the early Leak phase (A.D. 1300–1400), the space around the plaza was occupied by kin-group cemeteries and associated structures (Figure 18-8) (Boudreaux 2007a:55–60, 2010b).

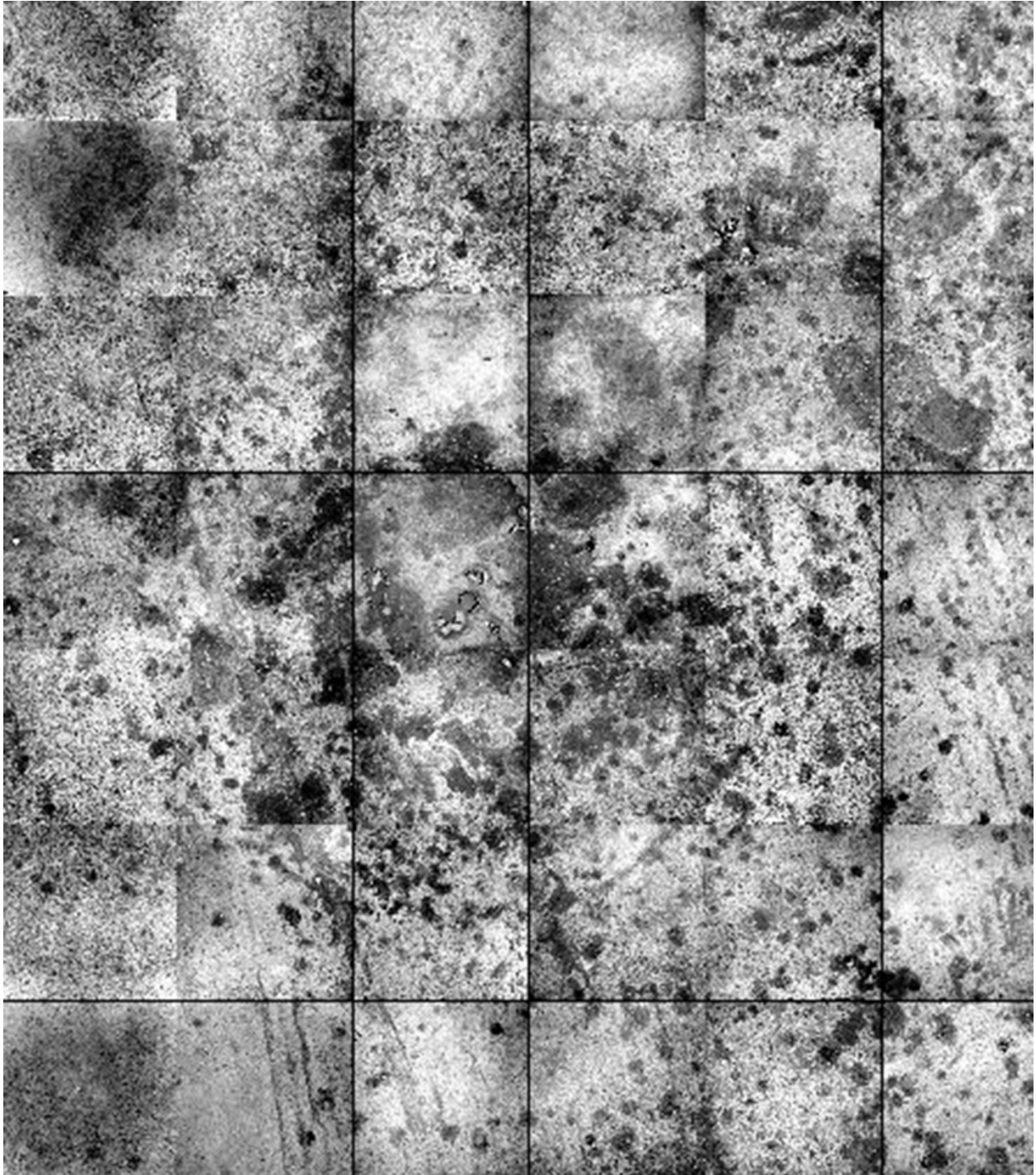


Figure 18-3. Section of the digital photomosaic showing Structure 7 (Mortuary D). Each square depicts a 10×10-ft excavation unit.

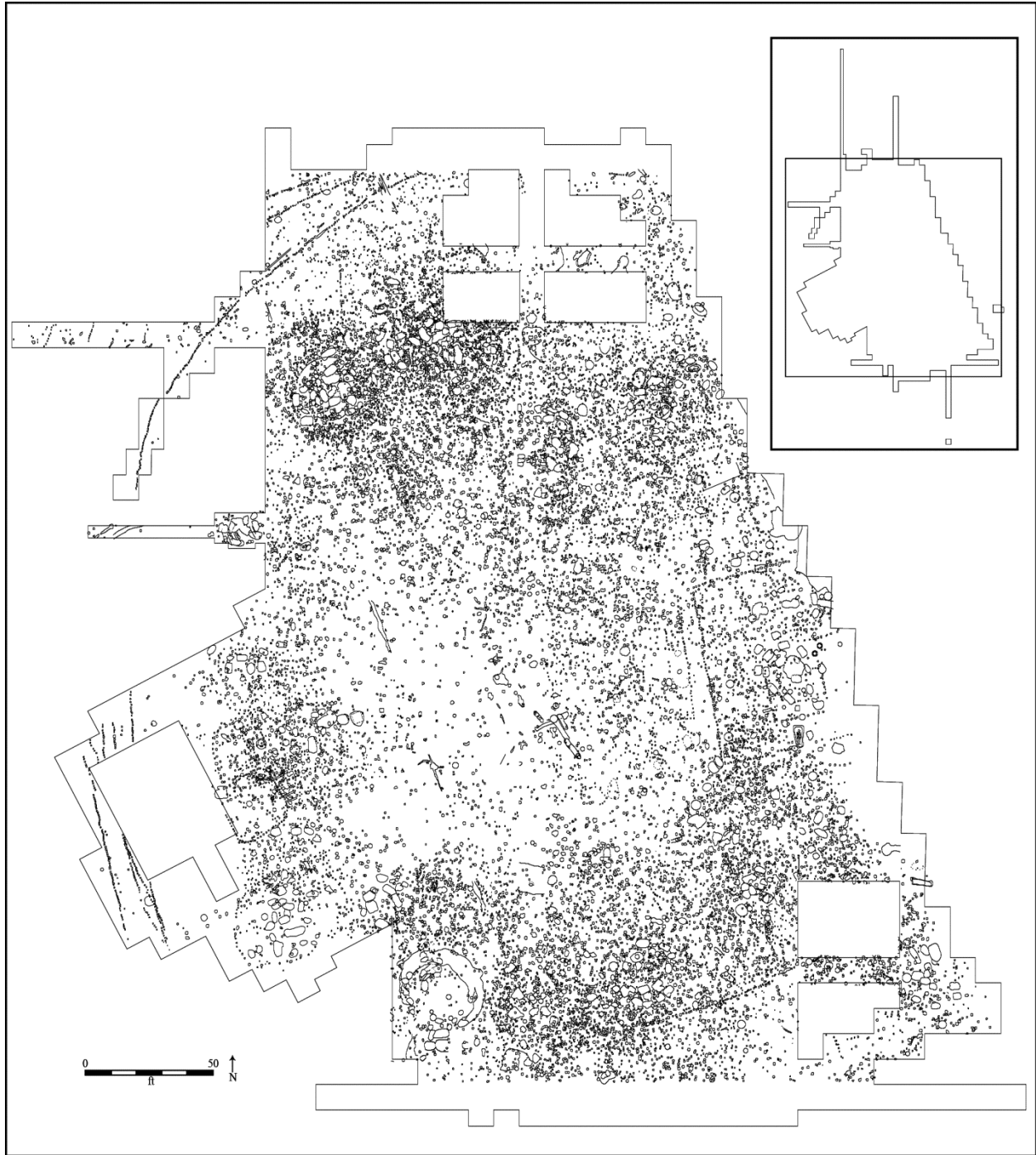


Figure 18-4. The original, unrevised map of archaeological features at Town Creek.

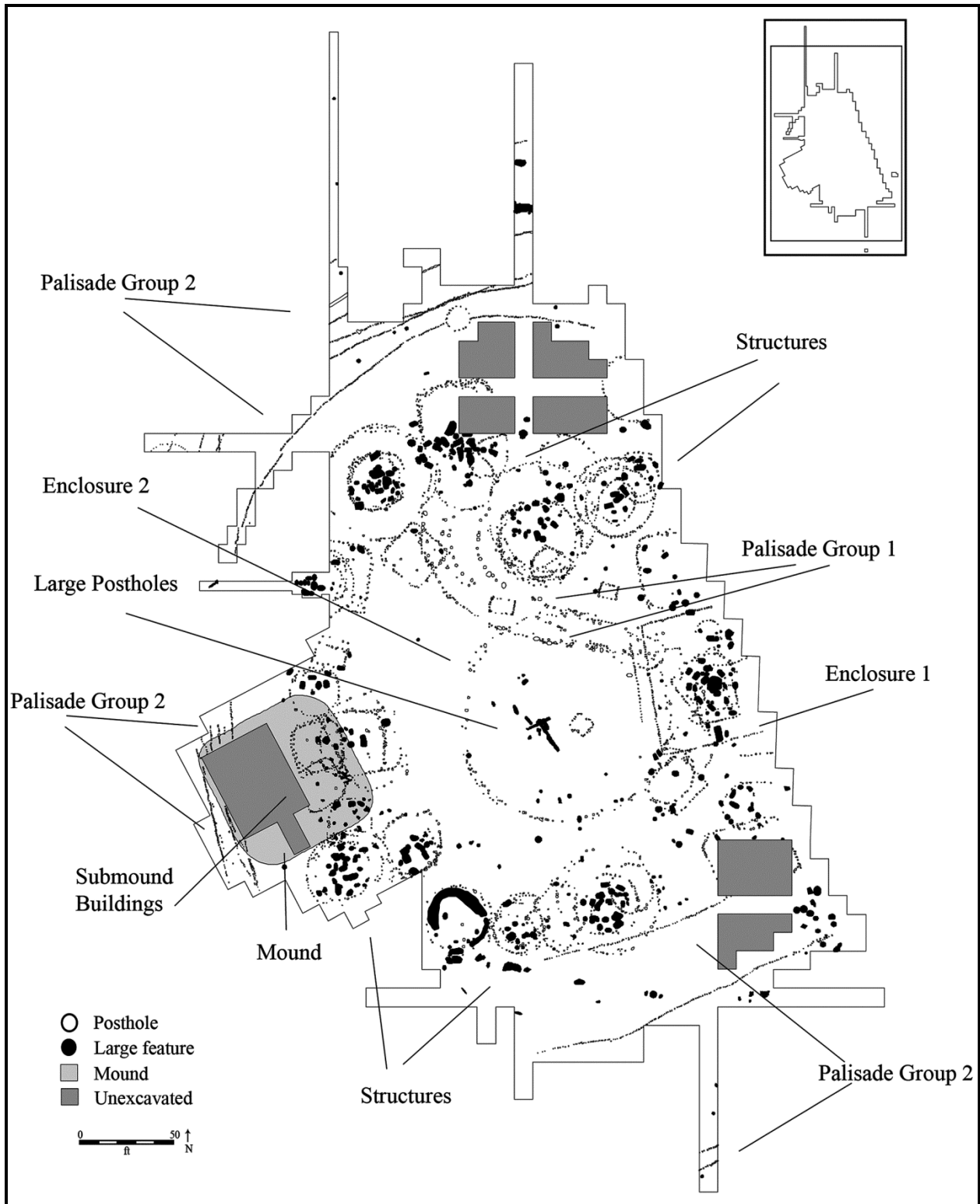


Figure 18-5. Identified architectural elements at Town Creek.

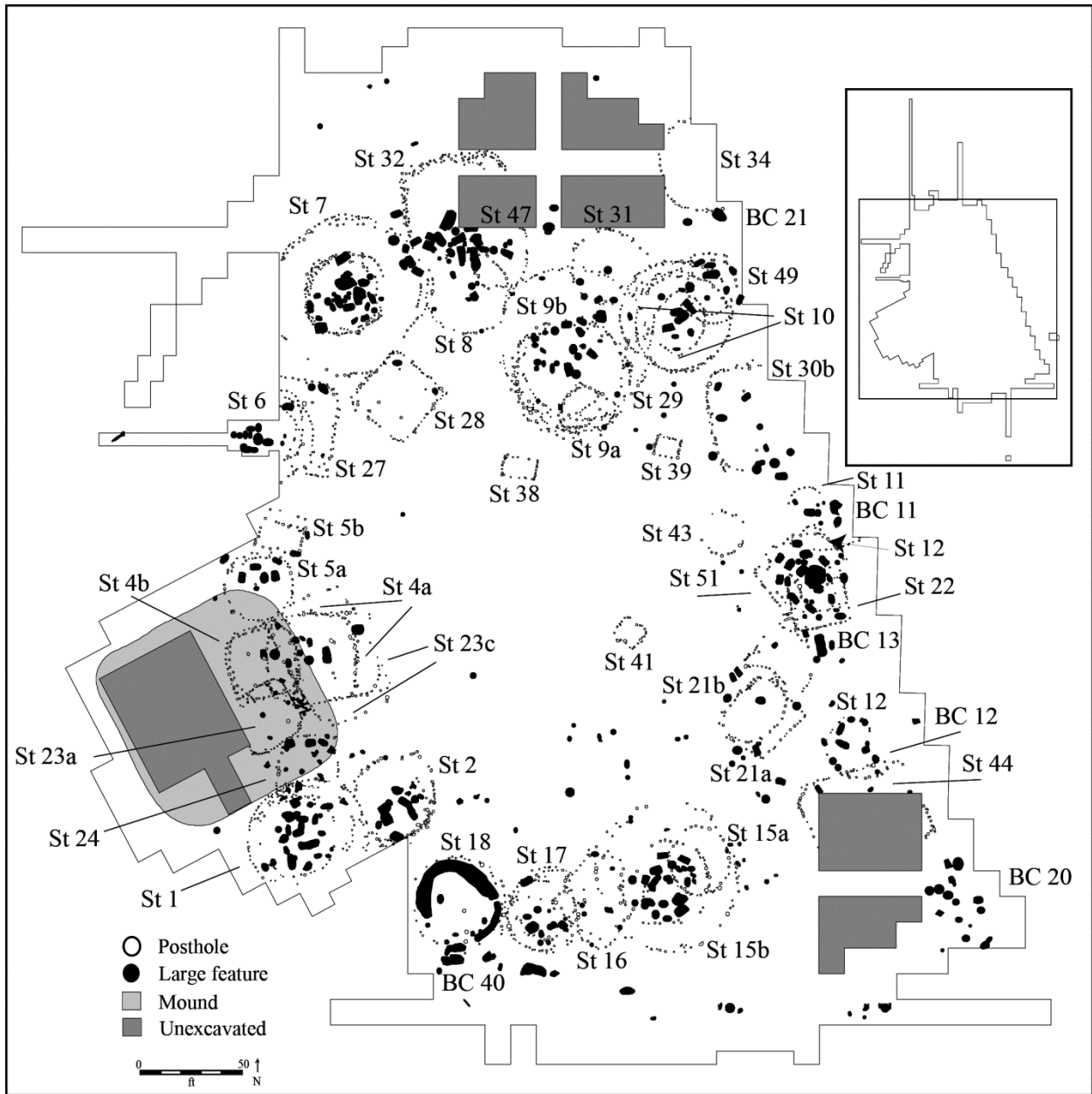


Figure 18-6. Structures (St) and burial clusters (BC) at Town Creek.

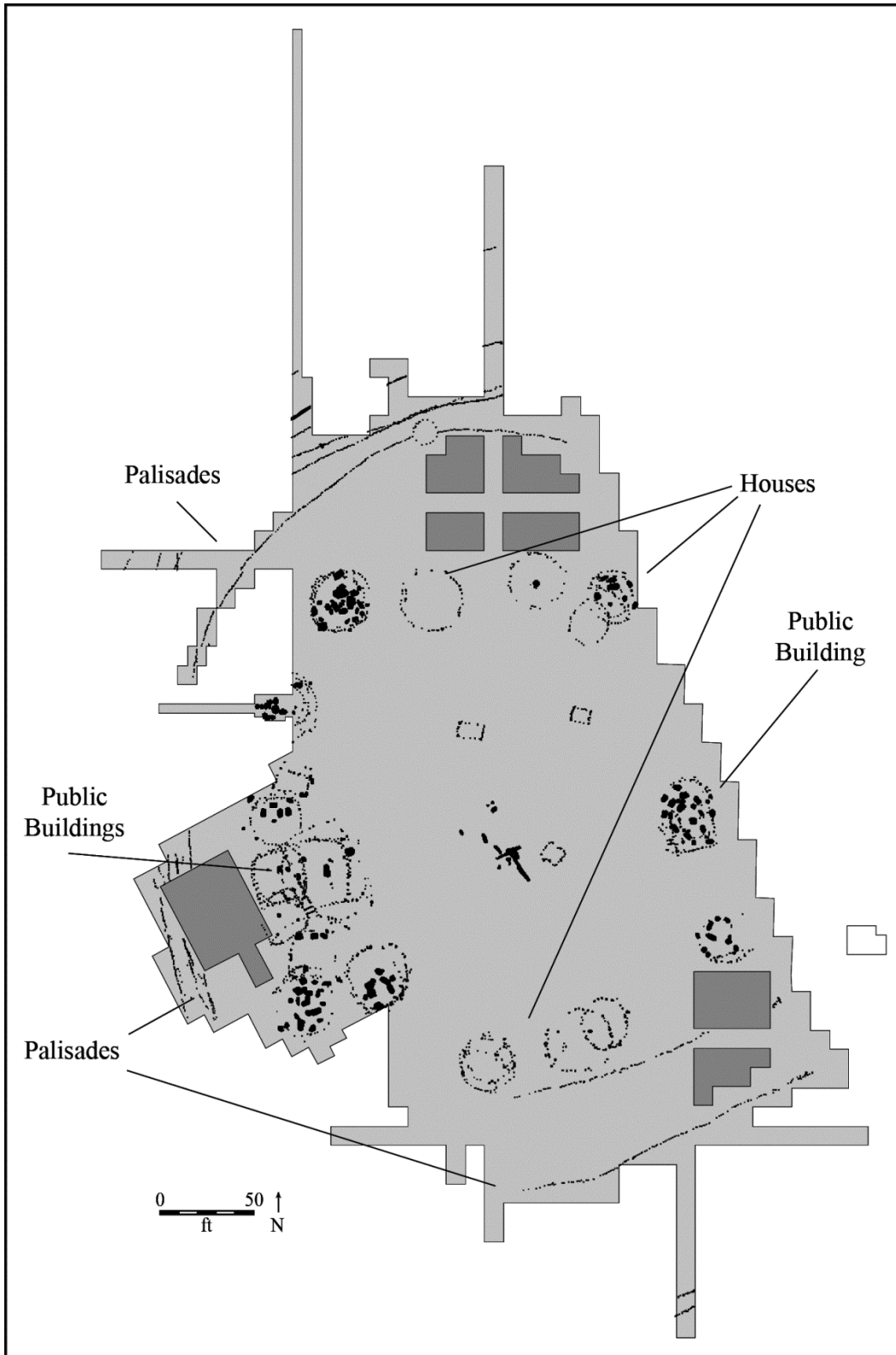


Figure 18-7. Select architectural elements from the early Town Creek phase occupation.

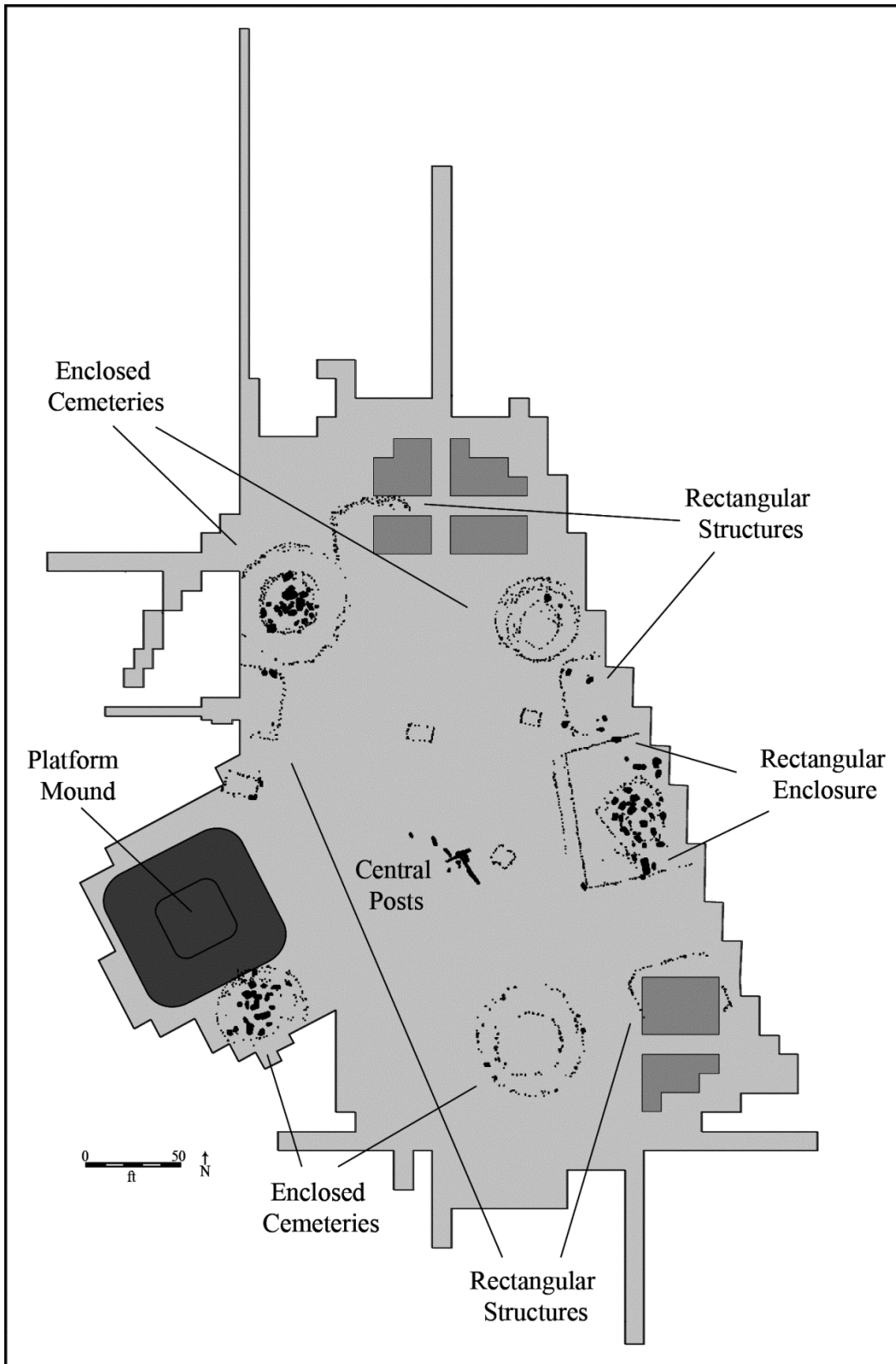


Figure 18-8. Select architectural elements from the late Town Creek-early Leak phase occupation.

Mortuary and Bioarchaeological Studies

Although a large number of burials—217 burials containing the remains of 249 individuals—were excavated at Town Creek (Boudreaux 2005), only five were discussed in detail in Coe's (1995) Town Creek book. These five individuals, which represent only 2% of the excavated burials and an even smaller proportion of the over 500 burials estimated to be present at the site (Coe 1995:264), were presented as examples of the people who lived at Town Creek during the Mississippian and Historic periods (Burke 1995). Since 1995, all of the excavated burials from Town Creek have been analyzed, the data have been reported, and these data have been used to investigate bioarchaeological and mortuary questions on multiple occasions (Boudreaux 2007a, 2010b; Cunningham 2010; Davis et al. 1996; Driscoll 2001, 2002). All of the human remains from Town Creek were first analyzed systematically as part of the site's Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act inventory (Davis et al. 1996). The age and sex data presented in that report were later used to investigate spatial and temporal differences in mortuary treatment among different contexts that may reflect the expression of social and political statuses (Boudreaux 2005, 2007a, 2010b). All of the human remains from Town Creek also were examined by Driscoll (2001, 2002), who considered them from a bioarchaeological perspective that emphasized social bases for differences in health and activity patterns. A second bioarchaeological analysis by Cunningham (2010) concluded that the people of Town Creek did not suffer from issues associated with poor nutrition or violence.

CONCLUSIONS

Significant progress has been made in the study of Town Creek and Mississippian culture in North Carolina's southern Piedmont over the last 25 years. This chapter has considered changes in Town Creek studies that have occurred since the beginning of Coe's Fifty-Year program, and it has emphasized analytical achievements since the fieldwork overseen by Coe ended in the mid-1980s. Accomplishments include: (1) involving more people in the study of Town Creek; (2) the interpretation and reporting of data from the analysis of human burials, mortuary contexts, ceramics, and architectural remains; (3) revising the region's Mississippian culture history; (4) constructing the site-wide photomosaic envisioned by Coe; and (5) identifying discrete episodes of occupation within the site's Mississippian component.

This chapter will conclude by summarizing some of what has been learned about Town Creek since the first fieldwork was conducted there in 1937. Town Creek was the location of a Mississippian town that was occupied during the Town Creek (A.D. 1150–1300) and Leak (1300–1500) phases (Boudreaux 2007a), and the nature of the Mississippian community at Town Creek changed a great deal during its existence. Town Creek was intensively occupied from approximately A.D. 1150 to 1400. Town Creek appears to have started during the early Town Creek phase as a community of circular houses surrounding a plaza with public buildings located on the plaza's east and west sides (see Figure 18-7) (Boudreaux 2007a:49–55). Around A.D. 1250, during the late Town Creek phase, a platform mound was built on the western side of the plaza over several earlier public buildings (Boudreaux 2007a:55–60). The mound was possibly built in four stages, and at least three of these stages probably supported public buildings (Boudreaux 2005:133–149, 2007a:31–38; Coe 1995:Figure 4.23). Mound construction and use appears to have continued into the early Leak phase, until at least A.D. 1350. Significant changes in the site's public and domestic architecture accompanied or followed the construction

of the mound. A rectangular enclosure and several buildings were constructed on the eastern side of the plaza next to the Little River, possibly at the same time the mound was built (see Figure 18-8) (Boudreaux 2005:159–179, 2007a:38–40). After the mound was built, the former locations of houses were encircled with enclosures of wooden posts and used as cemeteries during the late Town Creek and early Leak phases (Boudreaux 2005:254–255, 2007a:59, 2010b:219–222). These enclosed cemeteries appear to have been associated with large, rectangular structures, and it is possible that buildings of both types were used by kin groups that constituted the Town Creek community (Boudreaux 2005:254–255, 2007a:60, 2010b:221). Town Creek appears to have started as a village with recognizable domestic and public spaces, but it later evolved into a largely ceremonial place that included a mound that was used for large-group gatherings and a plaza that was surrounded by kin-group cemeteries (Boudreaux 2005, 2007a, 2010a, 2010b).

It must be emphasized that the progress made in Town Creek studies in the last 25 years, really in the last 15 years, represents only a fraction of the potential for research that is represented in the collections from Town Creek, in its unexcavated archaeological deposits, and in the surrounding region of the southern Piedmont. In the existing collections, for example, entire classes of artifacts (e.g., stone tools and pipes) and ecofacts (e.g., ethnobotanical remains) from Town Creek remain largely unanalyzed. The recent discovery of the first Clovis point ever recovered at the site indicates that Town Creek still has secrets to yield, even after decades of extensive excavation. Coe envisioned Town Creek as a landmark and a laboratory for archaeological research (Coe 1983:170; Ferguson 1995:xvi). This vision has begun to be realized through the efforts of numerous people who have contributed to the investigation, protection, interpretation, and study of Town Creek. If the pace of Town Creek studies continues, who knows what we will be able to say about Town Creek and the Mississippian societies of the North Carolina Piedmont after the next 75 years?

NOTES

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¹ I use the phrase “under the overall direction of Coe” because for nearly all of the fieldwork at Town Creek, Coe managed the research from afar. Coe was at Town Creek directly overseeing fieldwork during the 1937 and 1941–1942 seasons. At other times, however, he did not directly oversee day-to-day operations at Town Creek. Instead, a series of on-site supervisors directed excavations (Coe 1995:Table 2.1; Ferguson 1995:xvi), several of which went on to distinguished careers in Southeastern archaeology after their time at Town Creek (e.g., Roy Dickens, Leland Ferguson, Bennie Keel, Stanley South, and David Phelps).

² As was the practice at the time, the mound area was given a different site number than the rest of the site when fieldwork began in 1937. The area that encompassed the mound was designated Mg^o2 while the rest of the site was called Mg^v3 (Boudreaux 2005:15).

³ In reference to the apparent contradiction between the abundant archaeological materials at Town Creek and the interpretation that the site was occupied only by a small group of ritual specialists, Ward and Davis (1999:133-134) remarked:

If Town Creek was the home of only a handful of high-ranking priests, they must have had voracious appetites and the itch to constantly move and rebuild their houses and surrounding stockades.

⁴ One outgrowth of the digital photomosaic’s construction has been that several excavation units whose original photographs were lost or too damaged to use in the digital photomosaic have been re-excavated and photographed (Davis 2007, 2008).

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