RECONSTRUCTING A MISSISSIPPIAN HOUSE AT WICKLIFFE MOUNDS

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The Kentucky State Fair’s donation of a partially reconstructed Mississippi period house to the Wickliffe Mounds Research Center has prompted us to review available data on Mississippian structures. Ethnohistoric data often do not support the “standard reconstruction” seen in the donated structure and in many such buildings interpreted for the public. Recent data from Wickliffe excavations also have revised our own picture of Wickliffe housing, with house basins, well-finished and painted daub, a floor painting, puddled hearths, and a relatively undisturbed structure pattern emerging from field work in the last four years. These data allow a critical look at, and a basis to plan for, restoring the donated structure for public interpretation.

INTRODUCTION

Last year, we received as a gift from the Kentucky State Fair Board and the Kentucky Humanities Council, a replicated Mississippi period house that had been on display at the State Fair. The house was built on a pallet, with the idea that it would survive the fair and go on permanent display somewhere. The Wickliffe Mounds site struck everyone as an appropriate place, so it was trucked down from Louisville to Wickliffe--to the apparent amusement of a number of state highway inspection personnel along the way.

It arrived in reasonably good shape, considering. The concrete wall cracked, in one place exposing the lumber and styrofoam used in its construction--which is okay, that’s repairable. Some of the thatch was ripped off in the wind, but the roof had not been completed anyway. We put it under a small shelter to protect it from direct rain, as agreed in the terms of the donation, and then sat back to decide how best to develop it further as a working part of our museum interpretation.

One of the things I began thinking about was whether it really did represent what it purported to be: a visually accurate representation of a Mississippian dwelling of the Wickliffe period. It’s small, intended to be about 3/4 size. That’s not really a problem, as long as we say that in the interpretation. But the more I looked at it, the less satisfied I was that even with the cracks repaired and the roof thatched, it really would look like a Mississippian house.

I’m about to critique this replica rather thoroughly, but before I do, I want to say that I’m glad to have it; that I appreciate the donation from the State Fair and the Kentucky Humanities Council; that I think the builder, John White, did a fine job, and that the house served its purpose for the State Fair quite well. What I’m critiquing, really, is all of the house reconstructions I’ve seen, and this one as a generic example of them and as the one I’m going to be working on at Wickliffe.

The walls of the building are rough concrete. Concrete, of course, was used for durability, and stained to give an appearance of daub. But is this what the walls really looked like? What about the idea that we could see the ridges of the wall poles outside--which brings up the problem that Mississippian walls were supported by many more poles than this replica indicates. The floor, too, is questionable, being loose dirt, not packed by use.

I really started thinking about this problem when I looked at the “sleeping platform” built into the house, and the interior supports visible inside. This is a version of sleeping platforms I’ve seen almost everywhere. I’ve generally had the same reaction to all of them: who in their right mind could possibly sleep on something like this? Even with a pile of furs, it would have to be terribly lumpy.

More troubling, a reconstruction like this assumes that the Mississippian people were incompetent carpenters. Why would we assume that? We know they made bows and straight arrows, ball sticks, hafts for hoes and celts, clubs and spears, all sorts of wooden implements; from Florida we have that famous kneeling cat carving. Look at the bone and shell carving they did. These people could certainly have scraped a flat surface, or at least gotten all the nubs and knots off internal woodwork. This reconstruction just doesn’t work.

Our problem, then, is to look with fewer preconceptions at the evidence for what a Mississippi period house actually did look like. We have, of course, two sources of evidence: ethnohistoric descriptions, and archaeological data.

ETHNOHISTORIC DESCRIPTIONS
Let’s start with the ethnohistory. Today I’m just working with what I can get from a quick skim through Swanton’s *Indians of the Southeastern United States*. I have a group of students searching for sources to add to these, but Swanton will get us started.

This is what Ribault says of the sleeping platforms of the Timucua: “seats around about made of reeds nicely put together... two feet high from the ground, set upon round pillars painted red yellow and blue, and neatly polished.”

James Adair described “couches”... “raised on forks of timber” ... “they tie with fine white oak splinters, a sufficient quantity of middle size canes of proper dimensions, to three or four bars of the same sort, which they fasten above the frame; and they put their mattresses atop which are made of long cane splinters.”

If you keep reading these descriptions, there is maybe one account that describes the platforms as made of sticks. The rest all specify cane or reed construction. Swanton sums up the data (p. 422): “Throughout most of the region as far as the Caddo, the material out of which [beds] were made, except perhaps for the posts themselves, was cane”-- cane stretchers and crosspieces, supporting cane mats. Ribault’s polished, painted supports are a far cry from what we see in our reconstruction, or in any of the replications I’ve run across.

The historic descriptions of the walls also vary from what we see in modern replicas. DuPratz said that the Natchez wattle-and-daub walls were covered with mats. Timberlake described the houses as: “the whole wattled with twigs like a basket, which is then covered with clay very smooth, and sometimes white-washed.” Adair said that the houses were “whitewashed within and without, either with decayed oyster-shells, coarse-chalk, or white marly clay.”

It’s worth quoting Bartram’s descriptions more extensively:

"The paintings which I observed among the Creeks were commonly on the clay-plastered walls of their houses, particularly on the walls of the houses comprising the Public Square... The walls were plastered very smooth with red clay; then the figures or symbols were drawn with white clay, paste, or chalk; and if the walls were plastered with clay of a whitish or stone color, then the figures are drawn with red, brown, or bluish chalk or paste.

"Almost all kinds of animals, sometimes plants, flowers, trees, etc., are the subjects...."

"Men are often depicted having the head and other members of different kinds of animals as a wolf, buck, hare, horse, buffalo, snake, duck, turkey, tiger, cat, crocodile, etc., etc. All these animals are, on the other hand, depicted having the human head, members, etc.; and animals having the head and other members of different animals, so as to appear monstrous."

Stan South, for a building replica at Town Creek, North Carolina, used Bartram’s descriptions to inspire these wall decorations. This is a step in the right direction. But look at the wall poles and the platform reconstructions: the same rough stick construction that we see everywhere, despite clear ethnohistoric accounts to the contrary.

So the historic accounts give an impression of well-finished, whitewashed, painted walls; colorful, painted, polished supports for reed and cane benches or couches; there are references to solid, swinging doors, though rarely windows; rolled mats as cushions, carved wooden stools used by chiefs and honored persons, wooden mortars and pestles, dishes and spoons of wood and horn. Yet what we see in the replicas on sites like Wickliffe are monochrome dusty huts that look like Robinson Crusoe put them together on a bad day. We’re not doing well in depicting these houses.

**ARCHAEOLOGY**

So how much of this can we see in the archaeology?

In 1994, with help from a Kentucky Heritage Council grant, we targeted two houses that we thought would be well preserved.
The one that turned out to give us the clearest floor pattern was just east of the cemetery building. We got our first glimpse of it in 1992. We were testing outside the building to find out how far the cemetery extended.

This is the first unit to hit the house deposit. At the base of level 5, the daub and burning showed up. At the base of level 6, we see the feature pattern of a corner: the dark fill, mostly charred plant remains, included pieces of bark as big as about 2 x 4 inches, and a walnut with the meat intact, some of the best preservation I’ve seen.

But at the next level, the top of subsoil, the pattern changed: the wall trench went diagonally through the unit. The apparent corner at the level above must be an internal partition.

The next unit was four meters to the north. Here the burning at the base of level 5 was not so dramatic, but at subsoil, we were able to trace wall trenches making a corner. The floor level showed up well in the south profile.

In 1994, we completed a 4 x 4 meter unit that exposed most of the floor of this house--at least most of it that was outside the exhibit building. The pattern is quite clear for Wickliffe, where intrusions usually create a maze of intersecting wall trenches, postholes and features.

There are a couple of interesting aspects to this house. One, note the line of postholes that parallels the wall trench: are these the supports of those benches or couches?

Another is the puddled hearth, the best example of this type of hearth from our excavations. This one turned out to be stratified over a hearth of similar material, but more rectangular. These features give us something to work with for reconstructing a period house.

But to my mind the most interesting architectural details are just coming to light: the daub. This piece, for instance, has cane impressions. The reverse also has impressions, at right angles to the first side. One side is inside, against the wattle. Which? Is the other side an impression of the grass roof? Or is the cane side a mat covering, as DuPratz described?

Even more interesting is this stuff. We’ve been cataloguing it as “finished daub.” Jim Phillips pulled this out during cataloging and pointed it out to me, and I looked at it for several minutes before I was sure it wasn’t pottery. Here’s another piece, with refits. This is the reverse of another group--typical daub. But this side is smooth, hard, whitewashed, and possibly decorated--and is partly reconstructable.

I have reported fragments of red and white painted daub before, as others have, from the Marshall site in Carlisle County and, many years ago, from Angel Mounds. James Brown, in his recent Spiro volume, quotes Skinner from 1920 describing an excavated house interior “daubed with a stucco of fine clay which had been painted a muddy green.”

In this slide, the bottom row is another set of the finished daub. On the top is what I call in my reports “fired clay”: white to very light grey, fine-grained, slabby fired clay that is distinct from daub in both color and texture. It’s spread all over the site, though in much smaller quantity than daub. In the lab we’ve called it cougar litter for lack of any better term. But some of it is very flat-sided, and a few pieces have red patches that might be paint, or might be adhering daub. I think now it may be either the raw material for whitewash, or actually is the so-called stucco--or some of both.

I have to plead guilty to having missed the potential of daub before this. Up to now, the only thing most of us have related the odd fragment of painted daub to is Bartram’s descriptions of paintings, which you saw earlier as interpreted at Town Creek. But the archaeological and historical data both indicate that well-finished, whitewashed and/or painted are much more common than our mental picture had allowed us to see. We’ve only begun cataloguing the daub from this house, but you can bet I’ll be paying a lot more attention to the rest of it.
Incidentally, this house turned out to be a pit house. I resisted this interpretation at first, because I hadn’t seen house basins at Wickliffe, the wall trenches typically showing up in a palimpsest right at subsoil. But last summer--1995--we identified two more house basins in the southwest corner of the site, one with a wall trench, and one with a corner defined by postholes but no wall trench.

The other house excavation in 1994 also gave us an interesting perspective on Mississippian structures.

This is a test unit we placed in the north part of the site in 1989. At the base, we hit a corner of a fired clay surface which was clearly a floor of some kind. This surface was so hard we had to chisel through it to cut a profile.

In 1994, we opened up a 4 x 4 meter unit to try to expose the rest of this house, and to trace the fired clay floor. Here you can see the burned stain of the house starting to appear. This is the final floor of the excavation. As you can see, there are too many intrusions to trace out a coherent wall trench pattern or house outline.

However, we did find large patches of the fired clay floor. The students working on this level liked to tap the floor with a trowel to demonstrate its hardness to visitors: you could just about play basketball on this floor.

The real surprise came in the southwest quadrant. It’s a painting of a Sun Circle. We lost a little of it when we trowelled the floor, but enough of it is left to give us the first glimpse of what an actual Mississippian house painting looked like.

I’d like to digress a moment on this painting, because there are some grumblings--especially from a couple of colleagues who have not yet come to see it--that this isn’t a painting but a hearth. Superficially, I can see some cause for confusion.

Remember the puddled hearth from the house by the cemetery? This is what it looked liked when we first defined it as a feature. The red ring looks a lot like the ring around the Sun Circle painting.

But after excavation it’s very clear that the floor level that the hearth rests on is a dozen cm below the red ring. The hearth is built up from the floor.

The Sun Circle, however, is on the floor level, which is right at subsoil. There is no floor at a lower level, so the red ring is not the top of a puddled construction.

A closer look at a crack in the surface of the Sun Circle confirms this interpretation. The white and red are thin layers on top; the white, in particular, is not the top of an ashy fill. This is not a hearth, it’s a painting. It’s the best glimpse we have of the paintings described by various historical observers.

What doesn’t match the descriptions is that this painting is on the floor, not the wall. Did many floors have paintings? Does the prepared nature of this floor mean that it was a special structure of some sort? We have yet to find much in the ethnohistoric literature describing floors, as opposed to walls, and unfortunately there was nothing associated with the Sun Circle floor to give us much clue about the building it was in. There was a hearth right next to the painting, incorporated in the prepared floor and surrounded by four postholes--another version of the cross-and-circle motif?--but we can’t even tell which set of wall trenches the floor was associated with. All I can really say is that the prepared floor is very unusual for the Wickliffe site.

CONCLUSION

All of this discussion came from a simple question: how accurate is our reconstruction of a Mississippi period house, and what do we need to do to make it fit the evidence?
The historic descriptions and the archaeological data point to something more colorful and more sophisticated than our mental pictures usually recreate: well-finished, whitewashed or stuccoed, painted walls; reed and cane beds with rolled mat cushions and polished painted posts; prepared floors, perhaps with paintings for special occasions.

I’m not satisfied with the picture of Mississippian housing that I’ve been presenting to visitors at Wickliffe. I’m also not satisfied that I have even begun to do justice to the amount of information about architecture that my own excavations have revealed. But I hope that, in a year or so, when you come to visit the Wickliffe site you’ll see a recreated house that is a real departure from any you’ve seen before—and that I’ll have the ethnohistoric and archaeological data to back it up.