The Archaeology of Wakefield Creek:
Emerging Pictures of Wake County’s Distant Past

Joel D. Gunn, Ph.D.
TRC Garrow Associates, Inc.
Chapel Hill, North Carolina
The cover illustration shows archaeological excavations at Site 31WA1376 (Red Hawk Run) at Wakefield Plantation.
Preface

This booklet presents the who, when, and where of archaeology at Wakefield Plantation and Wakefield School, near the Falls of the Neuse on the north side of Raleigh, North Carolina. The two-year Wakefield archaeology project involved many archaeologists with many different specialties such as pottery, stone tools, microscopic plant particles, and geology. Those scientists’ contributions appear in a technical report presented to Wakefield Plantation and the Wake County School District in March of 1999. The report, entitled Redhawk Run: Archaeological Excavation of Three Early Woodland Sites at Wakefield Plantation and School Site, Wake County, North Carolina, can be found at the Wakefield Plantation sales office, the Wakefield School Library, and in the Office of State Archaeology library in Raleigh. Artifacts recovered during the excavations can be seen in displays at Wakefield School and at the Wakefield Plantation sales office.

Only selected portions of the large quantity of information collected on the history and prehistory of Wakefield Plantation and Wakefield School can be discussed in this summary. The portions presented are thought to be of most interest to the general reader. Many of the findings are new and tentative in nature, so they should be considered ideas that will be confirmed or disproved in future archaeological studies. To smooth the presentation in this document, such qualifications are not dwelt upon; they can be found in the technical report mentioned above.

The author would like to thank Billy Sutton of Wakefield Plantation, Mike Burriss of Heery International, and their many employees; Steve Claggett, State Archaeologist; and Dolores Hall of the Office of State Archaeology, for their support during the project.

Joel D. Gunn, Ph.D.
Who Lived on Wakefield Creek Hundreds and Thousands of Years Ago?

On February 15, 1701, an early North Carolina explorer, John Lawson, left the Native American town of Adshusheer near present-day Durham, North Carolina. There he and his Eno-tribe traveling companions had been treated to bread with bear-oil, an important food staple in the region. Four days after departing Adshusheer, Lawson reported in his famous journal that the sound of falls was heard like the grinding of many mills.

As Lawson approached the Falls of the Neuse and stood overlooking the roar of the river, he saw two Native American hunters on the north side of the river. After fording the river in chest high water, he talked with the hunters who told him they were members of the Tuscarora tribe that lived to the east on the Coastal Plain. So far as anyone knows, the two Tuscarora hunters were the first Native American visitors to the present-day Wakefield Plantation area ever viewed by a historically known personage. However, thanks to the archaeological excavations of three sites along Wakefield Creek, we now know that the Tuscarora hunters were preceded by 500 generations of hunters, collectors, and gardeners. Exactly who those people were is shrouded in the mystery of times long forgotten, even by the Tuscaroras. The Tuscaroras spoke directly with John Lawson about their culture. However, the names of the more ancient inhabitants of Wakefield Creek are completely lost to history or even the myths of the Tuscaroras. Archaeologists know by studying their artifacts that the Tuscaroras did not appear in North Carolina until recently by archaeological standards of time. While the Tuscaroras may have lived in North Carolina for about 1,000 years, other artifacts found on Wakefield Creek are more than 10,000 years old.

As noted above, we know the name of the Tuscarora tribe because two of its members talked to an early explorer. We will never know the names of the tribes that preceded them. For this reason, archaeologists have assigned names to a dozen past groups
that can be distinguished by the styles of artifacts they made. These names generally reflect the names of archaeological sites near present day towns or landmarks in North Carolina such as Hardaway, Stanly, and Morrow Mountain, and so they are familiar words to modern inhabitants of the state. These names are also assigned to stone tools known as "points" or "projectile points." Points changed in style with each group much as cars or clothing change styles now. These styles help identify the various groups that preceded the Tuscarora. They are pictured on the next page.

In discussing the lives of these groups near Wakefield Creek, I will use the points to symbolize them. All of the points in the list were found in the Wakefield Creek sites. Each one was made by one person according to traditions passed down from their parents. Each also had personal preferences concerning how such a tool should appear. A point is therefore the signature of a person who lived and worked in a society and used the tool to make a living hundreds or thousands of years ago. As such it is not a picture of that person, but rather it is a picture of their handiwork, that can represent him or her in this discussion. In addition to points, other tools, especially containers made of pottery, were also important in daily activities.

Something that is very noticeable about the points is that they become smaller over time. Archaeologists also know that the way people on Wakefield Creek lived changed over time, which is reflected in these points' sizes and shapes. Until about 5,000 years ago, the people of Wakefield Creek lived mostly by hunting wild animals and collecting wild plants. At that time they used spears, which required large points about 3 to 8 inches long (points 2-8 in the illustration).

After 5,000 years ago many changes were made, which resulted in a complete altering of the style of points. Among the changes were the character of the plants they used. By selecting larger seeds and planting them in gardens, people learned to produce larger and more nutritious crops. This selection process, which we still practice today, is called "domestication." Virtually all of the plants we eat, and the animals too, are domesticated.
Wakefield Creek Archaeology

Point-Time Chart

Archaeologists recognized 12 prehistoric Native American groups by point styles. Dates and point shapes are shown. The points are actual specimens from the Wakefield Creek sites and can be seen on display at Wakefield School and Wakefield Plantation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Name</th>
<th>Years Ago</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>12. Caraway</td>
<td>1,500-500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Wakefield</td>
<td>2,200-1,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Yadkin</td>
<td>2,700-2,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Gypsy</td>
<td>3,500-2,700</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Savannah River</td>
<td>5,000-3,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Guilford</td>
<td>5,500-5,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Morrow Mountain</td>
<td>7,500-5,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Stanly</td>
<td>8,000-7,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. LeCroy</td>
<td>9,000-8,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Kirk</td>
<td>9,500-9,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Palmer</td>
<td>10,000-9,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Hardaway (not shown)</td>
<td>&gt; 10,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The ancient people of Wakefield Creek consumed mostly wild animals and only slowly adopted the use of domesticated plants over a period of more than 2,000 years. Sometime after domestication became popular, they gradually switched to the bow and arrow and began to make small points about 1-2 inches long (points 9-12 in the illustration).

Fishing also became more important over time. This could be because during the early periods (before about 5,000 years ago) the sea level was lower than today. Under those conditions it was more difficult for fish to inhabit inland waterways such as the Neuse River. About 5,000 years ago the sea level reached its present elevation and established the vast estuaries and wetlands characteristic of the North Carolina coast. This gave great numbers of fish a place to live and reproduce. People soon began to focus on fish as a very healthy, nutritious, and reliable means of obtaining food.

**Where did the People of Wakefield Creek Live?**

Everyone, including archaeologists used to think of an artifact as something relatively small like a projectile point or pottery sherd, something that one could hold in the hand. In recent years, however, archaeologists have begun to think that the landscape on which people live is both the largest and perhaps most important artifact. In the next few pages I will be your tour guide down the mile-long Wakefield Creek watershed from its top at the present day Wakefield School to the Neuse River. This is no ordinary tour, however. You will also travel back in time more than 10,000 years as you travel down the valley.

For modern residents of North Carolina it is difficult to think about home in the same way the ancient hunters and collectors did. Your own house may have a yard with a garden, and in the house are rooms for living, cooking, bathing, etc. The ancient hunters, however, had a home of much greater size than the modern home. Archaeologists have studied how hunters lived on landscapes in other parts of the world such as the !Kung of
South Africa and the Inuit along the Arctic Ocean. They found that people lived in spaces that may be as big as several hundred square miles. Like us, they moved around in their hundred square mile homes to obtain what they needed. They went to the mountains in the summer to hunt large animals and to the hills in fall to pick nuts and berries.

It is almost certain that the people who lived on Wakefield Creek frequented other sites as well. Wakefield Creek is near the Fall Line, the boundary between the Piedmont hills to the west and the flatter Coastal Plain to the east. We know from studying the habitats of animals and plants native to the Fall Line that the people would probably have moved each season to the best location for obtaining specific foodstuffs, such as deer in the fall, fish in the spring, and fruits and nuts in the summer. Some of these things could have been found in or near Wakefield Creek, and for others they would have had to go elsewhere. To do all of this they would have moved from area to area much as we move from room to room in our homes. They probably also had a comfortable place to spend the cooler months, so they would have had to carry the food they collected to this winter place, or store it for later use.

In addition to these illuminating observations of human movement patterns from other parts of the world, we also have direct evidence on the changing use of different parts of Wakefield Creek. Three sites were studied intensively in the Wakefield Creek drainage. A fourth site on top of the hill where Wakefield School now stands also contributed important information on how people used the creek at different times. The following maps show the relationships between the sites, the creek, and the Neuse River.

- The site on top of the hill is called "Turkey Hill" because of a visit by a baby wild turkey while we were studying the site. (The state of North Carolina site number is 31WA1187). All of the points found on Turkey Hill—LeCroy and Morrow Mountain—were very old, dating to 8,000 to 5,500 years ago. You can look up their ages in the point-time chart earlier in the report.
Location of Sites Discussed in the Text.
The second site, called the "Burriss Site" (31WA1380) is where two streams join at the head of the Wakefield Creek valley. The streams would have provided a handy supply of water and the site is elevated enough at the head of the valley to be dry during rains. People arrived at this site about 8,000 years ago, and the site was inhabited for the longest time of any of the sites, through the Guilford, Savannah River, Gypsy, Yadkin, and Wakefield periods.

The third site, the "Sutton Site" (31WA1390), is at the foot of the valley just below the Burriss Site. It was occupied relatively early, during Morrow Mountain times. It was abandoned early compared to the other sites in the valley—its last known use was by Yadkin people. This is a key piece of information in the interpretation to follow.

The lowest site in the valley, "Redhawk Run" (31WA1376), is next to the Neuse River floodplain. It was occupied only briefly, during the Yadkin and Wakefield periods.

The distribution of points in the sites on Wakefield Creek tells a tale of past lifeways. With a few exceptions, most of the older points were found in the higher elevation sites, and younger points at lower elevations. One exception worth mentioning is that the only 10,000 year old Hardaway point was found in the lowest site; no other artifacts of this age were identified. With such meager evidence, there is no way to reconstruct what a Hardaway person was doing near the river. Still, it is interesting to think about what a Hardaway person was doing in the restricted lower part of the Wakefield Creek valley. It is generally thought they would have been on the upland prairies hunting large animals.

How do you think the inhabitants of Wakefield Creek 10,000 years ago felt about their home? Did they regard it "good real estate," or was it a bad neighborhood? We who now live in large permanent houses tend to think of hunters such as those who lived on Wakefield Creek as living uncomfortable lives. However,
How Did People’s Lives at Wakefield Creek Change Over Time?

Perhaps the most fascinating reconstructions of past lives are made by archaeologists who combine their studies of artifacts, such as points, with how those artifacts are distributed over the landscape. The Wakefield Creek prehistoric living room is particularly interesting because it contains a number of sites that were used in different ways at different times. I will now explore these changes with you and suggest how life changed at Wakefield Creek over thousands of years. Keep in mind the points and landscape discussed in the previous sections of this report as I offer my interpretation. However, I have given you the information necessary to make your own interpretations in the last section. Can you think of another interpretation?

My interpretation is as follows. During the early years of humans living on Wakefield Creek—LeCroy and Morrow Mountain—people lived on the high and middle ground at the head of the valley. From microscopic plant remains recovered at these and other sites, I suspect that the high ground was upland grasslands. This would have been a good place to hunt large animals such as elk and bison, although we did not find any bones. Because of its prominent elevation, the Turkey Hill site would have been a good place to watch for these large animals as they moved up and down the valley.

Also during this early time period, the Hardaway, Stanly and Morrow Mountain people explored the upper part of the valley.
Wakefield Creek Archaeology

They would have found smaller game such as turkey and deer at the forest edge at the base of the valley wall near the Sutton Site.

Occupation of the upper part of the valley continued through Savannah River and Gypsy times without much change. Many nut shells have been found in sites other than those on Wakefield Creek, and some from the Wakefield Creek sites. Probably part of what people were doing in addition to hunting was gathering nuts. We know from historic period reports that these nuts were boiled in water to remove nut oil; this oil was used like we use butter.

Major changes occurred during Yadkin times. People began to live in the lower part of the valley at the Redhawk Run Site near the Neuse River. Since this site is near the water, I suspect that it was used to process fish caught in the Neuse River. Very high phosphorus readings were obtained from a rock feature in the Redhawk Run site; this probably resulted from boiling fish to obtain the fish oil, another important source of fat. A photograph of the rock feature is shown on the cover with archaeologists mapping the stones. Since the fish come in spring, Redhawk Run was their spring fishing camp.

The Yadkin-era people were also the first inhabitants of Wakefield Creek to make and use pottery. The pottery fragments found during the excavations were quite small, and probably represent only a few different vessels. Most of the fragments are marked with impressions of fabric or cordage, as shown in the next illustration. While this marking is primarily a by-product of the way in which the pottery was manufactured, it also serves as a good reminder that the prehistoric peoples made and used a variety of textiles and other items that have not been preserved.

Another change following Yadkin times was that the Sutton Site in mid valley was abandoned. Yadkin people hunted there, but later Wakefield people did not. Abandonment of hunting sites on small tributaries is common in the region at this time. It also suggests that the Wakefield people were more interested in fishing than hunting. Archaeologists generally believe that at about this time greater attention was paid to fishing. Also, gardening became popular, which further reduced the need to hunt.
Wakefield Creek Archaeology

Different Fabric Impressions on the Ceramic Sherds.

Perhaps the strangest pattern of all is that after the Wakefield people, few people seem to have lived along Wakefield Creek. Occasional triangular points, perhaps typical of the Tuscarora, are found proving that they visited the creek, but no sites were inhabited. As I said at the beginning, the Tuscarora lived along the Neuse River on the Coastal Plain where they could find both abundant fishing and wide open floodplain land for gardening. This leads me to believe that when the Tuscarora arrived they emphasized life on the Coastal Plain and only came to Wakefield Creek on occasional hunting expeditions.

As near as archaeologists can tell, Wakefield Creek rested from human attention for about a thousand years until European tobacco farmers settled along the ridgetops in the early 1700s.
Wakefield Creek Archaeology

The End of a 10,000 Year Down Hill Journey

To summarize, our journey down Wakefield Creek and down the valley of time has taken us through 10,000 years and along the one mile length of the valley. During that time-space journey we saw the inhabitants of the valley change their ways from big game hunters and gatherers of wild plants, to fishers and gardeners. In the end they largely abandoned the valley for 1,000 years until European Americans arrived to put the land to work raising tobacco, wheat, and cotton.

Additional Readings

If you would like to know more about the archaeology of Wakefield Creek and North Carolina, you can read further in the following publications. Some of these publications are available in local libraries and bookstores; others can be bought or examined at the Office of State Archaeology (OSA) in Raleigh. Additional information on those sources can be obtained by calling the OSA at (919) 733-7342.

Coe, Joffre L.

Davis, R. P. Stephen, Jr., and H. Trawick Ward

Davis, R. P. Stephen, Jr., Patrick C. Livingood, H. Trawick Ward, and Vincas P. Steponaitis
Wakefield Creek Archaeology

Gunn, Joel D., and William S. Stanyard

Gunn, Joel, David S. Leigh, Irwin Rovner, Bruce Idol, Tracy Millis, John Byrd, and Linda Kennedy

Phelps, David S.

Ward, H. Trawick
Wakefield Creek Archaeology

A wide variety of information on North Carolina archaeology is also available on-line at www.arch.dcr.state.nc.us.