

Oral presentation

Agriculture and Gardening in an Evolving Economy: Paleoethnobotanical Insights into Muskogee Adaptation in the American Southeast

Mary Theresa Bonhage-Freund^a, H. Thomas Foster, II^b

^aDepartment of Anthropology and Sociology, Alma College, Alma, MI 48801; ^bDepartment of Sociology, Anthropology, and Philosophy, Northern Kentucky University, Highland Heights, KY 41099

Introduction. Prior to European contact the Muskogee were a confederation of linguistically diverse, politically independent people who lived in what is now central Georgia and Alabama. Euro-American migrants both precipitated and documented changes in the Creek lifeways and their commentaries facilitate the reconstruction of an evolving economic system. Paleoethnobotany fills-in gaps and reveals biases or misinterpretations conveyed by Euro-American descriptions. This research is the first comprehensive investigation of Creek human-plant interactions.

Objectives. We aim to provide a baseline for continued studies of the character and dynamics of Muskogee agricultural and gardening systems, and their place within the overall economic and subsistence strategy.

Methods. (1) Review of historic first-person descriptions of Muskogee agricultural and gardening; (2) assessment of archaeobotanical remains reported primarily from systematically excavated Lower Creek sites; and (3) analysis of the role of cultivation systems within the general Creek economic system.

Results. Flotation analysis points to a staple crop of maize (*Zea mays*), while native regional domesticates suggest limited crop diversification. Historic accounts describe community fields, private gardens, and details of their cultivation. Euro-Americans inventoried exotic taxa, many of which are conspicuously absent from the archaeobotanical record. Current archaeobotanical evidence implies that non-native taxa played a minor role in the Creek agricultural system, and that managed succession was at least as important. In addition, the Lower Creek relied on hickory (*Carya* spp.) and acorn (*Quercus* spp.) mast as significant wild staples. Adoption of livestock husbandry expanded both diet and trade options, while bounty-hunting of slaves signals increased participation in the Euro-American economy.

Conclusion. Muskogee Creek maintained a flexible, mixed economy, supported by agriculture. Their farming drew on Eastern, Meso-American / South-western, and European traditions. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries they increasingly participated in the Euro-American economic system.

Keywords: Creek, archaeobotany,

Selected References

1. Foster II, H. T., M.T. Bonhage-Freund, and L. O'Steen. Archaeology of the Lower Muskogee Creek Indians, 1715-1830. The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa.

Presenting Author: Mary Theresa Bonhage-Freund, freund@alma.edu