Occidental History of a Late Pre-Contact Site in the North Carolina Piedmont

Introduction
This research is part of the Yadkin River Settlement Ecology (YRSE) Project, which is a multiscalar analysis of human-landscape interactions in the late pre-contact (AD 1000–1600) western North Carolina Piedmont. The broader goals of this work are 1) to provide a better description of and explanation for the settlement activities of non-hierarchically organized communities and societies and 2) to explore the role of human-landscape interactions in sociopolitical organization. The research presented here focuses on the first goal through analysis of findings from the first two seasons of excavations at the 31Yd173 site, located near Jonesville, NC (Figure 1).

Setting the Stage
Surveys during the 2011 and 2012 field seasons identified 31Yd173 as having high potential for containing intact settlement remains. Surface collections over 50% of the site yielded over 400 pottery sherds and 500 lithic artifacts. Following shovel testing uncovered two thin (10-20cm), dark gray brown strata, the first 25mm below the surface (with a plowzone) and the second 115cm below the surface (Figure 2). The upper stratum was estimated to cover an oval area approximately 30x10m. The lower stratum was found in only a single STP at 10m spacing. These were initially interpreted as middens because of the dense concentrations of artifacts and floral and faunal remains. These layers produced sediments were collected in 2012 during shovel testing. 23 samples from various excavations during the 2013 season were subjected to Bouyoucos hydrometer analysis.

Excavations summer 2013:
The goal was to remove the plowzone and uncover a significant portion of the first intact stratum to explore horizontal patterns in features and artifacts. We took this strategy to maximize the likelihood of identifying intact settlement and activity patterns. The plowzone was removed to two levels in the same stratum by shovel skimmng and troweling; sediments were processed through a 1/4-inch screen. 25 units were excavated to the intact stratum below the plowzone, and one unit (unit 13) was excavated to 150cm with a core of an additional 100cm taken in the floor. Features and suspected postmolds were mapped on an iPad using iDraw software. Artifacts recovered during excavation of the plowzone were categorized, counted, and weighed.

Methods
Sediment size analysis, fall 2012-spring 2013
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The following sections detail the results from the early stages of analyses of seven lines of evidence. Early interpretations are also offered.

Sediments and Microlandscape
Behind the levee, stratum 4 has a higher proportion of fine sediments. Stratum 3 contains more angular, medium sized sediments and charcoal fragments.

Interpretation: there may have been a backswamp behind the levee that was eventually filled in by colluvial deposition from burning of upland forests, either naturally or intentionally. Sedimentology results and their location at the site relative to the natural levee, seen as the rise on the right side of this photo.

Feature Patterning, Artifact Distribution, and Activity Patterns
Picture of best defined line of postmolds in the excavated area (left). Profiles of 6 postmolds showing the ranges of shapes found (right). Average width is 5.5cm. The wedge shape in particular was used to distinguish root stains and animal burrows from postmolds.

Conclusions
The sedimentology results are the most complete and indicate that people likely chose this location within the floodplain because of the sizeable levee and the flood protection it offered. Combined with the early interpretations of feature and artifact patterns (and earlier survey results), we can start to piece together a picture in which people clustered activities in a small area (30x30m) of the floodplain. Given the presence of features and postmolds, albeit small in diameter, in multiple strata, people likely used the area for an extended period of time, either continuously or repeatedly. Future work will focus on the intact strata 2 and 3 to determine a possible function for the site and dates of use. Early results from artifact analysis suggest this site was used between AD 1400-1700. 31Yd173 has the potential to provide a great deal of information about late precontact life in this area. If this site is a settlement, as is suspected, that potential will increase greatly given the relatively good preservation of postmolds and features.

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Works Cited