

Kituwah Mound Designated a “Sacred Site”

by John “Many Winds” Ellis, Turtle Moon Band

It’s hard to believe that it has been seven years since I was in Cherokee, NC for a weeklong “Cherokee Spirituality Seminar.” During that week, we visited a Lutheran Church and learned how Cherokee and Christian customs have been merged in their services. We met with a Methodist minister whose family history in Christian ministry goes back to before the time of the Removal. We met in a Catholic Church built with the traditional Cherokee seven sides and the symbols of the seven clans inlaid in the floor around the central pulpit. We had lunch with Cherokee residents at the senior center, where we visited one-on-one and learned personal stories. We had time with former Principal Chief of the Eastern Band Joyce Dugan, well-know story teller Freeman Owle, and Sonny Ledford, a member of the *Warriors of AniKituwah* dance group. When talking to us about the Removal, one elderly Cherokee woman broke into tears while talking about Andrew Jackson. We also learned that more destructive to the Cherokee people than the Removal were the Government’s Indian schools. Many of the ills that trouble the Cherokee people today are most likely traceable to generations of children literally imprisoned in the Government run schools. But that would be the subject of another article.

As information and emotion packed as that week was, perhaps the most powerful experience was the day we made the trip out Highway 19 to the site of Kituwah, a Cherokee “mother town”. I took the photo here (Figure 1) on that cold February day. While oral history tells us that the mound, estimated to have been built about 1000CE, might at one time have been 20 feet or more tall, today it is about five feet above the surrounding field and barely visible if you don’t know where to look. Around this mound was found the ancient town of Kituwah, which, depending on whose oral history you believe, was THE “mother town” or one of the seven “mother towns” of the Cherokee. Back beyond the horizon on the left of this photo lays the wooded banks of the Tuckasegee

River. There we saw where a few traditionalists have cleared an area for the resumption of sacred ceremonies, which apparently continue today.

We were told that archaeologists have identified the shaft that goes down from the surface of the mound to the location of the town’s continuously burning “sacred flame.” In 1997, a survey of the area using noninvasive techniques identified at least 65 burial sites, and possibly as many as 1000, in the grounds around the mound, indicating a long term settlement. This is all evidence of the authenticity of the mound.

To ensure that the site is not lost in the future, the **Cherokee Phoenix** (published by the *Cherokee Nation* in Oklahoma) reports that on December 5, 2013 the *Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians* (EBCI) Tribal Council unanimously approved a resolution making the Kituwah Mound property a “sacred site.” As the **Phoenix** reports, “The resolution confirms the council’s Cultural and Historic Properties and Development Committee’s recognition of Kituwah, also known as the Cherokee ‘Mother Town,’ as a sacred area embodying ‘not only the remains of our ancient ancestors, but the sacredness of all that existed in our past, as well as all that it embodies for future generations.’”

The purpose of the resolution was to prevent development on the site, for which proposals have been suggested for such projects as a golf course, a train depot, housing, and others. The last proposed project was a greenhouse near the road. This prompted a few concerned traditionalists to approach the Kituwah Preservation and Education Program committee to propose the legislation to the Tribal Council.

The **Cherokee Phoenix** also reported that resolution passed by the EBCI has “‘immeasurable and significant cultural and spiritual value’ to the *Cherokee Nation* and the *United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians* (UKB)” (the other two federally recognized Cherokee tribes, both located in Oklahoma). UKB Chief George Wickliffe said, “It is like the Vatican to the Catholic, or the Garden of Eden to the Christian.”

I encourage all SeCCI members to make the pilgrimage to the Kituwah site. It is a powerful experience to walk on these grounds.

John Many Winds Ellis

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