

The Cherokee Trail of Tears in North Carolina

An Inventory of Trail Resources in Cherokee,
Clay, Graham, Macon, and Swain Counties

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Fort Hembree

Fort Hembree (Figures 18, 19), located in present-day Hayesville, North Carolina, was the U.S. Army's post for the collection of Cherokee prisoners from Tusquittee, Shooting Creek and surrounding communities of the upper Hiwassee River Valley. Fort Hembree, along with forts Lindsay and Delaney, was established in early October 1837. As noted by Quartermaster Abner Hetzel on October 9, 1837, Fort Hembree was garrisoned by Captain Joel Hembree's company of Tennessee Volunteer militia:

Sir, I have the honor to transmit herewith a rough map exhibiting the positions of the different stations in the Cherokee Country. Within the last four days five new posts have been established intended to be permanent for the winter, consisting at present of but one company each.... Capt. Hembree near the Georgia line on the Hiwassee River (Hetzel 1837b).

There is scant record of the fort over the next few months, except Hetzel's observation that "Information has been received at this office that the Q. [quarter] Master [Vaughn] at Fort Hembree is concerned in a store and is giving his attention to private, neglects his public business (Hetzel 1838a)". At the end of May 1838, Captain William Connelly's Company (Company C, Burke County Volunteers) of the Third Regiment, North Carolina Volunteer Militia took post at Fort Hembree. During the first two weeks of the Cherokee removal the North Carolina and Tennessee troops gathered approximately 1000 Cherokee prisoners around Fort Hembree, then marched this large contingent along the Unicoi Turnpike to Fort Butler. On June 22, 1838, Lt. John Phelps noted their passage: "Upwards of a thousand Indians passed by [Camp Hiwassee] today from Fort Hembree eighteen miles to the east of this, where they had been collected" (Phelps 2000:32). During the brief (week-long) encampments at Fort Hembree, a number of prisoners were stricken with illness and died. Claims filed by surviving relatives indicate that *Ool-scos-sit-teh*, *Cely*, *Nicy* and *Te-neh* perished at the the fort (Axley 1851), and their graves and others are likely located around the fort site.

The militia abandoned the fort at the end of June 1838 and the civilians who moved into the valley after the removal reused fort buildings for a number of purposes. A store and post office operated on the fort premises until the founding of Hayesville in 1861. The Thompson family



Figure 18. Detail of the 1838 Army Corps map of southwestern North Carolina illustrating Fort Hembree and its surroundings.



Figure 19. 1838 Army Corps sketchmap illustrating Fort Hembree location.

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contends that the (now demolished) family homeplace (Figure 20) at the site of Fort Hembree actually incorporated a hewn log building that was officers' quarters associated with the fort.

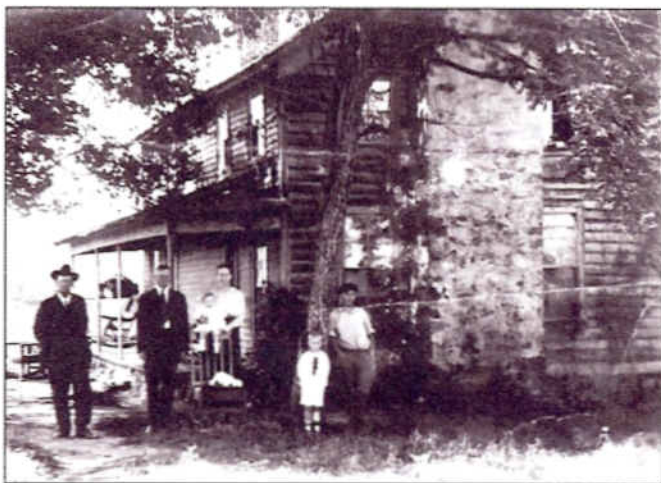


Figure 20. Photograph of the Thompson house (ca. 1920), reputed to be the site of the Fort Hembree officers' quarters.

In 1847, only nine years after the removal, journalist Charles Lanman traveled through the region, and passed the ruins of Fort Hembree: The principal novelty that I noticed on the road to this place was the spot known as Fort Embree. The only evidences that there was ever a fortification here are a breastwork of timber, a lot of demolished pickets, and two or three block-houses, which are now in a dilapidated condition. The site is a commanding one, and takes in some of the grandest mountain outlines that I have ever seen (Lanman 1849:380).

Lanman's account is informative in several respects. He observed multiple blockhouses, a timber breastwork (chest-height defensive wall), and pickets or palisades that presumably enclosed the fortification. This is the most detailed description of any Removal era fort in southwestern North Carolina. Because forts Hembree, Delaney, and Lindsay were built at the same time according to standardized plans provided by the War Department, it is likely that these other forts included similar features. Lanman also notes the deteriorated condition of the fort only a few years after its construction.

Fort Hembree Site Location and Archaeological Investigations

Army survey records, maps, and written accounts indicate that Fort Hembree was situated 18 miles east of Fort Butler along the Unicoi Turnpike between Sweetwater Gap and the Hiwassee River (Figures 1, 18, 21). The site of Fort Hembree is atop Fort Hill, between Town Creek and Blair Creek, approximately 1.3 km west of the Hiwassee River. Fort Hill is a broad, relatively level ridge that rises 40-80 feet above the surrounding terrain to offer a commanding view of the area. As indicated by Army survey sketchmaps, the fort was arrayed as a rectangular facility (approximately 200ft x 600ft) that occupied much of the level ridgetop, with the western end of the fort extending to brow of the hill where the slope begins to drop steeply. The hilltop is now a sparsely developed residential neighborhood; four properties with three private homes occupy the fort area, which is bounded or transected by Fort Hembree

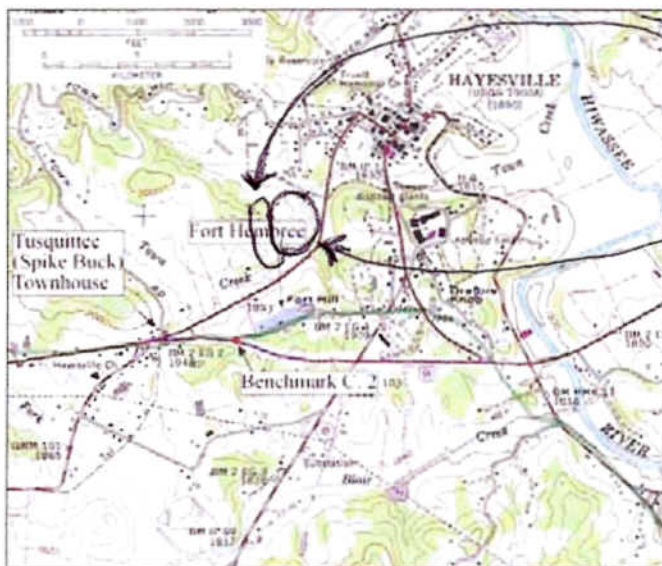


Figure 21. Detail of the Hayesville, NC 7.5' quadrangle indicating mapped locations of Fort Hembree, the Tusquittee Townhouse, and the Unicoi Turnpike.

Road.

Initial archaeological reconnaissance of the Fort Hembree locality entailed intensive pedestrian survey of a four hectare area that extends from the intersection of Fort Hembree Road and U.S. 64 eastward along Fort Hill approximately 430 meters (see Figure 22, blue shaded area). All surface exposures, such as garden plots and erosional features, were closely examined for diagnostic artifacts referable to the fort or its Removal-era military occupation. No such materials were evident, despite substantial exposed surfaces available to inspection. Subsequent to the pedestrian survey, investigators excavated a series of 30cm shovel test units arrayed at 10m intervals across a small pasture or hayfield and adjacent pine grove at the center of the presumed fort location (Figure 23); an additional transect of shovel tests was excavated parallel to Fort Hembree Road (see Figure 22, yellow shaded area). These tests revealed extremely shallow soils (5-21cm plowzone) with decayed schist bedrock near the surface. Shovel tests in the small hayfield yielded a sherd of polychrome handpainted whiteware, an alkaline-glazed stoneware sherd, a fragment of an olive green handblown beverage bottle, and a machine cut nail, all materials consistent with a Removal-era site occupation. No concentrations of material or discrete contexts were identified. A 60m x 50m area of the hayfield was also surveyed with a proton magnetometer, a remote sensing device that can discriminate archaeological features (e.g. pits, foundations, ditches) as magnetic anomalies. No prominent anomalies were identified in this area.

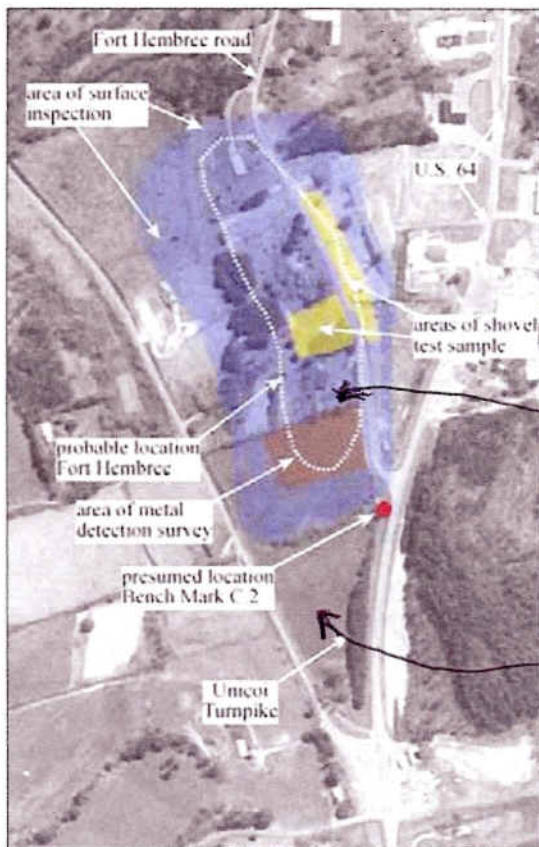


Figure 22. Aerial view of the Fort Hembree locality with extent and location of archaeological reconnaissance indicated by shading.

Investigators also scanned the small hayfield near the center of the fort locality and a portion of the larger hayfield at the eastern end of the fort area (see Figure 22, red shaded area; Figure 24) with metal detectors in an attempt to identify concentrations of nails or other construction hardware and other metal artifacts that might be referable to the fort occupation. These efforts proved fruitless, and the apparent absence of mid-19th century archaeological materials in the larger hayfield led investigators to conclude that the bulk of the fort occupation was centered to the east on the hilltop.



Figure 23. Shovel testing of the smaller hayfield in the Fort Hembree locality.

Evaluation and Recommendations

Reconnaissance of Fort Hill revealed close topographic correspondence to Army cartographic renderings of the Fort Hembree site, and promote placement of the fort along the western half of Fort Hembree Road. Archaeological survey of the Fort Hembree locality identified evidence of Removal-era occupation on Fort Hill, but did not conclusively establish the nature of that occupation, nor did investigations identify materials or contexts directly attributable to Fort Hembree. Although this area has been somewhat affected by residential construction, home density is low, and substantial portions of the probable fort site remain undeveloped, and the Fort Hembree



Figure 24. Larger hayfield at the eastern end of the Fort Hembree locality.

site may be the best preserved of the six military installations in southwestern North Carolina. It appears likely that discrete archaeological contexts associated with Fort Hembree have survived in these intervening areas, and more intensive and sustained archaeological investigations of the Fort Hembree locality are recommended. If such contexts can be identified through further fieldwork, the case for site integrity (and, by extension, National Register eligibility) can be readily supported. Like Forts Butler and Delaney, the Fort Hembree site is demonstrably “associated with events that have made significant contribution to the broad patterns of our history,” but lacks standing architecture and other readily visible evidence of the primary period of significance, and arguments for qualities of site integrity and significance must hinge upon archaeological evidence. The Fort Delaney locality retains appreciable integrity of setting; the site is still “a commanding one, and takes in some of the grandest mountain outlines” as Lanman noted. Like the other Removal era military sites in southwestern North Carolina, the Fort Hembree site should be marked with appropriate interpretation and designated as a site for public education as part of the Trail of Tears National Historic Trail.

Hwy 64
Property
Municipal
Center
Out of
View just
over the
hill.