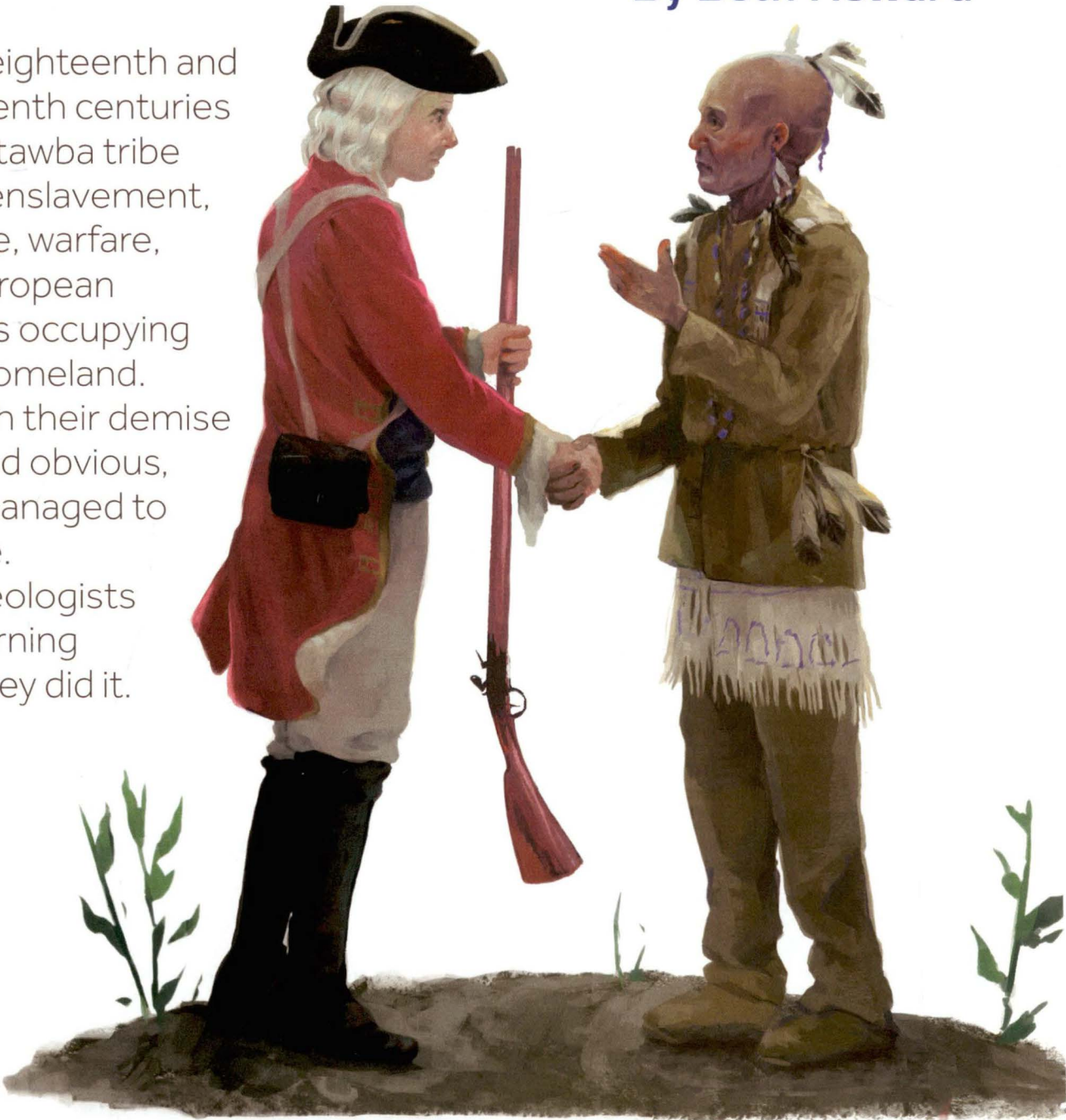


SURVIVING In A Changing World

By Beth Howard

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Catawba tribe faced enslavement, disease, warfare, and European settlers occupying their homeland. Though their demise seemed obvious, they managed to survive. Archaeologists are learning how they did it.



A British soldier shakes hands with a Catawba warrior. A key to the Catawbas' survival during the Colonial era was the military and economic alliance with the colony of South Carolina. Catawba warriors protected the colony from attacks by natives allied with the French and Spanish and served with the English in their frontier wars. In return, South Carolina granted favored trading status to the Catawba and provided them with firearms, ammunition, and supplies that were critical to their survival.

On a picnic-perfect day in South Carolina's Lancaster County last June, University of North Carolina (UNC) archaeologist Stephen Davis and his students meticulously scraped loose subsoil and dug, spoonful by spoonful, in search of clues to the lifeways of the Catawba tribe in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Based in the Catawba River Valley of South Carolina, just south of the North Carolina border, the Catawba came to prominence during the tumultuous centuries following the arrival of the English in the New World.

In the century preceding the American Revolution, native peoples in the Piedmont of the Carolinas, a plateau region sandwiched between the Appalachian Mountains and the Coastal Plain, experienced seemingly insurmountable threats—the ravages of European diseases, intense conflict between tribes that was exacerbated by encroaching white settlers, and a large-scale slave trade. “They were being captured, enslaved, and then shipped out of Charleston to the Caribbean to work on sugar plantations,” said Davis, explaining that Indians escaped more easily than Africans because they knew the land so well, so the Native Americans were sent to the Caribbean where the land was unfamiliar and escaping was more difficult. “It has been estimated that, prior to 1715, there were more Indian slaves being exported out of Charleston than there were Africans being imported.”

When a young Englishman named John Lawson traveled through the area in early 1701, he observed the chaos of collapsing native communities firsthand. But the Catawba stood out as stable and thriving, a testament to their resourcefulness and adaptability. The Catawba's survival was put to the test over the next century and a half, Davis said, but they met the challenges with savvy economic and political strategies.

“When we started the project our interest was in learning how the Catawba nation was able to survive in the face of a number of different pressures, and at a time when all the contemporary writers were writing them off, predicting they would be extinct in a decade or two,” he said. “And they're still here. They've been living in essentially the same place since the Spanish entradas of the mid 1500s.” In fact the Catawba Indian Nation—the only federally recognized tribe in the state—currently resides within a few miles of the tribe's historic homeland.

The archaeologists are investigating a series of settlements that, according to historical documents, the Catawba occupied sequentially between 1750 and 1820. “Their land, their world, was changing under their feet. How did they manage that effectively?” asked Brett Riggs, who codirects the project. “We have been able to piece together from the archaeological evidence and the documentary evidence that these folks very consciously changed their strategies through time.”



Brett Riggs excavates the bottom of a large cabin cellar at the Bowers site.

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The evidence suggests that the tribe survived in part by joining forces with the remnants of other decimated tribes. "As all native groups in the Piedmont are declining, they need to seek security, so the Catawba bring smaller groups from other tribes in under their aegis and continually repopulate their country," said Riggs, who was formerly at UNC but now teaches at Western Carolina University in Cullowhee, North Carolina. "We have accounts from the 1740s that twenty different languages are being spoken within the Catawba orbit."

As part of what the archaeologists refer to as their "coalescent strategy," the Catawba created dense settlements

that were easier to defend against warring tribes, and they located these settlements near major trading routes, which increased their access to firearms. Archaeological surveys have revealed the locations of a cluster of towns known as Weyane, Suchah, Nassaw, Charraw Town, and Weyapee within a two-mile radius. This settlement strategy may account for the nation's reported ability to quickly galvanize its warriors to repel enemies.

UNC researchers excavated the towns of Weyapee and Nassaw near present-day Fort Mill, South Carolina, in 2007 and 2008. At Weyapee they uncovered mid-1700s brass, iron,



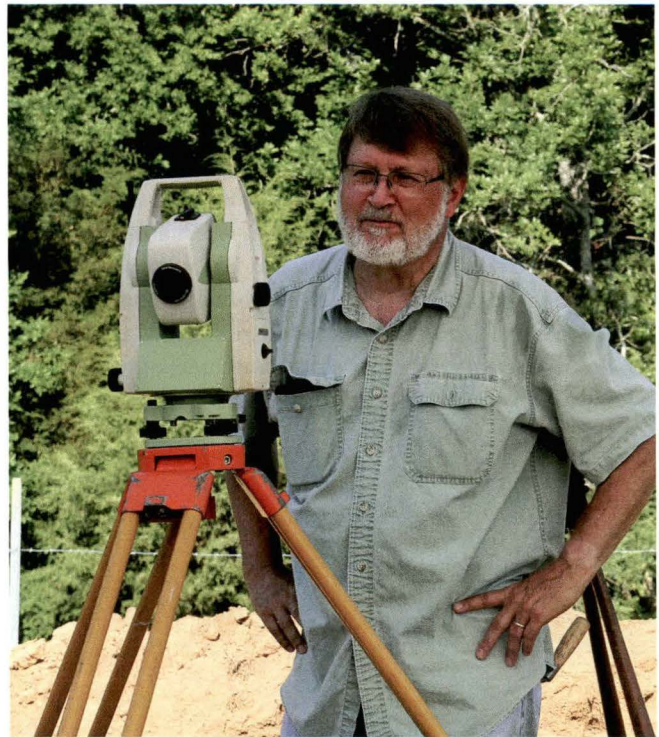
Steve Davis stands on a ladder to photograph an excavated cabin chimney base at New Town while students in the foreground use trowels to clean an intact hearth found beneath another collapsed stick-and-clay chimney.

lead, glass, and ceramic artifacts. They also found a corncob-filled smudge pit (smudging the interior of a pottery vessel with charred corn cobs was a way to waterproof it), and other storage pits that contained numerous pottery fragments, indicative of a rich pottery tradition.

At Nassaw, archaeologists uncovered storage pits filled with refuse, cob-filled smudge pits, soil borrow pits, and post-holes delineating structures. In all, the researchers recovered some 47,000 artifacts including glass beads, English kaolin pipe fragments, gun parts, and a great many potsherds. The distribution of artifacts within a circular pattern across the village site suggests that Nassaw was surrounded by a palisade the Catawba likely erected to defend themselves.

The Catawba also defended themselves by forging a critical military alliance with the colony of South Carolina. Although native peoples, including the Catawba, took up arms against the colony during an uprising known as the Yemassee War of 1715, devastating losses led the tribe to back down. Under the subsequent peace agreement with South Carolina, the Catawba agreed to police forces hostile to the colony's interests, according to historical accounts.

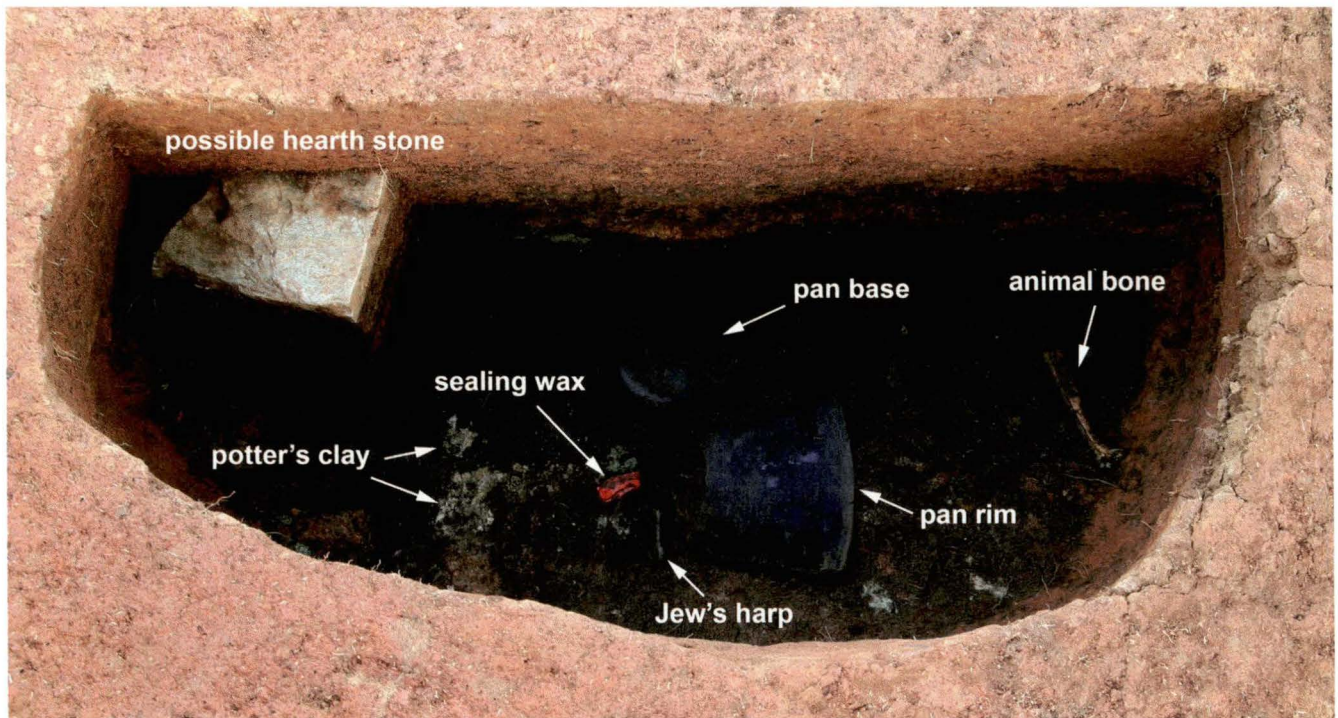
The partnership allowed the Catawba to become a military juggernaut. They fought against French-and-Spanish-allied groups that posed a threat to South Carolina, and they joined in raids against other tribes. In exchange, the colony ensured the Catawba were well-armed and even supplied them with cows and corn when they suffered famine due to crop failures. When Scottish settlers encroached on traditional Catawba hunting territory in the mid 1700s, the Catawba used their alliance with South Carolina to obtain payment for the intrusions and stolen horses.



HEATHER LAPHAM

Steve Davis uses a total station to map archaeological contexts.

The tribe's military power reached its zenith at the start of the French and Indian War of 1754, but when Catawba warriors returned from Quebec in 1759 infected with smallpox, the disease spread and the nation was reduced to a few hundred people. The disaster led to a major turning point as the Catawba abandoned



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A variety of in situ artifacts found near the base of a half-excavated cellar pit at Old Town that was filled in during the last decades of the 1700s.

These personal ornaments, which were discovered at Old Town, were manufactured primarily by Europeans. The Catawba obtained them by purchase or exchange. The smaller triangular nose bangles (lower right) were part of a native fashion wave that swept eastern North America in the 1770s.



their settlements and regrouped under the protection of the English at Pine Tree Hill. The decline in their ranks probably diminished the importance of the Catawba to the British. And subsequently, surrounded by Scots-Irish settlers, the Catawba allied themselves with the colonists against the British Crown during the American Revolution, boasting the highest per capita rate of service of any native community and earning them the title Patriot Indians.

The archaeological record reflects the Catawba's role as combatants. At Nassaw, UNC archaeologists recovered numerous gun parts and sword fragments as well as an

iron short sword known as a dirk. "This was a personal side weapon that Scottish Highlanders carried," Riggs said. "They were not issued by the military, and it's the sort of thing that would not be bought and sold. But here it is in this Catawba pit outside Fort Mill, right at the time that the Catawba are serving with the British and with Highland troops in Canada. It may well have been recovered on the field or in camp and brought back to South Carolina. This speaks immediately to that relationship and also to the way these things get transformed, because the hilt had been broken off of it and some Catawba had hammered a lower part

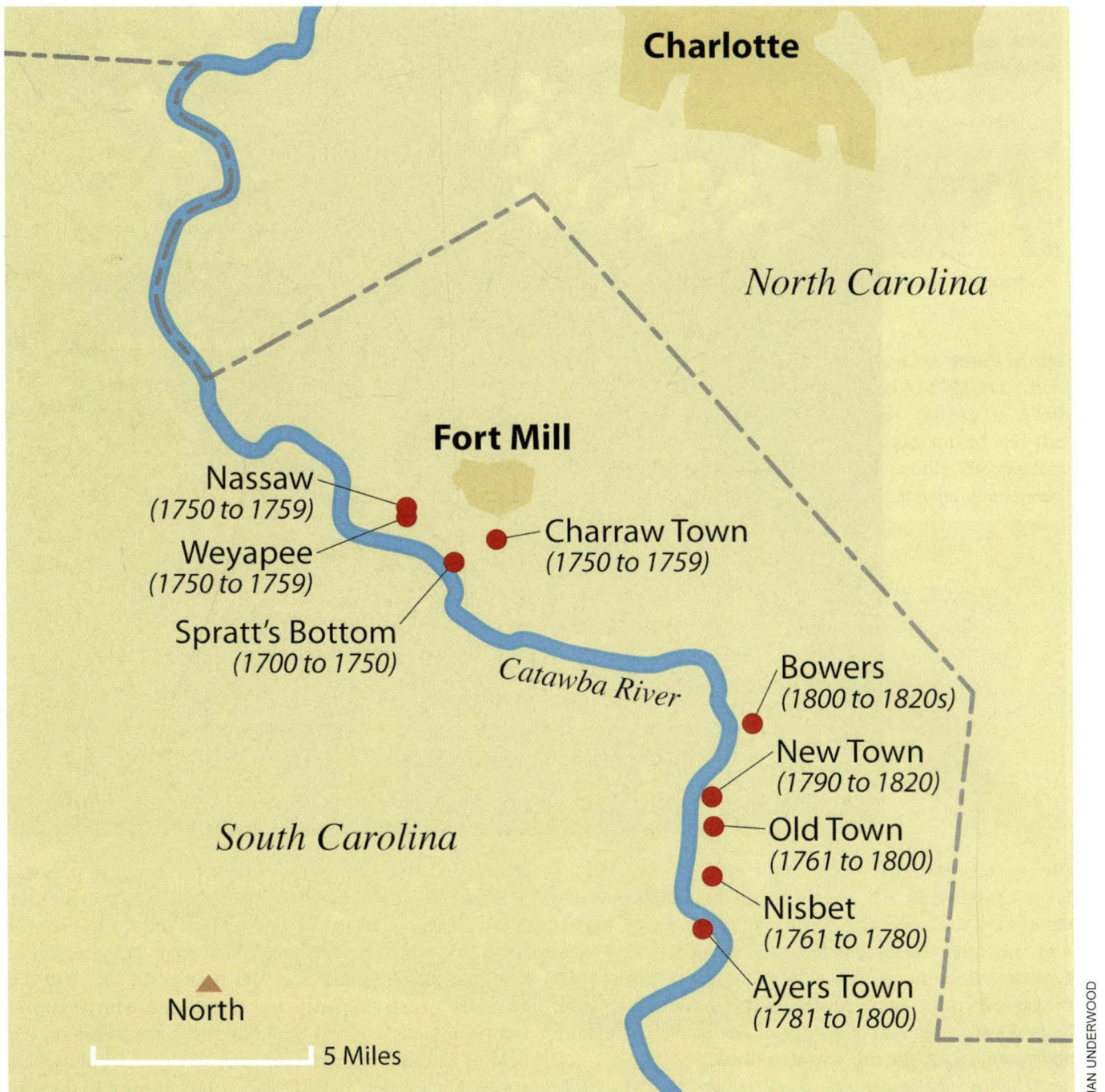
of the edge so it could be handled, wrapped, and reused.”

In 1760, shortly after taking refuge with the English in Pine Tree Hill, the Catawba signed a treaty preserving 225 square miles of their territory, allowing them to return to their homeland. They established a settlement called Old Town that consisted of clusters of households; but instead of the post-in-ground-style structures seen at Nassaw, the Catawba built log houses, similar to those of their white neighbors.

UNC researchers excavated five houses in 2003 and 2009, revealing deep sub-floor cellar pits, clay processing pits filled with unfired potter’s clay, a cob-filled smudge pit, and a large basin. The cellar pits contained deposits of

discarded refuse, including pottery, as well as European-made manufactured goods and subsistence remains.

Although only a few years had passed from the time the Catawba left Nassaw to when they returned to settle at Old Town, the materials recovered from the sites differed dramatically, particularly the ceramics. Instead of traditional wares like those found at Nassaw, Old Town vessels resemble English ceramics, which is likely a result of the tribe’s exposure to such objects at Pine Tree Hill and the Catawba’s awareness of a market for their earthenwares. The surfaces of the vessels—plates, bowls, cups, and milk pans—are bur-nished, and some display hand-painted designs. Some are



Before the smallpox epidemic of 1759, Catawba settlements were located near the modern town of Fort Mill. After the Catawba returned to their ancestral homeland in the early 1760s, they reestablished their settlements several miles downriver.

fashioned from pale clays, reminiscent of English ceramics that were also recovered at Old Town. The rims of the pale clay ceramics occasionally are tinged with a red or orange pigment made from sealing wax likely purchased during their time at Pine Tree Hill.

"When they come back, they are completely transformed. They are building European-style houses and producing ceramics for European markets, for American, and African American markets," Riggs said. "Within a span of just a few years, they recreate their ceramic tradition. Beforehand, they produced wares that are part of the Lamar ceramic tradition, which has been in place in that part of the valley by 1760 for a good 300 to 350 years. When they return, they are producing hand-built copies of Staffordshire slipwares." The Old Town pottery is so different from the Catawba's earlier ceramics, according to Davis, that without supporting documentary evidence, one could easily conclude they were the handiwork of different people.

The new ceramics represent the beginnings of what is generally thought of as the Catawba pottery style and mark a transition to a new economy, one dominated by the women of the nation. "What this tells us is that Catawba potters—these are mostly women—were extremely nimble in terms of their craft," Davis said. "They could essentially do whatever they chose to do. What became their choice—probably for economic survival—was to begin mass-producing pottery for sale rather than just for personal use."

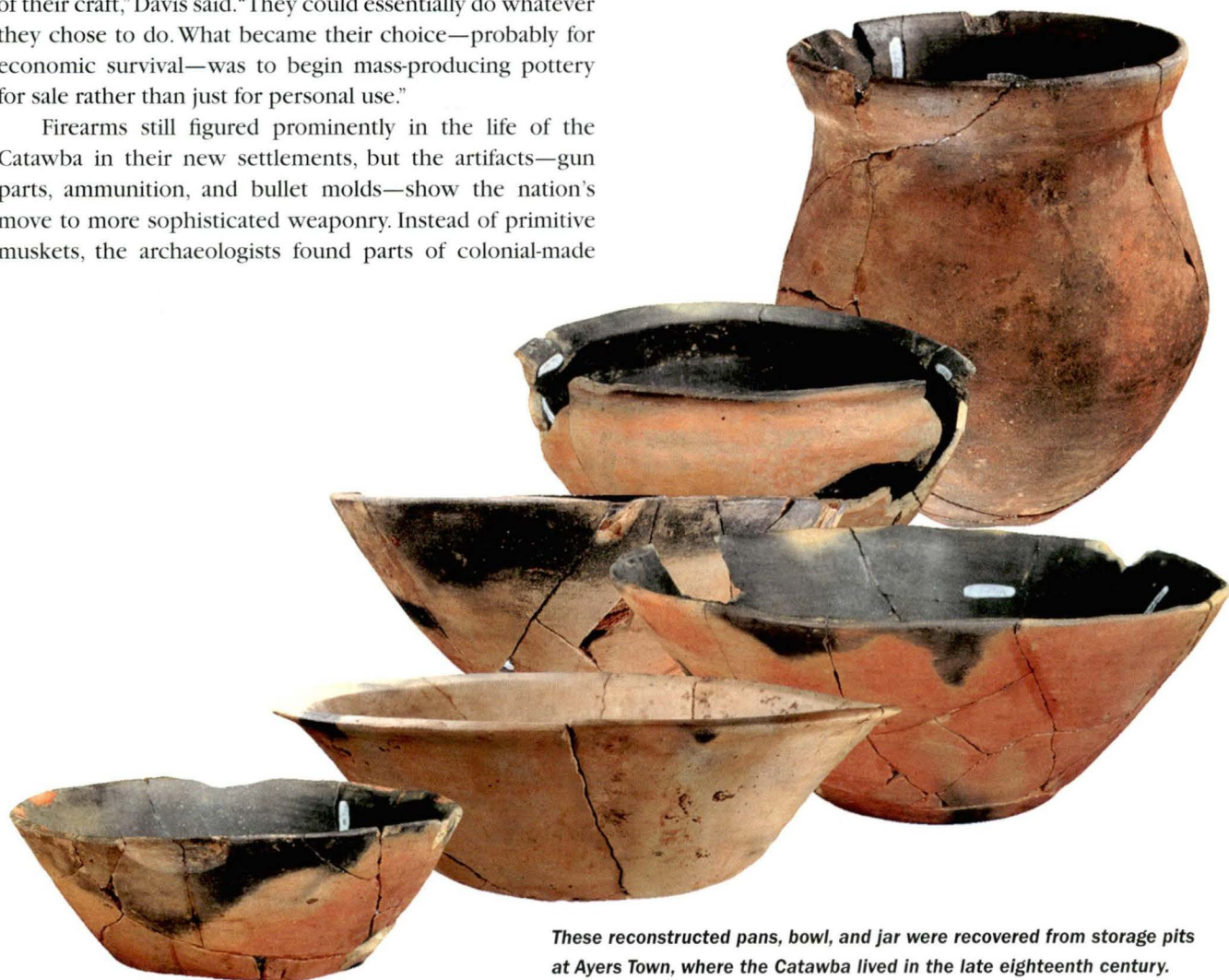
Firearms still figured prominently in the life of the Catawba in their new settlements, but the artifacts—gun parts, ammunition, and bullet molds—show the nation's move to more sophisticated weaponry. Instead of primitive muskets, the archaeologists found parts of colonial-made

rifles, which were more accurate and expensive. Increasing ownership of horses is reflected in an abundance of riding tack. The researchers also found four coins dating to 1769 in one of the cellars that indicate more frequent contact with Europeans, including their Scots-Irish neighbors.

Davis and Riggs believe such rapid changes in the lives of the Catawba suggest they had come to accept the permanence of European settlements and, in an effort to get along with their neighbors, the Catawba embraced some of their lifeways.

Explorations of later settlements suggest other ways that the Catawba sought to adapt to their changing circumstances and downplay differences with their white neighbors. Between 2003 and 2005, UNC archaeologists located seven discrete concentrations of artifacts and architectural remains at a site known as New Town, which the Catawba occupied from approximately 1790-1820. These correspond well to a description from Calvin Jones, a visitor to the village in 1815, who wrote of a grouping of "6 or 8 houses facing an oblong square."

The UNC team also discovered raised chimney hearths at two of the cabins, confirming Jones' observation that two



These reconstructed pans, bowl, and jar were recovered from storage pits at Ayers Town, where the Catawba lived in the late eighteenth century.



STEVE DAVIS

Young members of the Catawba Indian Nation help UNC graduate students Mary Beth Fitts and Mark Plane (far right) wash artifact-laden pit fill from Nassaw, which the Catawba occupied in the mid-eighteenth century.

of the dwellings, like those of white settlers, had raised wood floors. One of the cabins belonged to “General” New River, the nation’s leader, and his wife, Sally, an important Catawba matriarch who died around 1820. “A large portion of New Town was unplowed, so things were just below the surface,” Riggs said. “The base of Sally New River’s stick-and-clay chimneys were there and when we began to uncover them, we found the hearths intact. On one of those hearths was a broken Catawba-made milk pan that we were able to reassemble and put in the hands of descendants of Sally New River.” The researchers, he added, were “honored” to do this.

UNC archaeologists recovered some 86,000 artifacts, including 60,000 Catawba pottery fragments, from New Town, most of which imitate European vessels. Firearm components were much less prevalent than at older settlements, suggesting that warfare had come to play a less important role in the nation’s life. On the other hand, riding and draft hardware was especially prominent at New Town, indicating the Catawba’s increasing reliance on horses. By this time, historical accounts show that the Catawba were often on the road, traveling to plantations and towns throughout South Carolina and selling pottery along the way.

Other records reveal that the tribe had turned to yet another way to support itself—leasing its land to white farmers. A surviving nineteenth-century ledger recording leases

and payments shows that by the 1810s, most Catawba lands were being farmed or managed by whites. Indeed, a settler from this time noted that the tribe had stopped farming and turned to hunting and gathering. Food remains discovered at New Town—deer, pig, and fish bones, peach pits and corn—bear out these accounts.

In 1840, at the height of Indian removal, the Catawba were pressured to give up their remaining land and the leaseholders were able to acquire the title to their lands after the Treaty of Nation Ford. They nevertheless gained a small tract of less desirable land that the current Catawba Nation, about 2,800 people, calls home today.

The reservation sits on the opposite side of the river from the Catawba’s most significant archaeological sites, which are largely in private hands. While some are protected by conservation easements, many are under siege from rapid development emanating from the Charlotte metropolitan area. Some sites have already been destroyed by the construction of roads, golf courses, and housing complexes. Taken together, the excavations and the written record provide a rich picture of life for the Catawba at a time when any new evidence of its history may soon be lost. Said Riggs, “I feel like we stepped in there just in time.”

BETH HOWARD is an independent writer based in Charlotte, North Carolina.