

The
Archaeology
of Houses
and Households
in the
Native Southeast

Benjamin A. Steere

Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii
Introduction	i
1. Patterns of Architectural Variability in the Native Southeast	16
2. Environmental Factors in Architectural Variation	64
3. Household Composition and Economics	85
4. Houses and Architectural Symbolism	111
5. Houses, Status, and Settlement	138
6. Conclusion: A Macroregional Perspective on Architectural Variation in the Native Southeast	176
Appendix: Description of the Architectural Variables	185
References Cited	191
Index	213

Illustrations

Figures

I.1. Map of Middle and Late Woodland Period Sites Recorded in the Database	8
I.2. Map of Early Mississippian Period Sites Recorded in the Database	9
I.3. Map of Middle and Late Mississippian Period Sites Recorded in the Database	10
I.4. Map of Historic Indian Period Sites Recorded in the Database	11
I.1. Histogram of Middle Woodland Period Domestic Structure Area	23
I.2. Histogram of Late Woodland Period Domestic Structure Area	23
I.3. Histogram of Early Mississippian Period Domestic Structure Area	25
I.4. Histogram of Early Mississippian Period Nondomestic Structure Area	25
I.5. Histogram of Middle Mississippian Period Domestic Structure Area	26
I.6. Histogram of Middle Mississippian Period Nondomestic Structure Area	27
I.7. Histogram of Late Mississippian Period Domestic Structure Area	27
I.8. Histogram of Late Mississippian Period Nondomestic Structure Area	28
I.9. Histogram of Late Mississippian Storage Structure Area	29
I.10. Histogram of Historic Indian Period Domestic Structure Area	30
I.11. Bar Chart of Mean and Median Floor Area for Domestic Structures	33

1.12. Bar Chart of Mean and Median Number of Wall Posts for Domestic Structures	38
1.13. Bar Chart of Mean and Median Wall Post Spacing for All Time Periods	39
1.14. Bar Chart of Mean and Median Wall Post Diameter for All Time Periods	40
1.15. Bar Chart of Mean and Median Number of Partitions in Domestic Structures	48
1.16. Bar Chart of Mean Number of Interior Burials for All Time Periods	56
2.1. Major Physiographic Regions of Eastern North America	69
2.2. Location of Sites with Structure Basins	81
3.1. Model of Household Clusters for Each Chronological Period	99
3.2. Examples of Middle Woodland Period Domestic Structures	100
3.3. Examples of Late Woodland Period Domestic Structures	100
3.4. Examples of Early Mississippian Period Domestic Structures	101
3.5. Examples of Middle Mississippian Period Domestic Structures	102
3.6. Examples of Late Mississippian Period Domestic Structures	102
3.7. Examples of Historic Indian Period Domestic Structures	103
4.1. Middle Woodland Circular Structures from the McFarland Site	116
4.2. Rectangular Late Woodland Structure from 1PI61 Site	121
4.3. Late Mississippian Winter House Layout	130
4.4. Historic Indian Winter House Layout from the Townsend Sites	133
5.1. Box Plots of Area for Mound and Village Structures	148
5.2. Bar Chart of Mean and Median Area for Mound and Village Structures	148
5.3. Scatterplot of House Area and Component Area	160
5.4. Scatterplot of House Area and Number of Mounds	160
5.5. Scatterplot of House Area and Number of Structures	161

Tables

I.1. List of Archaeological Sites Recorded in the Database	12
I.1. Structure Shape by Time Period and Functional Class	18

1.2. Hearth Types	53
1.3. Average Post Density for Structures by Period	60
1.4. Results of Multivariate Regression with Chronological Dummy Variables for Domestic Structures	61
1.5. Results of Multivariate Regression with Chronological Dummy Variables for Nondomestic Structures	62
2.1. Environmental Data for Sites	70
2.2. Historic Accounts of Building Materials	76
2.3. Archaeological Evidence for Building Materials	78
2.4. Summary of Environmental Variables for Sites with and without Structures with Basins	82
2.5. Results of Multivariate Regression for Post Density and Environmental Variables	83
3.1. Results of Regression with Dummy Variables for Interior Partitioning	104
5.1. Summary Statistics for Mississippian Mound and Village Structures	149
5.2. Results of Wilcoxon Rank-Sum Tests for Differences between Mound and Village Structure Variables	151
5.3. Results of Multivariate Regression for Domestic Structure Area	162
5.4. Summary of Architectural Diversity by Component	164
5.5. Results of Multivariate Regression for Architectural Diversity	172

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*The
Archaeology
of Houses and Households
in the Native Southeast* explores the
evolution of houses and households in the
southeastern United States from the Woodland
to the Historic Indian period (ca. 200 BC to AD 1800).

"The Archaeology of Houses and Households in the Native Southeast is certain to become an essential reference for anyone doing native archaeology in the Southeast."

—Robin Beck, author of *Chieftdoms, Collapse, and Coalescence in the Early American South* and coauthor of *Fort San Juan and the Limits of Empire: Colonialism and Household Practice at the Berry Site*

"A critically important work that moves beyond mere synthesis and summary and includes interpretations of southeastern Indian lifeways only possible through an appropriate matching of methodology, scale of analysis, and an incredible amount of data."

—Ramie A. Gougeon, coeditor of *Archaeological Perspectives on the Southern Appalachians: A Multiscalar Approach*

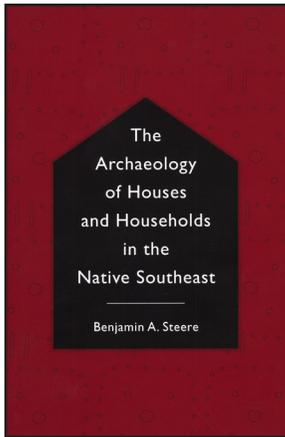
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Christopher B. Rodning, series editor



The Archaeology of Houses and Households in the Native Southeast

Benjamin A. Steere. The University of Alabama Press, 2017. ix+215 pp., 38 figures, 17 tables, 1 appendix, references. \$54.95 (Cloth), \$54.95 (e-book).

Reviewed by B. Jacob Skousen, Illinois State Archaeological Survey, Prairie Research Institute, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

In *The Archaeology of Houses and Households in the Native Southeast*, Benjamin Steere seeks to identify the causal factors underlying architectural and household variation in southeastern North America during the Woodland, Mississippian, and Historic periods (200 B.C. to A.D. 1800). He specifically examines the role of environment, economics, religion and symbolism, and status.

He finds that these factors account for some, but not all, aspects of household variation. In the end, he posits that widespread changes in social organization is the causal factor through both time and space. While perhaps not the most groundbreaking or theoretically robust volume on households, it provides a wealth of architectural data that will prove useful for southeastern archaeologists interested in architecture and households.

In the introductory chapter, Steere introduces the subject of household archaeology and explains the methods he used in gathering the data used in the study. His theoretical discussion on households is brief and notably scant (more on this below). The highlight of the chapter, and a major strength of the book, is the scope and detail of his data—it includes architectural features from over 1,200 houses throughout the study area. This is an impressive database by any measure.

Chapter 1 is divided into two parts. In the first part, Steere summarizes what is known about structure size, shape, orientation; the presence of entrances and interior features; and many more architectural characteristics through time in the study area. He finds, not surprisingly, that there are overarching similarities in the style, size, and layout of households during certain time periods and in certain areas, and that changes in these patterns occurred over a short period of time. In the second part of the chapter, he reviews household studies throughout the world, which indicate that the environment, economics, ritual and symbolism, status differentiation, and settlement patterning are the main factors influencing household variation. The following chapters are dedicated to testing these factors using Steere's household data to determine whether they also explain architectural variation within his study area.

The next four chapters, which are similarly organized, examine one of the four causal factors mentioned above: Chapter 2 focuses on environment, Chapter 3 economics and household composition, Chapter 4 symbolism and religion, and Chapter 5 status. The chapters all begin with a review of ethnographic, ethnohistoric, and cross-cultural data on the role of each of the factors in household variation. Then he examines different architectural attributes in households for each time period (Woodland, Mississippian, and Historic) to determine if there is any correlation. In Chapter 2, he finds that the only environmental

Book Review

factors that mattered were the distribution of local resources for building materials; there is also a correlation between post density, temperature, and precipitation. As discussed in Chapter 3, economics, particularly the adoption of maize agriculture around A.D. 900, explains a preponderance of larger structures explains a preponderance of larger houses, more interior partitions, and more space between between houses within communities. In Chapter 4, he suggests that many architectural attributes, such as house size and shape, number of wall posts, interior partitions, and community layout, likely reflect religious and cosmological concepts (e.g., a layered cosmos, binary opposites, the importance of cardinal directions) widely shared throughout the southeast. He posits that this is most evident during the Mississippian period. Status, the subject of Chapter 5, accounts for differences in house size and interior spacing during the Mississippian period, which is expected given the hierarchical nature of Mississippian societies. There is no correlation between house variability and site size or location during the Mississippian period, though sites with fortifications tend to exhibit greater variability in house form. Houses are generally similar in size, interior divisions, and construction style during the Woodland and Historic periods, which is what one might expect from egalitarian societies.

Finally, in Chapter 6, Steere summarizes the findings of the other chapters. He concludes that broad scale changes in architecture were dictated by changes in social organization; this is because the other causal factors he discussed throughout the book account for only some household variation. He spends the rest of the chapter discussing what archaeologists know about changes in social organization in the southeast through time, which correspond with the major architectural changes he described throughout the book.

Though this book is largely descriptive, it is well organized, and its goals are simple and straightforward. Its greatest strengths are its broad geographical and temporal focus and the wealth of data compiled. Indeed, the dataset is more comprehensive than those in other recent volumes on houses and households in Eastern North America (e.g., Lacquement 2007; Morgaan 1999; Redmond and Genheimer 2015).

However, a main strength of this book—its geographical and temporal depth—is also a weakness. Steere's broad-scale approach does not convey the architectural differences at individual sites and places. Small-scale changes in households matter, particularly when constructing individual and group histories and even when explaining broader historical trends. Despite Steere's candid focus on broad temporal and geographical trends, a more in-depth discussion on the correlation between small- and large-scale changes in households would be beneficial. Also, Steere's primary argument—that social organization explains architectural variation and settlement organization—is not surprising; this has been discussed by southeastern archaeologists for decades. Finally, anyone looking for a deep engagement with theoretical issues relating to households will be disappointed. He does not discuss or reference recent works and theories on households (e.g., McCorrison 2012; Müller 2015; Parker and Foster 2012). A more critical, in-depth treatment of households as a theoretical concept would surely bring new insights to the study.

Book Review

Despite these issues, this book is a necessary addition to any southeastern archaeologist's library, and I imagine that it will soon become a primary reference for general architectural trends in the greater southeast. I also echo Steere's parting remark (p. 184) that this volume is just a small sample of the excavated households throughout the southeast. His work will undoubtedly encourage others to build their own databases on regional architectural characteristics and serve as a template for other scholars analyzing long-term architectural trends.

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