

THE USE OF *CHENOPODIUM* SEEDS AS A SOURCE
OF FOOD BY THE EARLY PEOPLES IN
RUSSELL CAVE, ALABAMA¹

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In several instances in the past, references have been made to the use of *Chenopodium* seeds as a source of food by native groups of North America. This plant family is known locally as "pigweed," "goosefoot," or "lamb's quarters." Smith² has shown that the Adena people cultivated and used the seeds of this plant as one of its food sources. Jones and Fonner³ indicated that the Navajo Indians of our Southwest reaped the wild seeds, then roasted and ground them into *pinole*. Morris⁴ suggested that the people who had occupied Site 22, near Durango, Colorado, during Basket Maker II times also used this same food source. Fernal and Kinsey⁵ stated that: "The seeds of the Pigweeds can be gathered in great quantities and were largely used by the American Indians (of the eastern United States) as a source of bread or in gruel." Characteristically, the small, black in color, hard and slippery seeds have the tendency to jump and bounce while being ground, making the job rather difficult. Once the seeds are reduced to a meal, the resulting flour is dark colored due to the black seed coat.

Modern experiments have shown that the *Chenopodium* flour is good-flavored and highly nutritious, "tasting somewhat like buckwheat but with the characteristic 'mousey' flavor distinctive of this group of plants."⁶

Chenopodium ambrosioides has been used for quite some time as an intestinal worm killer, and in certain sections of our Southeast its oil is still used to rid victims of hookworms.

During the first season's work in Russell Cave,⁷ the charred remains of a small hemispherically-shaped basket were found filled with equally charred *Chenopodium* seeds. The seeds were

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²1959, p. 67

³1954, p. 95.

⁴1939, p. 118.

⁵1943, p. 178.

⁶*Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁷Miller, 1956, p. 555.

later identified by experts in the United States Department of Agriculture as belonging to this plant family. Their presence on the Early Woodland horizon, about 5,000 years ago, indicate that these people knew the potential of these wild uncultivated seeds as a staple food source, harvested them by means of seedbeaters and baskets, and converted them into food. We have no positive evidence that wooden seed-beaters were made and utilized; by their very nature these would have decayed and disappeared from the scene long ago, due to the moist nature of the deeper deposits. It was the charring of the basket and its contents that has given us positive information that these prehistoric people utilized, for certain, the seeds of *Chenopodium* and probably the seeds of the Amaranth plants as well as other wild grass seeds.

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Washington, D. C.

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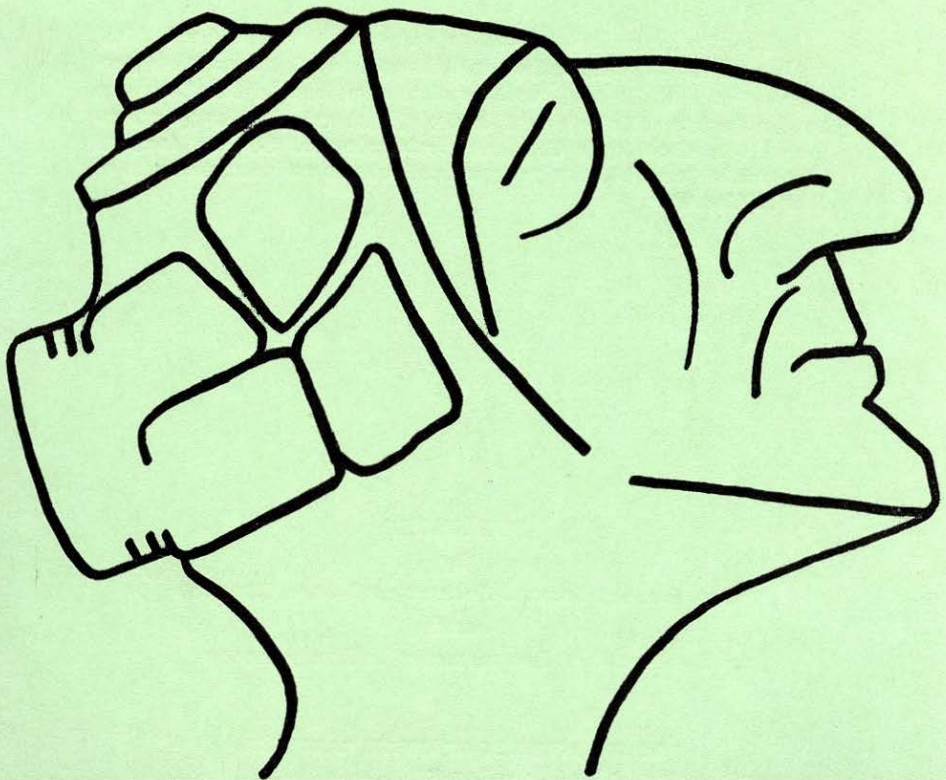
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SOUTHERN INDIAN

STUDIES



Volume XII

October, 1960

The *Southern Indian Studies* was established in April, 1949, as a medium of publication and discussion of information pertaining to the life and customs of the Indians in the Southern states, both prehistoric and historic. Subscription is by membership in the North Carolina Archaeological Society (annual dues \$3.00) or \$1.00 per year to institutions and nonresidents of North Carolina.



PUBLISHED

by

THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY OF NORTH CAROLINA

and

THE RESEARCH LABORATORIES OF ANTHROPOLOGY

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA

Box 561

Chapel Hill