Clayton Shuler

Florence Kidder Memorial Scholarship

2/13/2025

 (Berry)

Located on the banks of the Tuckasegee, just a few miles between Bryson City and the Cherokee Reservation, lie remnants of an ancient capital that dates back to almost 10,000 years ago. Kituwa, now mostly farmland with a single small mound, was once the political and cultural heartland of the Cherokee. The town hosted ceremonies, gatherings, and decision-making for surrounding villages. Kituwa is now preserved and safely in Cherokee possession, but the battle for the land has been an ongoing struggle spanning centuries.

Kituwa, one of seven mother towns controlled by the Cherokee Tribe, is considered the most important. Archaeologists date Kituwa back millennia, and the Cherokee consider it to be their first town established (DNCR NC 1). The town was a religious capital for all surrounding Cherokee towns and villages. Its approximately twenty-foot ceremonial mound set it apart from neighboring villages, which was built for their burial grounds for what experts estimate could hold thousands of Cherokee people, and their "great council fire." This fire was said to be eternally lit, and members from other villages would travel to get embers for their own fires. The mound also housed a townhouse for Grand Councils, celebrations, and wartime planning" (Kays

11). For generations, Kituwa was the Cherokee's central hub, until colonialism stripped it from them and razed the land for its natural resources.

In 1758, the British initiated the Anglo-Cherokee War over land and trade disputes. In 1761, British general James Grant led an attack on Kituwa and destroyed it (Hamilton). The U.S. government officially took the land in 1883, but relations between the two governments later improved, and the site was added to the National Register of Historic Place (National Park Service). In 1996, the EBCI bought back Kituwa. Unfortunately, most of the land had been over-farmed, and the once towering twenty foot ceremonial mound had been shaved down to a fraction of what it had once been, now standing at only five feet. Despite this, the Tribe conducted archeological searches and found artifacts and burials significant to the history of the Cherokee people. This made the tribe decide to preserve the land as it is, using it once again as a place to hold cultural ceremonies and gatherings. However, in 2010, almost 130 years after the land was first taken, Kituwa was threatened again.

In 2010, Duke Energy announced that it would be building a $52 million substation on the Kituwa land. Both Swain County and the Cherokee Tribe opposed this, with the Cherokee Tribe putting out a official statement, stating their intent to, "... protect all of Kituwah from further desecration and degradation by human agency in order to preserve the integrity of the most important site for the origination and continuation of Cherokee culture, heritage, history and identity" (Chavez). With this statement, a 90-day pause on the start of construction, local protests, and the Utilities Commission denying Duke its ability to override local laws, Duke decided to change locations to an approved land on Swain (Chavez). After this close call, the Cherokee Tribe knew they had to secure Kituwa land once and for all.

In 2021, the Cherokee Tribe submitted a request to convert the Kituwa land into their sovereign territory, giving their claim to the land more permanent legal standing. This request was approved, allowing Kituwa's land to be protected and preserved. In response, Chief Richard Sneed stated, "This land will never again be taken from our people" (Kays). An old Cherokee legend says that Kituwa was prophesied to be stolen, and then regained (SmithsonianNMAI), and now that Kituwa has been fully reinstated into the Cherokee's peoples possession, the prophecy has finally come full circle.

Today, Kituwa is used as a place to gather, to perform ceremonies, and to reconnect with nature. The Kituwa land is extremely important to the Cherokee and deserves to be preserved as it symbolizes their history. It is not only a testament to the Tribe's persistence and perseverance over the centuries but also a powerful reminder of how deeply land is tied to heritage, with one Cherokee writer expressing, "...keeping your mind on where you come from, it's real important…it anchors you back to the good things" (Kays).

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