

Institutional Database of Staff Publications Tennessee Division of Archaeology

Title: Middle Tennessee Archeology and the Enigma of the George Woods.
Year: 2010
Name(s): Michael C. Moore, Kevin E. Smith and Stephen T. Rogers
Source: *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 69(4):320-329.

MIDDLE TENNESSEE ARCHEOLOGY AND THE ENIGMA OF THE GEORGE WOODS

BY MICHAEL C. MOORE, KEVIN E.
SMITH, AND STEPHEN T. ROGERS

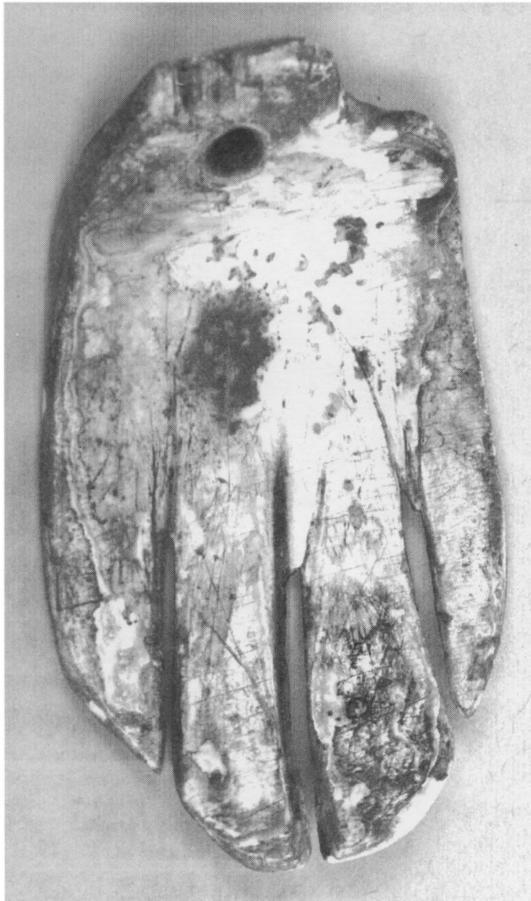
Antiquarian references to the rich heritage of prehistoric Native American sites in Middle Tennessee can be found in the early nineteenth century works of Rush Nutt and Judge John Haywood.¹ However, results of nineteenth century archaeological explorations at such sites were not published until decades later through the works of Gerard Troost, E. O. Dunning, Joseph Jones, Frederic Ward Putnam, William M. Clark, and Gates P. Thruston.² Most of these gentlemen scholars were well-educated and/or wealthy local residents with backgrounds in other professions, and would be considered avocational archaeologists by modern standards.

Frederic Ward Putnam represents an exception to this characterization. Putnam was the curator of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. He traveled to Nashville in late August 1877 to attend the annual American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) meeting. Upon completion of the meeting, he stayed in the Nashville area for most of September 1877 to conduct excavations at

five major archaeological sites in Davidson and Wilson counties.³

Putnam hired a local tailor and railroad construction contractor named Edwin Curtiss (1830-1880) as his chief foreman for this work. Curtiss was originally from Tompkins County, New York, and had served as a Union army officer during the Civil War. Curtiss had been stationed in Nashville, and after the war settled in Nashville with his family. Before returning to Harvard, Putnam retained the services of Curtiss to continue collecting artifacts for the Peabody Museum. Curtiss visited at least thirty-six archaeological sites across Middle Tennessee before his untimely death in December 1880.⁴

Both Putnam and Curtiss are known to modern archaeologists through publication of the 1877 Nashville explorations.⁵ Recent trips to the Harvard University Archives and Peabody Museum to research the Curtiss excavations discovered the name George Woods associated with the museum-sponsored work as well.⁶ An intriguing side-story emerged as the authors looked more closely at the role this previously unknown



George Woods, a Nashville African American, developed professional relationships with two of the most prominent archaeologists of his day and one of the most prestigious colleges in the country. Among Woods's finds was this shell carving from the Oscar Noel Farm site. (Thruston Collection, Tennessee State Museum)

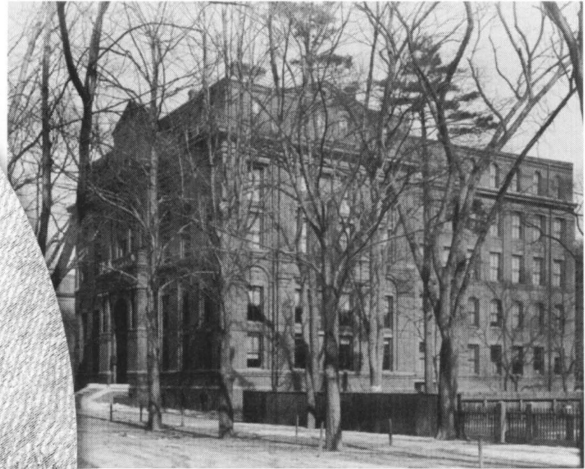
individual played in the Middle Tennessee expeditions. What made the story of George Woods so interesting was not that he was an African American, but rather he was a local working-class African American who developed a professional relationship with one of the most prominent scientists (Putnam) and prestigious colleges (Harvard) in the

country. This rapport has been documented through a series of letters between Curtiss and Putnam as well as Woods and Putnam.

Archival research for George Woods revealed limited details about his early background. According to the available census data, Woods was born in March 1842 in the state of Tennessee.⁷ His death certificate, however, lists Kentucky as his home state.⁸ Woods had a younger brother named Joe who also lived in Nashville. George was twice married, first at age thirty-nine to Lizzie Thompson on August 31, 1881, and again at age fifty-two to Annie Perry on May 7, 1894.⁹ Circumstances surrounding the end of his first marriage are unknown. The 1900 census lists one daughter, Mary, as twenty years old.¹⁰ A granddaughter Mabeleen, age five, is listed in the 1910 census.¹¹

The unlikely archaeological chronicle of George Woods begins in 1878 when he and his brother Joe were hired as field laborers by Edwin Curtiss to assist in the Peabody Museum-sponsored excavations. Curtiss kept modest field notes and wrote detailed letters to Putnam on a fairly regular basis. Curtiss undoubtedly hired a number of field hands to assist with his work, but George and Joe are the only two people mentioned by name in Curtiss's correspondence with Putnam between 1877 and 1880.¹²

The skill and dedication shown by the Woods brothers quickly gained the respect of Curtiss, a tough character with a stubborn streak. The archaeological work conducted by Curtiss generally focused upon Middle Tennessee until the fall of 1879, when he



Frederic Ward Putnam, curator of the Peabody Museum at Harvard, conducted excavations in Middle Tennessee in 1877. He hired George Woods to work for him on sites in the 1880s as well. (Courtesy of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University)

traveled to Arkansas and spent over four months, November 1879 to March 1880, excavating sites along the St. Francis River.¹³ He sent for George and Joe Woods within a week or so of using the local Arkansas labor, noting that “white labour . . . is not worth feeding and the niggers here are not much better trifling set and I can get two old hands that have been with me for two years in Nashville and do more with them than I can with 5 of those here and be sure of them every day.”¹⁴ Curtiss did not conduct any additional archaeological explorations, at least in Tennessee, after returning from

Arkansas. His sudden death on December 6, 1880, was a personal blow to Putnam, and left the Peabody Museum without a source for artifacts from Middle Tennessee.¹⁵

George Woods’s relationship with the Peabody Museum developed an interesting twist in June 1881 when he wrote to Frederic Putnam asking for work:

Dear Sir Have you any-one in the Historical Department of Cumberland Valey or State of Tenn. to fill the place of Mr. E. Curtis. If so would be pleased to know who he is so I can apply to

him for a place you know Brother Joe and my self was with Mr. Curtis about two years. The last trip was Ark from which place Brother Joe & my self sent you the 9 pices of potery. With my experence, I am confident that I can do you good service {on} the gentleman that is appointed by you. If you have not all-ready selected some one –would be pleased to give you a gentlemans name that I think would give entire satisfaction If he would undertake the Business. Would be pleased to hear from you at your earliest convinence¹⁶

Putnam obviously responded to this letter, and initiated a sporadic relationship that lasted until December 1884.

Perhaps a word about Woods's ability to read and write is appropriate at this time. Eleven pieces of correspondence from George Woods were found in the Harvard University Archives. Some of this correspondence was written for Woods by another person, but the remainder was penned by his own hand. The fact that George could read and write is interesting to note, although when and where he learned these skills is unknown. He wrote phonetically in a scratchy style that was often very hard to read.

Frederic Putnam returned to Tennessee in late May and early June 1882 to excavate two sites in northern Williamson County.¹⁷ The majority of Putnam's time was spent digging stone-box graves on the farm of Dr. W. H. Jarman, known today as the location of the Brentwood Library.¹⁸ Putnam

then moved several miles east for a limited inspection of the platform mound on the John Owen Hunt farm, in what is now the Chenoweth subdivision near the intersection of Concord Road and Edmondson Pike. Putnam hired George Woods to be his foreman for these explorations. Upon his return to Harvard, Putnam arranged for Woods to continue collecting artifacts for the Peabody Museum.

From the correspondence in the Harvard University Archives, we know the work performed by Woods on behalf of the Peabody Museum was irregular and generally limited by poor health. Woods returned to the Jarman Farm site in December 1882 for an excavation that was cut short by illness.¹⁹ He managed to dig nine stone-box graves south of the Jarman house before stopping, likely from the same cemetery worked by Putnam earlier that year. Woods left the recovered grave artifacts at the Jarman house following the December 1882 work, but returned in May 1883 to get "thos spesmints that I laft thir in Decbur" and ship them to the Peabody Museum.²⁰

Apparently a year passed before Woods again corresponded with Putnam.²¹ Woods's letter dated May 27, 1884, stated his regrets for not being able to work more for the Peabody Museum the previous eighteen months. Another letter dated July 15, 1884, mentioned a site he had in mind to explore, but that he would have to wait until crops were removed before beginning work.²² Unfortunately, he did not provide any information or clues regarding the site in question.

George Woods's last letter of December 19, 1884, briefly discussed work conducted on the farm of Oscar Noel.²³ Woods dug at least eleven stone-box graves from this location and shipped the recovered artifacts to the Peabody Museum. Whether or not the Noel farm is the site mentioned in George's letter of July 15, 1884, remains an open question. This locale is, however, best known to modern researchers as the Noel Cemetery featured in the classic work of Gates P. Thruston.²⁴ Many of Thruston's artifacts from this site area are on display in the Tennessee State Museum in Nashville.

The relationship between George Woods and the Peabody Museum ended with this December 19, 1884, letter. Interestingly, this break was not the end of Woods's archaeological career, as Gates P. Thruston later employed him to continue digging archaeological sites in the Nashville area.²⁵ This connection started sometime after 1885, but definitely before January 1890, suggesting that Woods's health had significantly improved by this time. Specific Nashville sites that Woods dug for Thruston include the Noel Farm and Judge W. F. Cooper's farm.

Several artifacts known to be recovered by Woods are on display at the Tennessee

State Museum as part of the Thruston collection. These items comprise an inscribed stone and a marine shell pendant (described as a "fork" by Thruston). An additional artifact found by George Woods, held at the Tennessee State Museum but not currently on display, consists of a catlinite pipe from the Noel Farm. Merely a few inscriptions include statements such as the following:

An inscribed stone of an interesting character was recently found by George Wood [sic], a colored man, while "digging for pots" in the large aboriginal cemetery on the Noel farm, near Nashville.²⁶

...and has really invented an aboriginal fork of considerable promise (Fig. 222). This unique implement, carefully carved from the side of a conch shell... was discovered in a stone grave by one of our men (George Wood), in exploring, under our direction, the ancient burial grounds on Judge W.F. Cooper's farm, on the bank of the Cumberland River, a few miles above Nashville.²⁷ ... b r o -
ken pipe illustrated in Fig. 99...carved in bright red catlinite from the pipe stone ledge of Western Minnesota...was found in exploring the stone grave cemetery of the Noel Farm near Nashville...

Woods corresponded with Putnam in regard to his explorations. He would collect artifacts for Harvard and ship them to the Peabody Museum. Woods wrote in a scratchy style that is often hard to read. (April 15, 1883, letter, 79-4B; 80-20; UAV.677.38, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University

J. - Look at

high for some family

But I am a Part to

get cop in fair air

I will - like to see

you say match of

high - have I want

an a half in - diffin

With some so that I

can't let boy

cannot thing to

you be from a little

see. I had a bit

to think that I

have you sat with

Father but as soon as

son get my thing

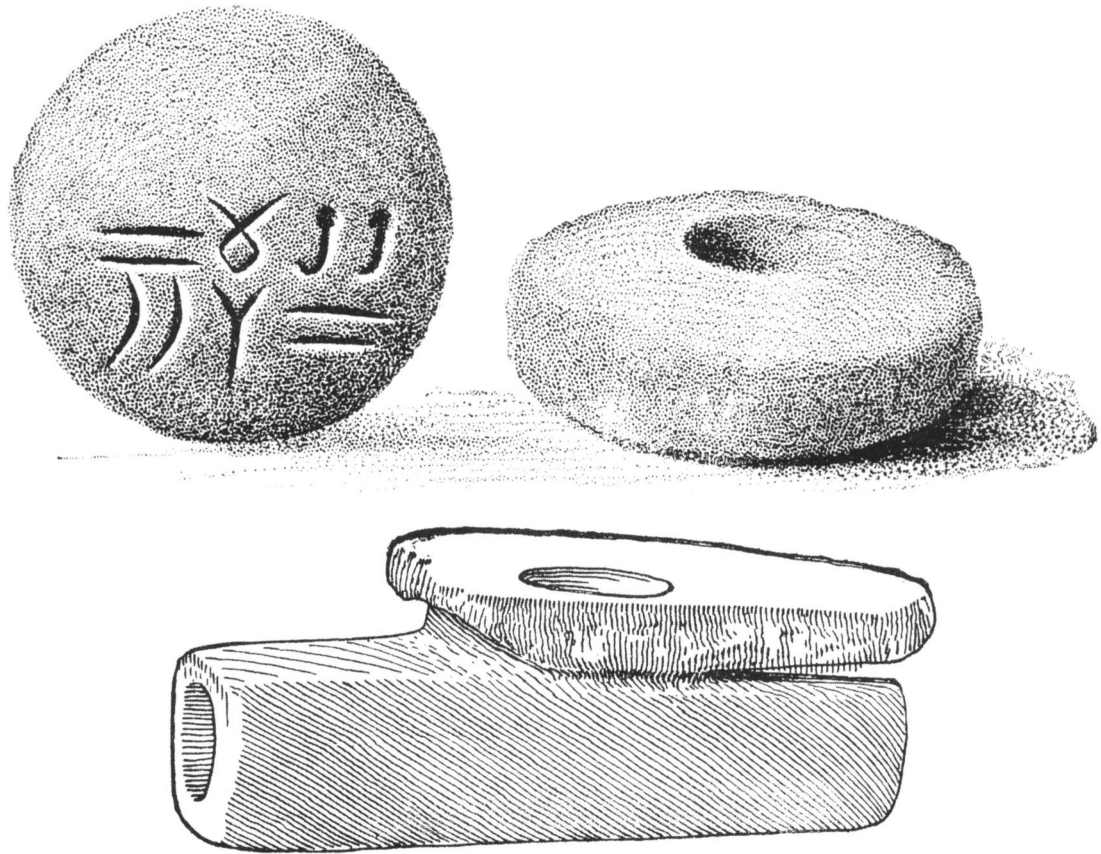
I will start them

to the field a

game I like to

get some arms to

so am I what I



Woods worked for Gates Thruston at the Oscar Noel farm near Nashville. Among the artifacts found were an inscribed stone that Thruston wrote "was recently found by George Wood [sic]" and a "bright red catlinite pipe... from George Wood, one of our employees." (Drawings from *The Antiquities of Tennessee and Adjacent States*, 1890)

we obtained it from George Wood [sic], one of our employees, on the day he discovered it.²⁸

Following the Peabody Museum work, Woods was also employed as a blacksmith, railroad porter, wage laborer, plasterer, and quarry laborer.²⁹ Woods died September 28, 1912, at the age of seventy in Nashville Central Hospital.³⁰ He had been a long

time sufferer of asthma. Woods was buried in Nashville's Greenwood Cemetery, an African American cemetery established in 1888, on September 30, 1912.³¹

Woods's occupation at the time of his death was listed as laborer. This occupation suggests a simple and mundane life with essentially no opportunity for an acknowledged contribution to society, and certainly not to science. However, George Woods

developed into an important character in Tennessee archaeology through his excavation skills for Edwin Curtiss and Frederic Putnam. Further, rather than remain in the background as just another laborer, he made direct contact with Frederic Putnam to continue the work of the Peabody Museum in Tennessee. George Woods and his brother Joe represent the earliest documented African American archaeological technicians in Tennessee. But perhaps of greater importance is that George Woods is now recognized as a key player in Harvard's nineteenth century archaeological explorations across Middle Tennessee.

The trust that Curtiss and Putnam placed in George Woods to dig archaeological sites begs the question of race relations in the postbellum South. Both Curtiss and Putnam obviously thought very highly of George, as expressed in their previously mentioned correspondence. Edwin Curtiss was a man that could not abide laziness, regardless of color, and particularly in regard to Arkansas residents. Curtiss might have been a somewhat abrasive man, and did use derogatory slang in several letters when referring to African Americans in general.³² But he never referred to George Woods or his brother Joe in an insulting manner. The Curtiss and Putnam letters suggest George Woods was respected, treated fairly as an employee, and collected the same wage as any other laborer.³⁴

George Woods's work experience came at a time when archaeological explorations across Tennessee were oriented toward the

discovery and excavation of prehistoric Native American graves through digging burial mounds and cemeteries. The primary objective, of course, was to acquire as many museum-quality artifacts as possible. Recovered artifacts were usually sent to the respective institution sponsoring the work, such as the Peabody Museum at Harvard, or Smithsonian Institution. Privately-funded ventures made their discoveries available for purchase by institutional representatives or local enthusiasts seeking to bolster their own collections. Academic analysis of the exposed skeletal elements was performed on occasion, although such work tended to focus on cranial measurements for comparative studies.³⁵

There is virtually nothing written about the contributions of other African American archaeological technicians working on early archaeological projects in Tennessee. Little documentation is available for the contributions of black laborers across the southeastern United States aside from the WPA-era Irene Mounds project near Savannah, Georgia. The Irene Mounds project, conducted between 1937 and 1940, represents a unique study of African Americans, mostly women, employed as field labor on an archaeological site.³⁶

There are a few tidbits of information available to jump-start future research in Middle Tennessee. We know that black laborers were employed during Frederic Putnam's 1877 work at Lindsley Estate-Sellars Farm in Wilson County.³⁷ The authors believe that most, if not all, mid-to-late nineteenth cen-

ture projects employed black laborers, as there would have been a significant pool of freed slaves looking for work that did not require many skills beyond a willingness to work. Early twentieth century projects, such as William E. Myer's 1920 work at the Gordontown and Fewkes sites, employed African American field hands as well.³⁸ Research to date has identified nine black males on Myer's 1920 field crew, ranging from fifteen to fifty-nine years old.³⁹ In addition, a 1949 article by Dr. Hugh Young, a Nashville physician, discusses his early twentieth century work at prehistoric Native American sites across Middle Tennessee. The article includes a photograph of Dr. Young with his workmen (defined in the caption as "three colored lads and four native White boys").⁴⁰ There is also a photograph of an African American man named Charley Hardeman, described by Dr. Young as "one of his faithful servants" who worked with him for twenty years.

To date, there is a substantial gap in our documentation of African American contributions to early Tennessee archaeology. Despite the lack of information currently available, the authors are confident that other African American technicians remain to be discovered within field records and correspondence from Tennessee archaeological collections held in repositories across the country.

The authors would like to thank the Harvard University Archives and Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology for their permission to publish the records and images used in this work and to Brad Kavan and the Tennessee State Museum for photographing artifacts associated with George Woods.

1. Rush Nutt, "Nutt's Trip to the Chickasaw Country," *The Journal of Mississippi History* IX(1) (1805), edited by Jesse D. Jennings; John Haywood, *The Natural and Aboriginal History of Tennessee up to the First Settlements therein by the White People in the year 1768* (1823).

2. Gerard Troost "An Account of Some Ancient Indian Remains in Tennessee," *Transactions of the American Ethnological Society* I (1845) :355-365; E. O. Dunning "Account of Antiquities in Tennessee," *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution for the Year 1870* (1872): 376-380, Washington, D.C.; Joseph Jones "Explorations of the Aboriginal Remains of Tennessee," *Smithsonian Contribution to Knowledge* 22(259) (1876):1-171, Washington, D.C.; Frederic Ward Putnam "Archaeological Explorations in Tennessee," *11th Annual Report, Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology* 2(2) (1878):305-360; William M. Clark "Antiquities of Tennessee," *Annual Report of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution for the Year 1877* (1878): 269-276, Washington, D.C.; Gates P. Thruston, *The Antiquities of Tennessee and Adjacent States*, (Cincinnati, 1890). Thruston dedicated his report "to the officers and members of the Tennessee Historical Society" for "their encouraging words first suggested its publication." (iii)

3. Putnam, "Archaeological Explorations in Tennessee," 305-360.

4. Michael C. Moore and Kevin E. Smith, *Archaeological Expeditions of the Peabody Museum in Middle Tennessee, 1877-1884*, Tennessee Division of Archaeology Research Series 16 (2009).

5. Putnam, "Archaeological Explorations in Tennessee," 305-360.

6. Moore and Smith, *Archaeological Expeditions of the Peabody Museum in Middle Tennessee, 1877-1884*.

7. Davidson County, Tennessee 1880 Census, p. 242; Davidson County, Tennessee 1900 Census, ED 107, Sheet 1, Line 33; Davidson County, Tennessee 1910 Census, ED 60, Sheet 6B.

8. Death Certificates 1908-1912, Tennessee State Library and Archives Microfilm, Certificate Number 13899.

9. Davidson County, Tennessee Marriage Certificates, Nashville Local History Index, Book 7, Page 232; Davidson County, Tennessee Marriage Certificates, Nashville Local History Index Book 10, Page 383. A slight discrepancy exists for the actual year of marriage for George and Eliza Wood. The 1880 census lists George and Eliza as married, but the marriage certificate states August 1881.
10. Davidson County, Tennessee 1900 Census.
11. Ibid.
12. He noted in 1880, for example, that “two of my old hands...those that have been with me for two years...went out and said they were going to make you a present of what the[y] found you individually...the boys are delighted there names are Joe Woods and George Woods.” Edwin Curtiss to F. W. Putnam, 2 February 1880, Peabody Museum Accession File 79-4B.
13. Robert C. Mainfort and Sarah R. Demb, “Edwin Curtiss’ Archaeological Explorations Along the St. Francis River, Northeast Arkansas, 1879-1880,” *The Arkansas Archeologist* 41 (2001):1-27.
14. Edwin Curtiss to F. W. Putnam, undated narrative between 31 October and 13 November, 1879, Peabody Museum Accession File 80-20.
15. Carrie Curtiss to F. W. Putnam, 18 January 1881, Harvard University Archives (UAV.677.38)
16. George Woods to F. W. Putnam, 20 June 1881, Harvard University Archives (UAV.677.38).
17. Frederic Ward Putnam, Tennessee Notes, Explorations by F. W. Putnam, Peabody Museum Accession File 82-35E, Folder #2.
18. Michael C. Moore, *The Brentwood Library Site: A Mississippian Town on the Little Harpeth River, Williamson County, Tennessee*, Tennessee Division of Archaeology, Research Series 15 (2005).
19. George Woods to F. W. Putnam, 15 April 1883, Harvard University Archives (UAV.677.38).
20. George Woods to F. W. Putnam, 10 May 1883, Harvard University Archives (UAV.677.38).
21. George Woods to F. W. Putnam, 27 May 1884, Harvard University Archives (UAV.677.38).
22. George Woods to F. W. Putnam, 15 July 1884, Harvard University Archives (UAV.677.38).
23. George Woods to F. W. Putnam, 19 December 1884, Harvard University Archives (UAV.677.38).
24. Gates P. Thruston, *The Antiquities of Tennessee and Adjacent States*.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid, 89-90.
27. Ibid, 314.
28. Ibid, 199.
29. Nashville City Directories, 1878-1912, Tennessee State Library and Archives.
30. Death Certificates 1908-1912.
31. Greenwood Cemetery Record of Interments, Interment No. 8654.
32. Edwin Curtiss to F. W. Putnam, undated narrative between 31 October and 13 November 1879.
33. Edwin Curtiss to F. W. Putnam, 1 June 1879, Peabody Museum Accession File 79-4A.
34. Edwin Curtiss to F. W. Putnam, 7 December 1878, Peabody Museum Accession File 79-4A.
35. Joseph Jones, “Explorations of the Aboriginal Remains of Tennessee;” Lucien Carr, “Observations on the Crania, *Eleventh Annual Report of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology* (1878).
36. Gail Whalen, Elusive Women of Irene: The WPA Excavation of Irene Mound (unknown date), *The Women of the Irene Mound*, <http://www.sip.armstrong.edu/Irene/essay.html>, last accessed
37. Moore and Smith, *Archaeological Expeditions of the Peabody Museum in Middle Tennessee, 1877-1884*.
38. William E. Myer, “Two Prehistoric Villages in Middle Tennessee, *Forty-second Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (1928).
39. Cheatham County, Tennessee 1920 census; Davidson County, Tennessee 1920 and 1930 Census; Williamson County, Tennessee 1920 and 1930 census.
40. T. Hugh Young, “A Study of Stone Graves of Middle Tennessee,” *Journal of Illinois State Archaeological Society* 6 (1949):7-12.