

ARTICLE

# Anchoring Sovereignty in Space: Documenting Places of Wichita Community Building in the Twentieth Century

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## Abstract

The Wichita and Affiliated Tribes have a long history of occupation in what is now known as Oklahoma. This includes evidence of habitations along Camp Creek and Sugar Creek near Anadarko in Caddo County. Here Wichita peoples camped, built grass houses and arbors, and held social gatherings leading up to and following the passing of the General Allotment Act in 1887. After allotment, communal camp and dance grounds were especially important focal points for community building. These places, such as the ichaskhah camp and dance ground discussed in this article, are critical to understanding the multigenerational connections between ancestral and living Wichita peoples. This history is also important to the community today. However, archaeological research of the Allotment period is exceptionally rare in this region. By using collaborative and Indigenous archaeological methodologies, this work documents the complexities of these places, challenging traditional assumptions of allotment-era cultural loss and assimilation.

## Resumen

Las tribus afiliadas con el grupo Wichita poseen una larga historia de ocupación en Oklahoma. Esta incluye evidencia de habitación antes y después del contacto con Europeos en Camp Creek y Sugar Creek cerca de Anadarko, Condado de Caddo. En este lugar los Wichita acamparon, construyeron casas y cenadores de paja, y celebraron eventos sociales alrededor del paso del General Allotment Act en 1887. Después del paso de esta ley, los lugares de campamento y danza comunales fueron puntos focales e importantes para mantener el sentido de comunidad. Estos lugares, por ejemplo el campamento y lugar de danza ichaskhah, discutido en este artículo, son esenciales para comprender las conexiones multi-generacionales entre los ancestros Wichita y sus descendientes. Esta historia también es importante para la comunidad Wichita de hoy. Sin embargo, la arqueología del período de Allotment es muy escasa en esta región. Este artículo documenta una colaboración con poblaciones Indígenas en la cual se demuestran las complejidades de estos lugares, y se cuestionan las ideas tradicionales de asimilación y pérdida cultural relacionados con el período de allotment.

**Keywords:** Wichita and Affiliated Tribes; Allotment period; Oklahoma; community-based research; Indigenous archaeology

**Palabras clave:** Wichita y Tribus Afiliadas; período de Allotment; Oklahoma; investigación comunitaria; arqueología Indígena

For at least the past 30 years, archaeologists working in North America have been refining the theoretical models used to characterize intercultural entanglements between Indigenous peoples and colonizers. There now exists a growing body of literature on the strategies that Native nations used to resist, adapt to, and appropriate Euro-American goods, culture, and practices in a variety of contexts (for a recent overview, see Panich and Gonzalez 2021). This research has resulted in the development of archaeological theory and methods that attempt to understand Indigenous responses to settler colonialism through time. Although a robust body of literature exists for earlier colonial periods, there are relatively

fewer archaeologists working in more recent time periods. Extending our theoretical understanding of Indigenous responses to colonization into the twentieth century allows us to consider the broader historical impacts of US legislative policies while also acknowledging the ways that Indigenous people continue to live today with the policies and actions of colonists. This is especially true for periods of history, such as the Allotment period, that are traditionally told from the perspective of US legislative policy instead of by those who were subjected to it.

The General Allotment (or Dawes) Act was passed by Congress in 1887. It mandated that Tribal lands be divided into parcels with individual Tribal members getting 160 acres; any remaining lands that were once under Tribal control were then to be opened for sale to non-Natives. The Curtis Act (1898) extended the General Allotment Act to those Tribes living in what was then known as “Indian Territory” before Oklahoma became a state. As a result, more than 90 million acres were taken from Native nations by the US government between 1887 and 1934 (Zaferatos 2015). These lands, once communally held, were separated into a patchwork of Native and non-Native holdings. The primary goal of these legislative actions was to break down Native communities into smaller family units by establishing individual land ownership. In this way, the government used land-based policies to undermine Tribal sovereignty by attempting to break up not only Indigenous claims to land but also cultural traditions and systems of governance based on community-level decision-making. Allotment was one of many assimilation programs and policies introduced by the US government. Another such policy was the Code of Indian Offenses (passed in 1883 and not truly ended until 1978), which sought to eliminate the sovereignty of Native nations by restricting traditional religious and cultural ceremonies, social gatherings, dances, medicine, funeral practices, and gift-giving ceremonies; by breaking kinship ties; and by forcing Native American communities to adopt a more European-American lifestyle, often with the goal of elevating non-Native settlers at the expense of Native peoples (Bacon and Norton 2019:306; Justice and O’Brien 2021:xii).

For the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes, whose ancestral homelands and hunting grounds once spanned across the southern Plains from Kansas to Texas and New Mexico to Arkansas, the Allotment period marks an era of devastating upheaval leading to intergenerational trauma that is still felt today (for discussion of this in other communities, see Schneider and Hayes 2020:130–131). The Wichita refer to this period as the “Days of Darkness.” However, they do not identify themselves as victims of this turbulent history. They and many other Native nations fought government policies officially in federal courts while finding creative ways to circumvent these policies so they could continue to gather together, practice important ceremonies, and preserve their culture. The Wichita point to the time after 1934 as a “New Beginning” for their people, and today the “descendants of the Wichita, Waco, Tawakoni, Taovaya and Kichai people survive as a group perhaps because of their shared memories of the past as well as common experiences of the present and their faith in the future” (Wichita and Affiliated Tribes 2022).

One of the many ways that the Wichita people resisted settler-colonial assimilation efforts was by establishing community gathering spaces on their allotted lands. These places operated beyond the influences of non-Native agencies and functioned as important centers where they could continue their community-building practices. The area near Camp Creek, north of Anadarko, Oklahoma, for example, was a vital place for Wichita social gatherings. Oral histories indicate there were several different camps in the vicinity of Camp Creek from the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. Shirley Davilla (personal communication 2021) remembers that the Wichita camped in this area “for a long time.” The latest iteration of the Camp Creek camp and dance ground, the ichaskhah site (34CD826), was used from the 1930s until the early 1960s and was a center for Wichita social life.<sup>1</sup> There Tribal members camped and gathered to share meals, play games, dance, and sing traditional songs. It was also the location for large-scale gatherings at holidays, the place to host visitors from other Tribes, and where the Wichita came together for group decision-making. Although some people only visited the ichaskhah site for specific events, to celebrate holidays, or just for a day to socialize, many families set up semipermanent camps near the dance ground where they would live for days, weeks, or even months at a time.

The significance of ichaskhah and other gathering places for the Wichita cannot be overstated. As coauthor of this article Gary McAdams (personal communication 2023) explained, “What we retain of

our culture and traditions we owe to those who passed before us, those Camp Creek people. Our songs and dances, the way we play the handgame and our foodways; they carried them on and passed them to us. They should not be forgotten by our people.” Despite the importance of these places to the Wichita, archaeological investigations of the Allotment period are exceptionally rare in Oklahoma. Indeed, although the Wichita themselves certainly recognize their long history of occupation and hegemony in the southern Plains, most academic and compliance research on Wichita archaeology has centered on pre-Allotment history (e.g., Drass, Perkins, and Vehik 2018; Drass, Vehik, et al. 2018; Perkins et al. 2016; Trabert 2019; Vehik et al. 2010). “It seems like we know more about a long time ago than we do about 100 years ago,” explains McAdams (personal communication 2019). Overall few attempts have been made to understand the lives of the Wichita people in Oklahoma from an archaeological perspective after their removal to Anadarko (Perkins and Baugh 2008; Smith 1996). A similar research imbalance exists throughout many other regions of the United States (Kretzler 2022; Kretzler and Gonzalez 2021; Mitchell and Scheiber 2010).

We developed the Wichita Allotment Project in the fall of 2019 as a collaborative research effort between the University of Oklahoma and the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes to address community concerns related to documenting the physical remains of allotment life. This work follows Gonzalez and coauthors (2018:96) in documenting more recent histories to highlight the ways in which Indigenous communities resisted land-based assimilation efforts centered on the individualization and isolation of Tribal groups by creating their own community centers based on traditional systems of spatial, social, and political organization. By highlighting the decisions and actions of Native nations to circumvent these colonial political structures (as per Bacon and Norton 2019:302), our work subverts the dominant public narrative of the Allotment period that focuses on the policies of the federal government. This “sovereignty-driven research” (Gonzalez et al. 2018:92; Laluk 2021:2; Laluk et al. 2022; Welch 2018:268) greatly expands our knowledge of cultural resources from a time that is underrepresented in traditional American histories while contributing new archaeological perspectives to studies of the long-term effects of settler colonialism, place making, and Indigenous thriving. This article presents one example from our work, the ichaskhah gathering place, to show how allotments became refugia, how the actions of the Wichita in those places were forms of resistance, and finally how Tribal sovereignty is anchored in these spaces.

### Theoretical Framework

Archaeologists have repeatedly called for the reconceptualization of spatial and temporal boundaries of colonial entanglements to include long-standing Indigenous histories (Panich 2013:105; Rubertone 2012:274). Although it is becoming increasingly common for researchers to extend their study of colonialism into the more recent past, archaeologists continue to focus on early colonial encounters without linking these processes to the continued impacts of settler colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Gonzalez et al. 2018). Failure to do this, as Gonzalez and colleagues (2018:97) point out, “risks reifying the pernicious idea that indigenous history is marked by discontinuity, decline, and assimilation” and “perpetuates an approach that treats colonialism as a singular, past event rather than a force that continues to shape tribes’ contemporary reality.” Instead of conceptualizing colonialism as a tightly bracketed event, it is more appropriate to frame interactions between Indigenous communities and settler states as an ongoing process that requires a constantly evolving conversation (Rubertone 2012).

As others have discussed (e.g., Panich and Schneider 2015:49; Schneider and Hayes 2020:128) the dominant narrative held by the general public presents the colonial experience of Indigenous communities in North America through the lens of change, loss, tragedy, dependency, victimhood, and the destruction of Native cultures. Indigenous and collaborative archaeologies are attempting to mitigate this problematic public history in hopes that archaeology may serve instead to promote a narrative not just of survival but also of persistence, refusal, and active resistance (Acebo 2021; Cipolla et al. 2019:137; Ferris 2009:29–30; Gonzalez et al. 2018:96; Nelson 2020:226; Schneider 2015; Two Bears 2022; Vizenor 2008). For example, the framework of survivance, first developed by Vizenor (2008), has since been reframed by Acebo (2021) in his collaborative work with Indigenous community

members and researchers in southern California to focus instead on “thrivance.” He and his collaborators argued that archaeologists too often equate “survivance” with survival and low levels of resistance, when Native cultures so often continued to grow and “thrive,” despite a myriad of colonialist agendas working against them (Acebo 2021:478).

Thrivance provides a powerful reconceptualization and update in how archaeologists should view Indigenous sovereignty. It offers a more accurate framing of narratives of a community’s resistance, autonomy, political governance, and achievements from the past through to the present. This shift in perspective connects both with researchers outside archaeology (e.g., Baumann 2023) and with members of descendant communities, who also encourage archaeologists to avoid a focus on cultural loss. Schneider and Hayes (2020:133), for example, state that research focused on community engagement, relational ontologies, and sovereignty “stand[s] in opposition to the structures of settler colonialism, which erase contemporary Native presence, introduce irreconcilable ruptures between present and past, and are essential to a framework of archaeological objectivity in empirical observation.” The concept of thrivance encourages us to consider how Native American communities strategically incorporate and reimagine colonial policies, such as allotment, into their own cultural practices.

Archaeological narratives set within the framework of thrivance, therefore, must be understood from Indigenous worldviews and understandings of their own past, present, and future (Atalay 2019; Cipolla et al. 2019; Laluk et al. 2022; McNiven 2016; Zedeño 2008). For example, many Native nations have maintained their legal and intellectual sovereignty through their continued use of places on the landscape that predate colonization (Basso 1996; Bethke 2016; Colwell-Chanthaphonh et al. 2008; Laluk et al. 2022). Allotment and similar land-based assimilation policies, which fragmented, privatized, and/or transferred land to non-Native ownership, were created to break down Tribal sovereignty by fracturing these landscapes and the social structures they were based on. Allotment also left Indigenous communities with smaller amounts of often less-desirable lands, which limited their capacity for economic independence, community building, and self-governance and forced Indigenous people to live under direct US control and interference in their daily lives (Bacon and Norton 2019:326). As a result, these “homemaking” policies reinforced settler sovereignty at the expense of those communities whose land they colonized (Tuck and Yang 2012:5).

Although imposed forms of colonial rule, such as allotment, certainly did work to transform Indigenous communities by transforming their access to land, this “change” was often simultaneously grounded in Indigenous practices and decision-making (Bacon and Norton 2019:320). Collective use and ownership of Native lands were, as Justice and O’Brien (2021:xv) explain, intertwined with “social networks that were quite resilient in withstanding reformer policies of individualism and hierarchical patriarchy.” For those who were dispossessed of their land, the maintenance of these social structures was often achieved through the creative reimagining of culturally significant places in new locations where communities could continue to thrive (Bethke 2016). These places may not be just one single location within a community, but rather multiple places where communities gather to keep reimagining and adapting over time. These “places of refuge” are defined by Schneider (2015:696) as “familiar and unfamiliar places, such as villages and other landscape features, to which people return to evade and maintain physical separation from persecution. They do this through the maintenance and refashioning of social practices in relationship to these places as both meaningfully constituted by and constitutive of social identity.”

This article considers how *ichaskhah*, as a twentieth-century place of refuge, provided a safe space for the Wichita to gather and continue centuries-old community-building practices on their allotments. Here, their traditions, songs, dance, language, and culture thrived in direct opposition to federal policies.

### Wichita Places of Gathering

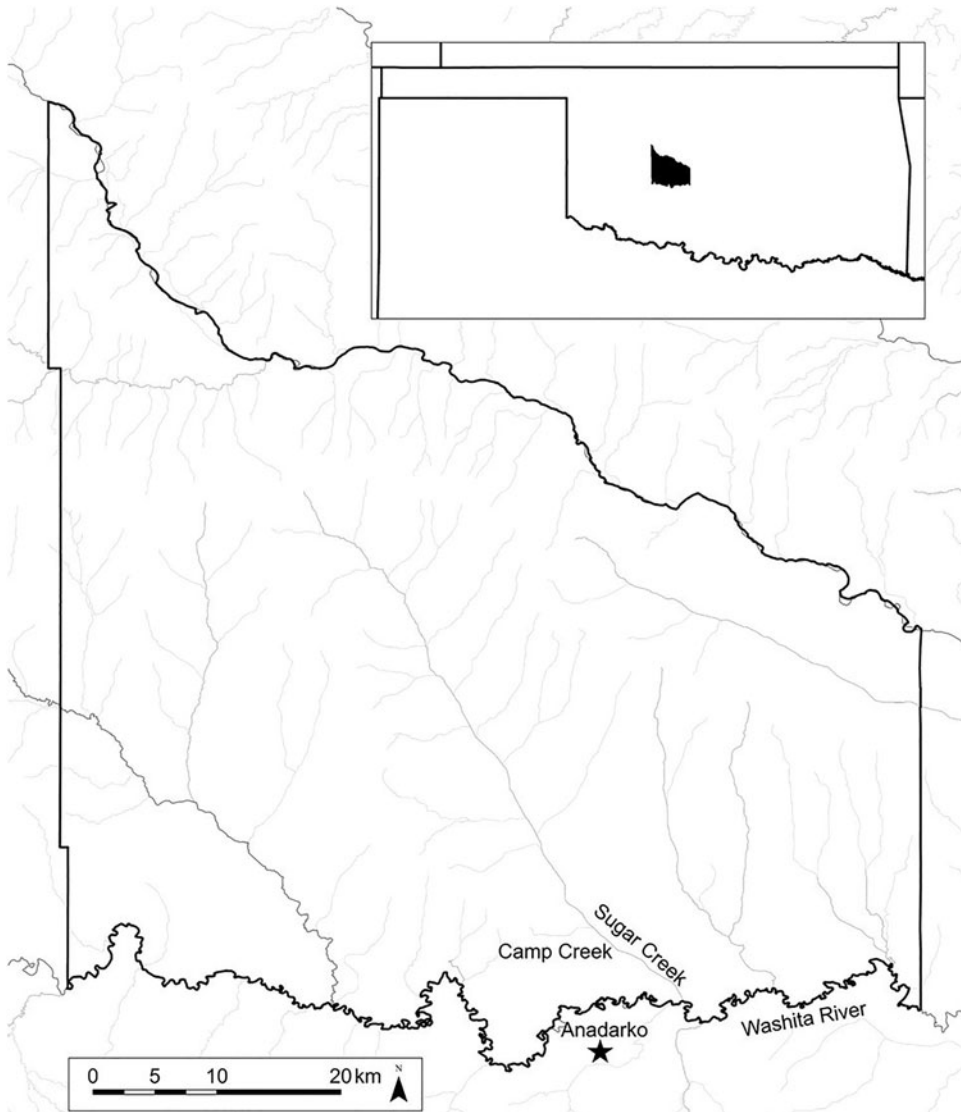
Recognition of how communal land systems and basic structures of pre-allotment village life continued into the Allotment period is critical to understanding how the Wichita people created, maintained, and adapted to ongoing settler colonialism. Our initial conversations with the Wichita community focused primarily on *ichaskhah*, but as we continued building relationships with community members, they

encouraged us to think beyond this site-specific approach to understand how ichaskhah was connected to a much longer history of Wichita social practices and place making. Through these conversations, we learned about other Allotment period gathering places, activities occurring at these places, and their broader importance to the Wichita. As we moved from a narrow focus to the larger network of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century archaeological sites on Wichita allotments, we broadened our research objectives to understand how ichaskhah was part of a larger multigenerational strategy of establishing places to gather—first in villages across their ancestral homelands and later in camps and dance grounds on private land outside direct federal oversight.

Before European contact, the Wichita lived in small scattered villages across the southern Plains for at least a thousand years. Then approximately 500 years ago, demographic shifts and social change led Wichita bands to coalesce into larger villages that were often fortified (Drass, Perkins, and Vehik 2018). After their contact with Europeans, the Wichita were able to strategically position their villages to take advantage of the growing trade market at key sites such as Bryson-Paddock (34KA5) and Deer Creek (34KA3) on the Arkansas River and, later, Longest (34JF1) on the Red River (Drass, Perkins, and Vehik 2018; Drass, Vehik, et al. 2018; Trabert 2019; Trabert and Bethke 2021). Dedicated spaces for gatherings, dances, ceremonies, singing, shared meals, games, and hosting visitors were important and common elements at these Wichita villages for millennia. In the story “The Deeds of After-Birth-Boy,” one such space is described: “The two villages were connected by a streetlike way, [and] the space that divided the two villages was a place where all sorts of games were played every evening. There were a good many young men and young women who amused themselves here by playing these games” (Dorsey 1904:88). These spaces were also used for dances and celebrations. Dorsey (1904:52) recounts that in one village, “there was a large elm tree at the edge of the village, where all the dances were had whenever the men came home from war.” Many of these practices integral to village life continued into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The Wichita have used the area north of the Washita River, particularly along Camp Creek and Sugar Creek, for social gatherings since at least the late 1800s (Figure 1). Anthropologist Karl Schmitt notes that several Wichita community members he talked to in the late 1940s mentioned the existence of a “consolidated village near the mouth of Sugar Creek” where dances and community gatherings were held around the late eighteenth century (Sam Noble Museum [SNM], Notes, Karl Schmitt, 1948–1951). Oral histories indicate there were several iterations of the camp and dance grounds in the vicinity of Camp Creek from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. Although little is known about the earliest camp and dance grounds, when Dorsey visited Camp Creek in 1901, he mentions that it had been in use for several years (Gary McAdams, personal communication 2021). Joe Wheeler told anthropologist William Bittle (SNM, T-288-2, William Bittle, 1967) that he was born in 1902 near Camp Creek at “the old camp when it first started Camp Creek, they call it. A little creek.” There is more known about the second iteration of the camp and dance ground—what those alive today remember their parents and grandparents calling the “Old Camp Creek.” Charlotte Johnson (personal communication 2021) remembers that this “earlier dance ground . . . was in use when my mom [born 1913] was a kid.”

According to Frank Miller (SNM, Notes, Karl Schmitt, 1948–1951; SNM, T-65, William Bittle, 1967), it was around 1932 when the “old grass house at Camp Creek” burned down, and it was around “1935 that they moved up on the hill to the present location.” This latest iteration of Camp Creek, ichaskhah, was used from this time until the early 1960s. Leading up to and following the disbandment of ichaskhah, others such as Rollin Stevenson (34CD845), Elva Mae Miller McAdams (34CD842), and Bill Campbell (34CD857) began to host dances and social events on nearby allotments until the early 1980s when a dance ground and community center were established at the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes’ Tribal Complex. Other groups in the area, such as the Caddo Nation and Kiowa Tribe of Oklahoma, also had their own gathering spaces that Wichita Tribal members would visit. The Rock Springs Church and Wichita Mission served as similar places for the community to gather. For the Wichita, therefore, the privatization of their lands in many ways had the opposite effect desired by the US government. Rather than isolating (the intended consequence of the Allotment Act), the Wichita used these places to maintain their community, continue their cultural traditions, and



**Figure 1.** Project area showing major waterways within the outline of the Wichita-Caddo-Delaware Reservation boundary.

reinforce their sovereignty. Allotments and the gathering spaces established on them became places of refuge for Wichita families.

### **Collaborative Archaeological Methods**

Archaeologists are well positioned to document the physical remains of places of refuge and the memories associated with them, both of which are needed to understand the complexities of why, how, and where thrivance, despite settler colonialism, occurs within Indigenous communities. However, to effectively research these histories, this work must be collaborative and originate from community need and interest (Laluk et al. 2022:671; Steeves 2020:5699). Collaborative archaeology starts by acknowledging what is important to descendant communities in the present, asking how archaeology can contribute to these goals, and incorporating Indigenous voices into the interpretation of the material record (Atalay 2019:515; Hanson et al. 2022; Laluk et al. 2022:674; Smith and Wobst 2005).

Our project developed because of the great interest among community members in documenting both the physical remains and memories of ichaskhah and similar twentieth-century gathering places

for future generations. As Gerald Collins (personal communication 2021) put it, “It’s good to document this stuff. . . . It helps us to remember who we were, who we are, hopefully, who we’re going to be.” We worked with the community and the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes Executive Committee to develop our overall research design. Through these conversations we decided to apply a multidisciplinary approach that combined (1) intensive, noncollection pedestrian survey, (2) high-precision mapping and digital documentation of finds, (3) remote-sensing technologies, (4) archival research, (5) oral histories from new interviews with community members, and (6) multiple forms of data management and information distribution (see Supplemental Text 1).

Through these combined methods we were able to “co-construct” (Nelson 2020:237) not only the physical attributes of these sites but also the history and emotional connection of these refugia to the community. This type of multidisciplinary approach integrating archaeological, historic, and ethnographic research has proven effective for better understanding the autonomy and internal dynamics that structured Native societies (Panich and Schneider 2015). It is the link between the physical remains, their history, their memory, and their continued meaning for the people who created them that produces a shared knowledge with, by, and for the community. Our data, collected via traditional archaeological methods, were interpreted through theory that, although in some cases was developed by Native scholars or draws on Indigenous voices, comes primarily from the work of non-Native academics. The words not quoted are ours. However, this project is the result of the ideas, memories, and priorities of the Wichita community members we spent time with and learned from.

### *Low-Impact Archaeological Methodology*

Using nondestructive methods to investigate their allotments was important to community members. With this in mind, we employed a suite of noninvasive, low-impact methods that involved no ground disturbance to sites while providing us with data to document their location, use, features, and histories. In this way we combined Tribal protocols with common archaeological methods to maximize information gained while minimizing the potential damage to cultural resources (Davies 2020; Gonzalez et al. 2018; Nelson 2020; Townsend et al. 2020). To document what was present on the ground we implemented an intensive, noncollection pedestrian survey (without shovel or auger testing). We did not remove any artifacts from properties and instead used a customized ESRI Survey123 database in combination with high-precision GNSS RTK mapping equipment (Emlid Reach RS2) to describe, photograph, and record the locations for objects, features, and structures observed in the field. Additional methods included terrestrial and aerial remote sensing, in-field photogrammetry, and possible targeted test excavations in the future.

### *Archival Research*

Our archaeological surveys drew on unpublished archival documents, primarily the Karl and Iva Schmitt Notes. Karl Schmitt was an anthropologist at the University of Oklahoma who worked in Anadarko in the late 1940s and early 1950s. He conducted both formal and informal interviews with Wichita Tribal members and even camped out at the ichaskhah site with his family. In addition to Schmitt’s notes, we consulted interviews with Wichita Tribal members conducted by William Bittle (OU Department of Anthropology) in the 1960s and by Gary McAdams in 2010. We also accessed photographs housed at archives and provided by community members, allotment records and maps, and historic aerial imagery.

### *Community Interviews*

This project had a unique resource: we could talk to people who were at these sites and who could remember not only the activities that occurred but also how they viewed their experiences there. Along with our archaeological surveys and consultation of archival documents, a critical component of reconstructing the layout and history of ichaskhah was recording insights from community members through a series of semistructured interviews that focused on intragenerational memories of family allotments and gathering places. All those we spoke to are Wichita Tribal members or descendants who were either residents or visitors to the Camp Creek area or are family members or direct

descendants of those residents or visitors. Participants were selected for interviews based on a systematically gathered peer recommendation or snowball sampling methodology (e.g., Davis and Ruddle 2010:891). Those who volunteered to be interviewed were financially compensated for their time. All interviews were conducted either in person or over the phone (if the interviewee no longer lived in the vicinity) by the authors using interview instruments approved by the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes Executive Committee.<sup>2</sup> Participants gave their consent for us to use their names and stories.

To date we have spoken with 22 individuals in one-on-one or small group interviews. During these conversations, elders suggested that a group visit to ichaskhah would be especially helpful for them to recall stories of this place. As part of our field research, we facilitated a visit for eight elders and their families. These oral histories from Wichita elders and their memories of ichaskhah as children or young adults have yielded a great deal of information critical to documenting ichaskhah. Their insights, along with information from past interviews, served as a basis for our surveys at the ichaskhah, allowing us to better understand the layout, organization, and use of the camp and dance ground and associated features; the activities that took place there; and their ongoing significance to the community. We used this information to identify, document, and interpret these archaeological sites and share our findings with those we spoke with in follow-up meetings.

### Archaeological Survey Results and Stories of Ichaskhah

Work at ichaskhah has been ongoing since the fall of 2020. This section summarizes our findings to date.

#### *Archaeological Surveys at Ichaskhah*

When we first visited the ichaskhah camp and dance ground, the site was covered in brush and trees; however, it was largely protected from disturbance because it was not used for cattle grazing or farming. During our surveys, we recorded extant surface features like the intact lower portion of the flagpole that is set in concrete, two standing posts from a wooden building, and scatters of surface artifacts such as metal sheeting from the community building's roof, metal barrels, glass bottles, and other artifacts that dated to the first half of the twentieth century when the site was occupied (Figure 2). We also used remote sensing to see whether we could identify subsurface features related to the site's use. We used ground-penetrating radar (GPR) to collect data from four 20 × 20 m grids that were set around the flagpole. We identified several high-amplitude clusters in the GPR data that appeared at nearly all depths and may correspond to postholes from an arbor around the dance arena, but no other identifiable features were noted (remote-sensing work is ongoing).

Even though our standard archaeological survey and site assessment yielded information related to the site's occupation period and general function, there was relatively little direct material evidence to indicate that this site was specifically a Wichita gathering place, dance arena, and camp. For example, artifacts, architecture, and other features recorded on twentieth-century "historic" sites may seem to be the same as those of their non-Native neighbors, making it appear that the Wichita have been erased from these places. However, the features and artifacts we documented in our archaeological surveys could be described in greater detail because community members shared their memories of ichaskhah. Each time we revisited ichaskhah, consulted the archives, or had new or follow-up conversations with elders, we were able to better understand how the site's layout and construction, objects and features, and the activities that took place there are Wichita and continue to be significant to the community. Together, these lines of data were able to capture the rich character of the site and how it linked to community thrivance as Wichita peoples gathered there to continue long-held traditions.

#### *Reconstructing the Layout of Ichaskhah*

Historic photographs show several prominent features of ichaskhah when it was in use, including the dance arena surrounded by an arbor made of willow branches with a flag pole set near its center (Figure 3). The flagpole was an important feature to match up across the years—it was photographed while ichaskhah was in use, Karl Schmitt mentioned it several times as the center of life at the dance ground, community members remember playing around it as children, and it still stands today for us



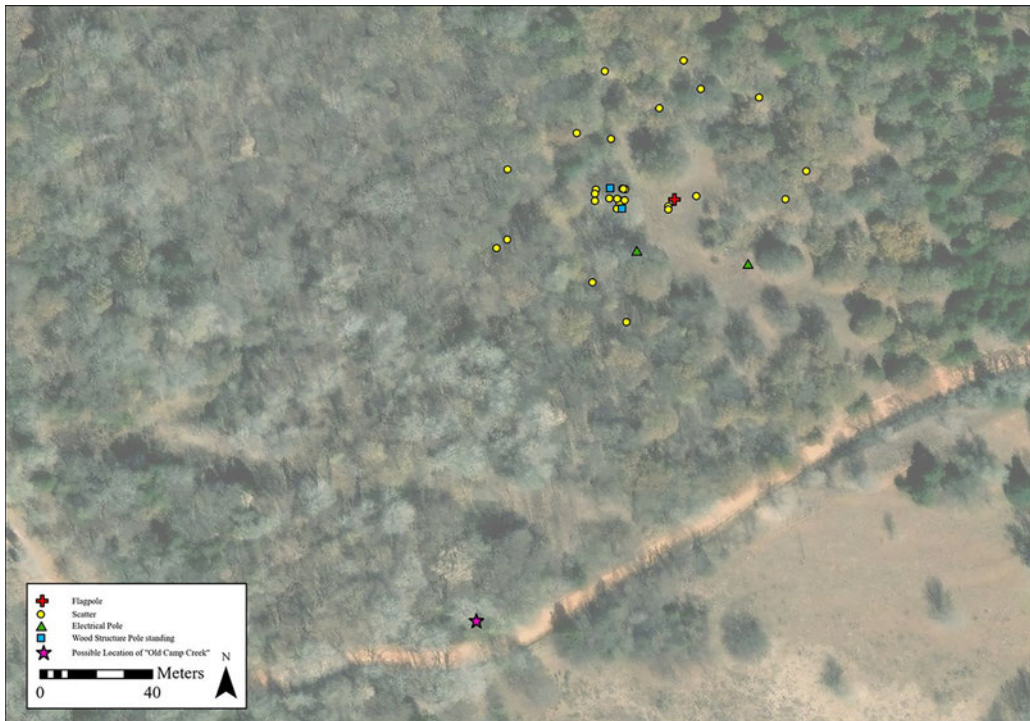


Figure 2. Location of major features recorded at ichaskhah (34CD826). (Color online)

to record (Figure 4). During our survey of the site, we observed letters written in the flagpole base, but it was difficult to make them out. Community members did not remember what was written on the base, but when we consulted Schmitt's notes we found that on July 19, 1942, he had written that the names of the three dance chiefs—A. [Albert] Lorents, G. [George] Ashley, and G. [George] Lamb—and of two Wichita chiefs B. [Burgess] and N. [Nuss] Stevenson were inscribed when the flag pole was erected. Schmitt also used the flagpole as a point of reference in his notes, such as this example of Rollin Stephenson giving the day's blessing on July 15, 1949: "Rollin Stephenson gave the blessing today. . . . Rollin took a grain or two of corn off the cob and went between the arbor table and the flagpole, faced west, held the kernels up into the air with hands outstretched. . . . George Lamb told me that they had a special song to be sung during the blessing rite—and that I would hear it during the doings at Camp Creek" (SNM, Notes, Karl Schmitt, 1948–1951).

Many of the individuals we interviewed remember playing games around the flagpole as children. However, children were not allowed to run in the dance ground or walk across it during dances because it was an area of prayer and people needed to respect those spaces (Gary McAdams, personal communication 2021).

Just west of the arbor, where we documented two standing posts, was a wooden building with a wood-burning stove that was used by visitors in inclement weather (Figure 5). According to Frank Miller (SNM, Notes, Karl Schmitt, 1948–1951), this structure was built in 1938 or 1940. Inside the building were benches along the walls, and each family had its own places to sit during events. As Sandra Wilson (personal communication 2022) explains, "I remember my grandma used to tell me, at every building that we ever were in whether it was Camp Creek or Elva Mae's or Bill Campbell's or the current dance building, she would always say our family always sits in the northeast corner, and so that's where we always sat. . . . She never did tell me why we did."

Once we learned more about the site when it was in use, we consulted historic aerial photographs from that period (Figure 6). We were able not only to see the wooden community building and better understand its size and orientation but also where roads and camping areas that the elders had



**Figure 3.** Photo of the twentieth-century ichaskhah dance ground while in use; note the flagpole inside the dance arena and the wooden structure on the right (Wichita Tribal History Center, date and photographer unknown).

described to us were located. Surrounding the dance ground and arbor were individual camps that families used while staying at the site. Some families would occupy the same camping area year after year, erecting large canvas tents for sleeping and storing their belongings. Cleta Ataddlety (personal communication 2021) describes what she remembers her family arbor and cooking area looking like: grandfather “always made a little cooking area under the arbor . . . just a little open fire, a little pit, and then you had a little . . . kind of like a grill and of course we had a kind of icebox.” We created a map of these camps with the help of Mrs. Davilla, who remembers the general location and names of family camps (Figure 7). Her daughter Mrs. Wilson and current resident of the site Lance Silverhorn helped refine the map. Using this information, we reviewed our documentation of the scatters of historic artifacts that surrounded the ichaskhah dance ground and were able to link several clusters to the locations of specific family camps (Figure 2).

To the south of the dance ground was a sandy area that many community members remember playing at when they were children. “There was an area down here, it was kind of, the dirt was like sand almost,” remembers Shirley Davilla (personal communication 2021), “and there were big trees there and they called it ‘the Ball Diamond.’” Lance Silverhorn (personal communication 2021) describes a similar landscape: “It was sand, real sandy and had huge trees there, and the kids did a lot of tree climbing. We had a lot of good games there.” This sandy area was known to have important plants

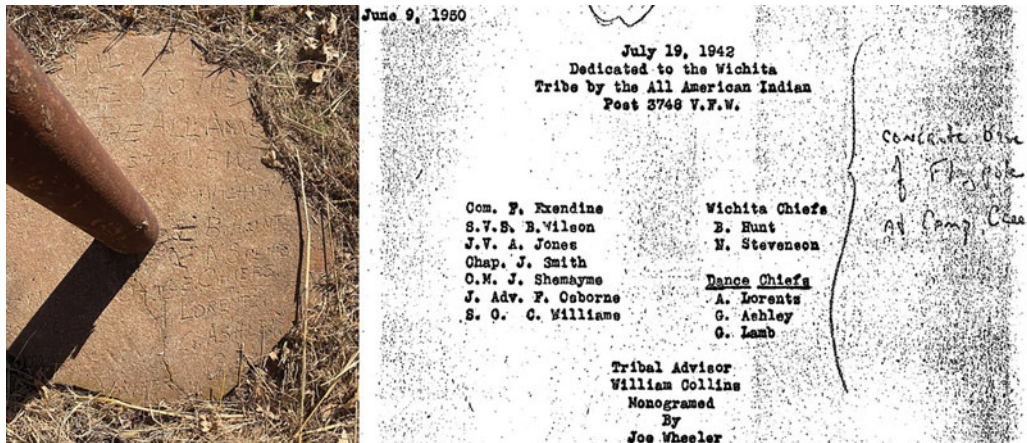


Figure 4. Image of the base of the flagpole at ichaskhah taken by Brandi Bethke 2020 (left). Karl Schmitt field notes from 1950 detailing the writing in concrete on the flagpole base (right). (Color online)



Figure 5. Wooden structure near the dance ground at ichaskhah (Wichita Tribal History Center, photo taken by Virgil Smith in the 1980s).

growing nearby that could be collected for medicines. It was also remembered as the possible approximate location of the Old Camp Creek (Lance Silverhorn, personal communication 2023). Although we were able to relocate this area through pedestrian survey and historic aerial imagery (Figures 2 and 6), no evidence of the camp and dance ground used before ichaskhah remained on the surface.

Community members indicate there are still more features in the area that we have not relocated using traditional field methods. These include an outhouse structure, the precise location of family



Figure 6. Aerial image taken of ichaskhah in 1937 (OK Historical Aerial Photos AE-Z5-68).

camps, a spring or creek located near the dance ground, the footprint of an older dance ground and grass house used in the early twentieth century, and a “gambling house” up the hill from the dance ground. Many of these features are in areas of heavy tree cover, making terrestrial pedestrian and geophysical survey difficult, or their possible locations are too large to realistically test using this method given time and budget constraints. Future work is planned to conduct small unmanned aircraft system (sUAS) remote sensing at ichaskhah and the surrounding area to identify these features that we have not yet been able to relocate.

### *Remembering Life at Ichaskhah*

Archaeological sites are more than just locations where human activities happened in the past. At ichaskhah we are able to work with the community to breathe life into this place. Their stories help ground this site within broader social and political processes, as Wichita peoples not only resisted federal restrictions on their culture but also persisted and thrived during difficult times.

Community members remember ichaskhah fondly as a place where they could gather for a wide range of activities to celebrate their culture and continue important practices. “It was just a time,” Gerald Collins (personal communication 2021) recounts, “for people . . . to do dances, and to congregate and share socially through our Tribal ways.” As Charlotte Johnson explained (personal communication 2021),

Well to me what a unique community of people they were. . . . It’s like the Tribe is almost one big, huge family; everybody knew everybody, everybody did things together, whatever was going on everyone was there, with their children and their old people. I just remember the closeness of Tribal life back then, that I think was so good. I guess that’s one of the main things that the government wanted to discourage and change. And I don’t know their great big reason for that, but to me, that’s what was special about Indian people, was just their closeness in community and family.

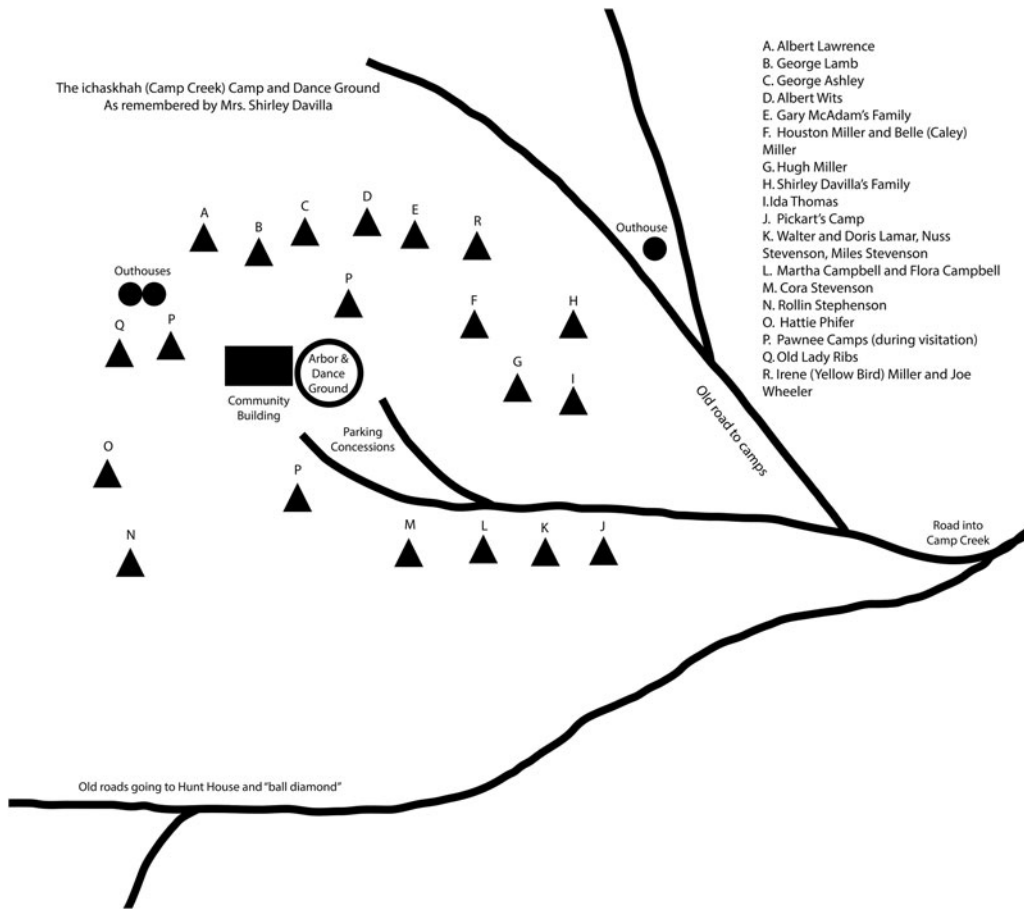


Figure 7. Map of ichaskhah as remembered by Shirley Davilla.

Although some families spent their summers or longer camping out at ichaskhah, others would join only on Sundays or for special occasions. Socializing, dances, handgames, meals, and giveaways would be held at ichaskhah for specific occasions (Stuart Owings, personal communication 2021). Many community members remember gathering at ichaskhah for the holidays. Holding these events at ichaskhah during national US holidays—ones they co-opted like the Fourth of July, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and others—or at days of the week associated with gathering by the general American public, such as Sundays, helped those organizing and attending circumvent the Code of Indian Offenses and gave them a reason to gather should law enforcement ask. As Lance Silverhorn (personal communication 2021) explained, “Every Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter they would have things going on, activities, and they would always have good little get-togethers.” In addition to gathering for American holidays, the Wichita have a long-standing relationship with the Pawnee Nation, and for generations they have taken turns hosting each other for several weeks during what is known as “Visitation” (Dorsey 1901:17). Wichita families hosted the Pawnee for Visitation at ichaskhah several times while it was in use, and these visits were remembered fondly by community members (SNM, Notes, Karl Schmitt, 1948–1951).

Members of the community recalled that games, communal meals, songs, giveaways, and dances made up the typical programming for gatherings. Gary McAdams (personal communication 2021) remembers, “Wichitas when they got together on those Sundays or usually any other time, the program was more or less, you’d have a meal, and then they would play a handgame. Every once in a while

they'd have a dance like what you see now, though it wouldn't be exactly like what you see now, but most of the time it would be handgame."

"It [the handgame] was a big deal," Charlotte Johnson (personal communication 2021) recalled. "Everybody loved it." "Oh, that was so much fun!" exclaimed Donna Williams (personal communication 2021) when the topic of handgames came up. "It was just really a lively game, everybody would be laughing." People would win prizes for the games, "money . . . sticks, baby drumsticks, maybe a drum, maybe a blanket, . . . shawls," recounts Mrs. Williams. "I think the biggest prizes that they could get was horses," Charlotte Johnson (personal communication 2021) told us.

Meals were served potluck style with a range of foods served, such as to:kic (beef and gravy), corn, beans, pumpkin dumplings, and fry/skillet bread. "The men would always serve," Shirley Davilla (personal communication 2021) explained. "They would take the pot of food around to the people that were there. If it were wintertime, we would be inside in what they called the "big house." Many would bring food grown from their own gardens using traditional recipes handed down from their parents and grandparents.

Games and meals provided an opportunity for people to socialize in the Wichita language. Although Wichita was spoken regularly by the older generations visiting ichaskhah, many of the elders we spoke with, who were children at the time, are not fluent in the language. "A lot of the older people, I remember hearing them speak Wichita all the time. But, like my mother's age, she and her cousins," Shirley Davilla told us (personal communication 2021). Songs were also for the most part sung in Wichita, although songs and dances from other Tribes, such as the "forty-nine dance" from the Kiowa were also sometimes performed at ichaskhah (Randy Edmonds, personal communication 2023; SNM, Notes, Karl Schmitt, 1948–1951). Songs sung in Wichita were often linked to specific dances or activities, such as the Turkey Dance, War Dances, Round Dance, and Ghost Dance, or dances held for specific individuals, such as returning servicemen (Charlotte Johnson, personal communication 2021; Donna Williams, personal communication 2021; Sandra Wilson, personal communication 2022; Stuart Owings, personal communication 2021; SNM, Notes, Karl Schmitt, 1948–1951). These dances "were social type of dances," Gerald Collins (personal communication 2021) explained and would be held for various events. Although "government agents worked to destroy the Ghost Dance religion," many members of the community remember that this dance was still practiced at ichaskhah (Wichita and Affiliated Tribes 2022). Lance Silverhorn recalled the following story (personal communication 2021):

On a Friday night I recall, one of our Tribal Elders came in and did a Ghost Dance. It was a really special aura about that particular night, everybody was . . . like see what's going to happen. All the young people, a lot of the younger ones, thought that there were going to be ghosts. And so, we were all anxious and really waiting and then, I think that . . . Moses was a Tribal Elder, and I think it was him that come in and did the Ghost Dance. He showed everybody how to do that and the song, so it was really interesting, and I remember participating in that.

Dances and other events would be organized by leaders at ichaskhah who held special jobs or obligations relating to the activities. Although it is unknown what the exact political structure of a Wichita village was like before the twentieth century, many of these roles likely have their origins earlier in time (Gary McAdams, personal communication 2021): "I don't know when that started like that, but I'm sure that it was an evolution from whatever it was they did before . . . when they were in a village, I mean I'm sure it was different than a gathering would be when everyone is dispersed all over the place, and you no longer had the governance structure of a village, and whatever leadership structure there was that was kind of like a traditional one was at these dance places."

Although there were some formal leadership roles—such as chiefs, drum chiefs, dance chiefs, arena directors, and tobacco men—we know from community memories that other elders held informal leadership roles that contributed to the organization of camp doings. "Of course, the elders would visit," explains Shirley Davilla (personal communication 2021), "and the men would get together and talk if there was something coming up soon; they would discuss it and they always had one Dance Chief that was in charge."

Decision-making at *ichaskhah* involved not only issues related to camp doings but also extended to group decision making on behalf of the Tribe. According to Cora West, who was interviewed by Schmitt in 1948 (SNM, Notes, Karl Schmitt, 1948–1951), *ichaskhah* was used as a meeting place by the larger Tribal council:

She then decided to go out to Rock Springs and see what was going on there. When her taxi got to the church, she was surprised to find that there wasn't anything going on there. One man was in evidence: CW asked him where everybody was. He said, "They're all up at Camp Creek." CW then said that she thought something was funny—the only time the Rock Springs Church people and the Camp Creek bunch get to-gather is when something important come up—when "Washington wants something."

The creation, use, and occupation of the *ichaskhah* camp and dance ground were critical in maintaining the Wichita's connections to each other and to their ancestors following allotment. A *community* resided at *ichaskhah*. It was a "real village" as Shirley Davilla (personal communication 2021) told us. Here Wichita community members could continue many of their cultural practices in the same ways their ancestors had for hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Through this community rebuilding and healing, cultural practices and institutions were maintained and reimagined for the realities of the twentieth century and leadership systems were reformed that eventually became the current government of the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes. Wichita sovereignty is rooted in this place and continues at gatherings on Tribal lands to this day. By focusing on the intersections of place and community, our work at *ichaskhah* advances our understandings of how Indigenous sovereignty was created, maintained, and adapted by the Wichita to the new settler-colonial landscape.

### Discussion and Conclusions

The General Allotment Act attempted to divest Tribal communities from the concept and realities of communally held lands. Policies like the Code of Indian Offenses criminalized Indigenous culture, medicine, dance, songs, and ceremonies. These federal policies and actions caused irreparable harm to these communities, and this trauma is still felt by Native nations today. Yet, these strategies were unsuccessful. The Wichita, like so many others, resisted assimilation efforts in multiple ways, including subverting the concept of privatization to their own advantage. Simply gathering was resistance. Dancing, singing, and speaking Wichita were resistance. And if, for example, they were caught hosting activities not sanctioned by Indian Agents, then someone else would step up to hold events on their allotted lands, these places of refuge, to keep resisting (Gary McAdams, personal communication 2021).

The memories shared by those who frequented *ichaskhah* attest to the thriving of the Wichita people and document the continuation and growth of their community practices that persisted through the Allotment period and continues today. Community memories are incredibly important means to preserve and link to specific places (Schneider and Hayes 2020:138; Silliman 2014:61). Without this knowledge, histories are erased and replaced with Eurocentric assumptions of the past and what makes these places significant. Frequently, the documentation of more recent archaeological time periods can yield an archaeological record that may be considered as sparse or of little intellectual value. However, for those community members who gathered at these places and their descendants, something as simple as the base of a flagpole can anchor their culture, community, and sovereignty in physical space. Furthermore, the physical documentation of features on the landscape is also critical for long-term preservation of these culturally significant places under the legal policies of federal and state governments (Hanson et al. 2022). As archaeologists we must work to link intangible memories with tangible places (and the features and artifacts that remain of them), regardless of how ephemeral these places may be. In this way we may document and interpret a place's history so that it can be shared in the present and preserved for the future.

Archaeology, when conducted collaboratively with Indigenous communities, has much to contribute to narratives that reinforce both legal and intellectual Tribal sovereignty. Focusing on the intersection of place and memory enables moves toward reclaiming Indigenous histories that counter

stereotypes of allotted lands as places of poverty, dependence, and loss of a “dying culture” and replaces them with narratives of how Indigenous communities were and still are actively responding to the persistent effects of settler colonialism (Davies 2020; Gonzalez et al. 2018; Nelson 2020; Smith 1999; Townsend et al. 2020). The integration of multiple forms of data and ways of knowing allowed us to trace the long-term histories of allotment land use and place making to understand how land-based assimilation efforts shaped Native nations into the twentieth century. Archaeologists working in earlier time periods have modeled how Indigenous communities adopted Euro-American settlement patterns, economic activities, and systems of governance to accommodate, co-opt, or resist efforts of colonization (Montgomery 2022). Extending theory and methods developed by archaeologists working on early contact period sites into these more recent times allows us to consider the broader impacts of settler colonialism while acknowledging the ways that Indigenous peoples continue to thrive, despite the agendas of colonizers in their everyday lives.

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**Data Availability Statement.** All spatial data and archaeological survey information collected for this study are archived within the Oklahoma archaeological site files administered by the Office of the State Archaeologist, Oklahoma Archeological Survey (University of Oklahoma). All original recordings, field notes, and transcripts from interviews conducted by the authors as part of this research are archived at the University of Oklahoma, and transcripts were shared with the Wichita and Affiliated Tribes. These datasets may be made accessible to others at the discretion of these offices.

**Competing Interests.** The authors declare none.

**Supplemental Material.** For supplemental material accompanying this article, visit <https://doi.org/10.1017/aaq.2024.23>.  
Supplemental Text 1. Data Management and Distribution Plan.

## Notes

1. Known in English as Camp Creek (named after the Camp Creek drainage), the camp and dance ground are called *ichaskhah* in the Wichita language.
2. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Oklahoma determined that our project did not require IRB review and approval.

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