

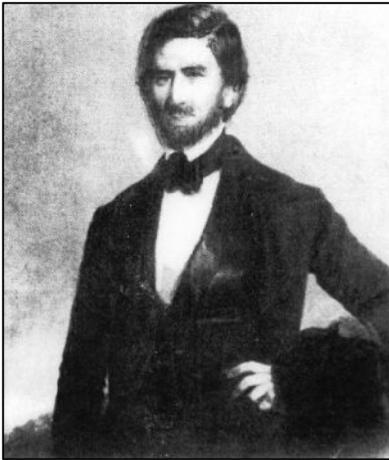
MOSES FISK: THE UPPER CUMBERLAND'S FIRST ANTIQUARIAN

By Randal D. Williams

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was among the most renowned of the Upper Cumberland's early settlers. A true Renaissance man, Fisk was the first scholar to study and comment upon the prehistoric remains encountered by early European settlers in the Upper Cumberland region of Tennessee.



Moses Fisk was born on 11 June 1760, in Grafton, Mass., and died on 26 July 1840, in Hilham, Tennessee. He was descended from an old family of English Puritans who had emigrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1640.

Fisk was highly educated for a man for his time. He graduated from Dartmouth College in 1786, and received an honorary M. A. from Yale in 1793. He taught at Dartmouth from 1788 until 1795, at which time he migrated to the frontier of Tennessee.

Fisk's accomplishments were many. In today's era of educational and vocational specialization, the breadth of Fisk's knowledge is nearly inconceivable. Fisk studied theology at Dartmouth and became a licensed congregational minister. He was a land speculator, amassing upwards of 100,000 acres of land in several Upper Cumberland counties. Fisk also established numerous roads in the Upper Cumberland, most of which are still in use today. Fisk Road, which runs through Cookeville, was named for him.

Fisk studied law in Knoxville and was licensed to practice law in Tennessee in 1798. He was a mathematician and land surveyor, and in 1802 was appointed by Governor Archibald Roane as one of three Tennessee commissioners to survey the state line between Tennessee and Virginia. Fisk was also active in local affairs, serving as magistrate in several Upper Cumberland counties.

Fisk is widely remembered in the Upper Cumberland as one of the foremost educators of his day. In 1806 he established the Fisk Female Academy in Hilham, Overton County. The school was chartered by the legislature specifically for the education of girls. The school was the first of its kind in the South. Fisk even wrote some of the textbooks used in the school.

Fisk was ahead of his time concerning social justice. As a New Englander, he was a staunch abolitionist and was concerned with the welfare of American Indians. While teaching at Dartmouth in 1795, he published an address entitled, "Tyrannical Libertymen: A Discourse Upon Negro Slavery in the United States." By all accounts, Fisk applied this sense of justice to all his personal and professional dealings.

One area of Fisk's research was especially intriguing; it was his study of the prehistory of the Upper Cumberland region.

Fisk was a charter member of the American Antiquarian Society (AAS), which was founded in 1812 by Revolutionary War veteran and printer, Isaiah Thomas. The AAS's original mission was to collect and disseminate knowledge concerning America's prehistoric peoples.



(The Moses Fisk House at the entrance to Standing Stone State Forest in Overton Co., TN)

Moses Fisk was an early AAS member, and contributed to the society's first publication, *Archaeological Americana*, in 1820. Fisk's essay was entitled, "Conjectures Respecting the Ancient inhabitants of North America." The essay was one of the first ever published concerning Tennessee's prehistory. What is remarkable about the essay is its very modern approach to the subject of prehistory, anticipating the later discipline of anthropology. Fisk was no adherent of the popular romantic theories concerning the origin of the area's native peoples. Fisk wrote as an empiricist, collecting data for analysis, and drawing conclusions from it.

In the essay, Fisk focuses primarily on prehistoric mounds, which were fairly common in the area's river and creek bottoms, until modern agricultural practices destroyed most of them. Fisk recognized two distinct types of mounds, the conical burial mound, and the flat top, pyramidal mound. He hypothesized that the flat top mounds were "to give eminence to temples or to town houses." We now know the flat mounds were indeed Mississippian era temple mounds.

Fisk also addressed the idea of "Welsh Indians." From the beginning of the seventeenth century there were reports of Welsh-speaking Indians in America. These Indians were supposedly the descendants of Welshmen who had come to America in 1170 under the leadership of Madog ab Owain Gwynedd, or Prince Madoc. According to the legend of Madoc, he and his band of adventurers landed in what is now Mobile Bay and made their way into the interior. Tales concerning Welsh-speaking Indians persisted well into the nineteenth century. Many ancient earthworks in the Mississippi Valley were attributed to Madoc and his men. Even John Sevier, the first governor of Tennessee, and a friend of Fisk's believed the myth of Madoc.

He wrote in 1810 of a conversation he had with the Cherokee chief Oconostota in 1782 about a white people called "Welsh" who had been driven from the Southeast by the ancestors of the Cherokee. Sevier also wrote about skeletons supposedly discovered in brass armor bearing the Welsh coat-of-arms.

Concerning the prehistoric inhabitants of the Upper Cumberland, Fisk stated “It is absurd to suppose they are Welsh...Welsh Indians are creatures of the imagination.” He went on to say, “All Wales could not have furnished such a population as once inhabited this section of the country. Wales is a little nook of earth, not a quarter so large as the State of Tennessee, and not a fiftieth part so large as the territory occupied by those ancient inhabitants, who cannot be estimated at less than millions.”

At a time when many people accepted the story of Madoc, Fisk understood that the story was nothing more than a myth.

Fisk also used tree rings to date trees growing in and on ancient earthworks, thus determining how long the structures and sites must have been abandoned. Dendrochronology is still a viable tool of the modern archaeologist.

Even during Fisk’s time, just as today, valuable archaeological material was being lost at an alarming rate. Exactly two hundred years ago he wrote, “It is to be regretted, that these ancient ruins and relics have been exposed to so much depredation. Valuable articles are lost by being found. The finest specimen of statuary, that I have ever heard of in this country, was knocked to pieces, to ascertain what sort of stone it was made of. It was the bust of a man, holding a bowl with a fish in it, and was constructed of a species of marble.”

Fisk wrote these words in 1815. How sad that we face the same loss of irreplaceable cultural resources in 2015. Moses Fisk was a man ahead of his time. His article, “A Summary Notice of the First Settlements Made by White People Within the Limit Which Bound the State of Tennessee,” published in 1818, was the first effort by a Tennessean to discuss the early history of the state. This, along with Fisk’s discussion of Middle Tennessee’s prehistoric remains, uniquely qualifies him of the title of the Upper Cumberland’s first antiquarian.

Note: For a history of Moses Fisk, see Tim Barlow’s 1980 volume, “The Life and Writings of Moses Fisk.”

Randall D. Williams is a partner in Kwill Consultants. “Cumberland Tales,” created by Calvin Dickinson and Michael Birdwell and sponsored by the Cookeville History Museum, welcomes any tale of this region’s history. For more information, contact Calvin Dickinson at cdickinson@tntech.edu or Michael Birdwell at birdie@tntech.edu.

*Read more Cumberland Tales at: <http://www.ajlambert.com>

Moses Fisk

b. 11 June 1760, Grafton, Worcester Co., MA – d. 26 July 1840, Hilham, Overton Co., TN, md **Nancy (Shultz) Fisk**, b. 1790, VA – d. 1850, Overton Co., TN.