

A Brief History of Swift Creek Middle School

There is much about a thing that its name can tell us. It's characteristics and qualities. Its status and reputation – even its heritage and history. A name is often times a story within itself. But what about *our* name? Swift Creek Middle School? Throughout the years I have received many interesting answers to this question. Perhaps there was once a fast flowing river that meandered through these parts? Could it have been named after the school's founder – whose last name we bear today?

I am pleased to say that the story behind Swift Creek Middle School is nothing so conventional as all that. To understand our name, we must journey back nearly two thousand years to an ancient time and an even more ancient people. They were called the Swift Creek Culture, and this is their story.

Around 100 A.D., a group of people belonging to the Creek and Deptford culture of South Carolina, North Georgia and Alabama migrated south and settled into villages and tribes stretching along the Florida panhandle. These people quickly developed a unique way of life that set them apart from other neighboring Native American tribes. Most notably, the Swift Creek natives created a unique style of pottery decorated by a complicated stamped design. The design was made by slapping wooden paddles with intricately lined engravings onto the surface of wet clay. Historians call these people the "Swift Creek", named after an archaeological site in northern Georgia where this pottery was first found.



One of the largest Swift Creek sites ever excavated in Florida was just a stone's throw away from where our school stands today. A settlement that held nearly 800 or more people existed right here in the Lake Lafayette basin behind Swift Creek. Archeological evidence from a dig done by Florida State University in 1970 revealed many details about the identity of our Swift Creek predecessors. It seems these Swift Creek people were semi-nomadic – meaning that for part of the year they would move from place to place – likely following the migration of deer, birds and other animals that were hunted for food. However, during the Spring and Summer months, the site here at Buck Lake served as a kind of "gathering place". Here for a few months out of the year, the Swift Culture would participate in religious rituals, gardening and various construction projects, including a flood retention wall as well as dozens of earthen mounds used for both human burial and religious ceremony. The natural abundance of fish, animals and other resources at the site allowed for the continuous habitation of hundreds of people for many months at a time.

Among the artifacts discovered at this site were numerous arrow heads, flint knives and spear heads – suggesting the importance of the hunt, but also a warrior-culture that was equipped to defend its claim to the fertile wetlands around Piney-Z and Lake Lafayette. Trade also seems to have been an important economic activity throughout the Swift Creek. Although they had no known currency, a flourishing barter system seems to have been in full use throughout the Swift



Creek culture, with metals such as copper coming from as far away as Tennessee! Many of these artifacts can be seen on display in the front school's front office display case. Most notable around the site are the iconic mounds scattered throughout the area. The rounded mounds were used for ceremonial burials likely reserved for political or spiritual leaders of the Swift Creek people. Other mounds were flattened at the top, suggesting the construction of permanent buildings, such as temples, shrines or a chieftain's hut. These mounds are protected by State and Federal law to prevent looting and to preserve and respect the eternal rest of our Swift Creek forbearers.

For reasons still not altogether known, the Swift Creek culture here at Buck Lake began to disappear around 800 A.D. Some argue this may have been due to the break down of trade networks, leading to a lack of cooperation and an increasing amount of warfare amongst the Swift Creek people. Others suggest that new Native American cultures who migrated into the region, such as the Mississippian culture and later Apalachee, led to fierce competition and over land

and resources, leading to the Swift Creek culture's eventual decline. Regardless of the cause, what remains is a rich legacy of an industrious, resourceful and inventive people who called this land home nearly 2,000 years ago.

Sometimes when I am in my classroom teaching my students I am struck by the thought that in this same spot thousands of years ago elders and tribal leaders of a proud ancient group of people gathered around fires or ceremonial mounds to receive instruction of their own. I wonder what lesson they were teaching, what ancient wisdom was being passed down to the next generation of future warriors, artisans and leaders. Huddled together, telling stories of the past, and of things yet to come. And perhaps, in many ways, we are still like those Swift Creek natives that came before us, continuing the story they began, and carrying the name to which they belonged.

- **Matt Rousseau**, *6th Grade Social Studies Teacher*