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EXPLORATORY ARCHEOLOGY AT NINETY SIX IN OCTOBER AND NOVEMBER

1970

by Stanley South

An exploratory archeology project was carried out at Ninety Six from October 5 until just before Thanksgiving with the goal of further defining the archeological features at Holmes' Fort. Archeologist Stanley South was assisted by Crew Chief Steven Baker and a crew of five men. Bruce Ezell again provided camp ground facilities for the mess tent, equipment tent, bunk tent, and trailer for the archeologist. Toilet and shower facilities were installed in the equipment tent and one of the crew members was chosen to serve as cook for the expedition.

The primary goal of the project was to define the outline of the ditches of Holmes' Fort, which was a defensive work built by Lieutenant Colonel John Harris Cruger and his Royal Provincials in 1780 on the hill above the town of Ninety Six for protection of the town and water supply. Exploratory slot trenches were cut, and various ditches were discovered and followed during the first two weeks of the project. By the end of this time the outline of the fort was clearly understood. A major fortification ditch six to eight feet wide was found to enclose an area 80 by 100 feet, with a small bastion facing the west. At the north of this area the ditch formed a large bastion 50 by 70 feet. Accompanying these large fortification ditches, when the fort was still in use, was an embankment or parapet of earth taken from the ditch. Inside this anti-artillery embankment was a palisade ditch paralleling the major fort ditch. This ditch provided a vertical firing-wall from which the fort could be defended. From the burned palisades found in the ditch, the rotten palisade impressions, and the baked clay accompanying the ditch, it is clear that this palisade was burned. The documents indicate that this was done when the British evacuated Ninety Six after the siege of General Nathaniel Greene was lifted by Lord Rawdon on June 19, 1781. During the siege Holmes' Fort was subjected to artillery assault by "Light Horse" Harry Lee under Greene, and on June 18th it was captured by Lee in the major assault on the works at Ninety Six. A few hours after capturing the fort, Lee had to abandon his prize because of the nearness of Lord Rawdon's reinforcements arriving to lift the siege. Before the British abandoned the fort and blockhouses, they burned everything they could so as to render it unusable by Greene had he decided to occupy the works.

The exploratory work on the site revealed that the fort was shaped like a large mitten, and was not a square fort with corner blockhouses and bastions as shown on the early maps. It is clear now that these maps were drawn many years after the fort was destroyed, and the shape shown on them was only symbolic. The "mitten" shaped fort with two bastions is typical of British fortifications known as hornworks or crownworks, all having two bastions, one often larger than the other. These were designed to protect a high point of ground not easily taken into the regular fortifications of a town, and were connected to the main fortification by means of a "covered way" or ditch inside which troops could move under cover without being subjected to fire of the enemy. Such a covered way was indicated on the early maps of the Ninety Six works, but the covered way has yet to be investigated at the site, though its location is now known.

After the first two weeks of work were accomplished and the map of the data recovered was drawn, earth moving machines were brought to the site to remove the plowed soil zone much faster than was possible by hand labor. This would allow the entire fort ditch outline to be seen for dressing and photographs, and for an additional map to be drawn from the complete fort data thus revealed. However, when the machines moved onto the site, the rain also came, and during the rainy season to follow, the crew concentrated on cutting exploratory slots into the area of the junction of the Charleston Road and the road to Augusta in the heart of Ninety Six. A blockhouse was suspected in the area, and this work was designed to reveal any ditches relating to fortification of this critical area of the approach to Ninety Six. As the project developed and weather prevented work on the Holmes' Fort site, many fortification ditches were located. A major fort ditch was found to enclose an area inside which was found a cellar hole measuring 15 by 30 feet. Here too, was a firing wall ditch for palisade poles to retain the parapet embankment thrown from the fort ditch, providing firm evidence that the structure over the cellar was of such importance that it required heavy fortification for protection. In front of this major fort ditch was another palisade that was part of an enclosure apparently measuring some 220 by 400 feet and having a small diamond shaped bastion at the northeast corner. This palisaded enclosure surrounded the buildings of the town, the courthouse and nearby houses, and was apparently the structure referred to by Cruger when he said:

"I have Palisaded ye Courthouse & the
Principal houses in about one hundred
yards square, with Block House flankers..."
(Cruger to Cornwallis-Oct. 13, 1780).

In front of the entire fortification described here, in the area to the north some 55 feet away, another palisade ditch was discovered which enclosed an area some 150 by 325 feet and was probably used as an encampment area for the Royal Provincials during the siege of 28 days in May and June, 1781.

The area around the site of the jail was examined, and another fortification ditch was found here, as well as the west palisade ditch around the town. This jail fortification ditch was shaped as a bastion (similar to those at Holmes' Fort on the hill west of the jail), and clearly revealed that this building was heavily fortified with ditches, parapets, and palisades, typical of those of English origin. None of these works at the jail or at the intersection of the roads in the center of Ninety Six were shown on any map, and are now known only through archeology.

From the exploratory work done in this area on this project, we have learned that the defensive works at Ninety Six were far more extensive and impressive than any historical record had led us to believe. The cellar may be that of a fortified blockhouse where powder and ammunition was stored. Patrick Ferguson in a report in February 1780 described and illustrated such a heavily ditch-parapet-and-palisade-protected blockhouse as an ideal anti-artillery type blockhouse that would be of important use in South Carolina, and Ferguson's plans may have been used by Cruger for building some of the fortifications at Ninety Six. A complete map of the features discovered in this project and the Holmes' Fort map has been printed and will soon be published along with a report. The work at Holmes' Fort and the Ninety Six

Sites will continue in the spring and fall as further expeditions are carried out through the cooperative efforts of The Star Fort Historical Commission, The State Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, and The Institute of Archeology and Anthropology at the University of South Carolina.



Fig. 1. Motor grader and archeological crew removing topsoil at the site of Holmes' Fort, Ninety Six, S. C.