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Charlesfort Discovered!

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Legacy

South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology

Charlesfort Discovered!

By Chester B. DePratter, Stanley South, and James Legg

On June 6, 1996, University of South Carolina President John Palms announced our discovery of French Charlesfort. The announcement ceremony was held at the Ribaut Monument located on the south end of Parris Island, home of the U.S. Marine Corps Recruit Depot. The ceremony was attended by local dignitaries, invited guests, and numerous members of the press. We were gratified by the interest shown in this once-in-a-lifetime discovery.

What is Charlesfort?

Charlesfort was constructed in 1562 on Parris Island in Port Royal Sound, near present-day Beaufort, South Carolina, by Captain Jean Ribault. Ribault and his followers were French Huguenots seeking a place for Huguenot refugees to settle in order to escape religious persecution in their homeland. After building a fort, which was named



USC President John Palms joins Bruce Rippeteau, Stanley South, and Chester DePratter at Charlesfort ceremony.

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H. L. Hunley Assessment Expedition Fieldwork Completed

By Christopher F. Amer, Steven D. Smith and Jonathan M. Leader

The South Carolina Hunley Commission and the U.S. Navy/Naval Historical Center initiated on 29 April a jointly funded assessment survey of the remains of the submarine *H.L. Hunley*. The survey was conducted during a five-and-one-half-week period. The principal goals of this survey were to confirm the identity of the object at the site as the *Hunley*, document the site to the extent conditions would permit, ascertain condition of the hull, and to evaluate the feasibility of a future

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Charlesfort, Ribault selected a group of 27 men to remain behind while he sailed back to France for supplies and reinforcements. Ribault's plan to return to Charlesfort was delayed by conflict in France; he was forced to go to England to seek support there from the queen. He was imprisoned briefly in England as a spy, but not before obtaining a promise of support from Queen Elizabeth.

In the meantime, the Charlesfort garrison grew restless. The fort's storehouse and all of the supplies left by Ribault burned within months of his departure. Dissent grew among the garrison, and ultimately the decision was made to abandon the settlement. The garrison, now reduced to 23 by death and desertion, built a small, 20-ton vessel and sailed for France early in 1563. After a difficult crossing, an unknown number of survivors were rescued by English ships in the English channel. Most, if not all, of the survivors made their way back to France.

Why Charlesfort Is Important

Charlesfort was the first attempt by the French to settle the southeastern United States. Earlier French settlements along the St. Lawrence River Valley in present-day Canada in the 1530s and early 1540s and on the Brazilian coast in 1555 both failed.



Chester DePratter and Stanley South announcing the discovery of Charlesfort with the Ribault Monument in the background.

Despite the fact that Charlesfort's occupation was brief, its construction triggered a strong Spanish response that led to annihilation of the 1564-1565 French settlement on the St. Johns River in Florida. The Spanish Crown

established both St. Augustine (in 1565) and Santa Elena (in 1566) in part to prevent further French incursions in Spanish Florida.

More than 100 years later, the French from Canada began moving down the Mississippi River to settle the Mississippi River and adjacent portions of the coast. At about the same time, the English settled Charles Towne (modern Charleston) and initiated their effort to claim the northern frontier of Florida.

Thus, Charlesfort precedes the first permanent settlements—Santa Elena and St. Augustine—in Spanish Florida. It predates the first English settlement at Roanoke Island (in present-day North Carolina) by more than two decades. It is 45 years older than the English settlement at Jamestown, Virginia, and more than one hundred years older than Charleston, the oldest English settlement in South Carolina.

Charlesfort, therefore, represents an extremely important location and

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New Archaeology Series for SC ETV

Chester B. DePratter (SCIAA) and Larry Hall (Advanced Producer/Director, SC ETV) have begun work on a 13-part videotape series on archaeology for broadcast on SC ETV and for classroom use by South Carolina Instructional Television. DePratter and Hall co-produced a one-hour video, "Children of the Sun," in 1991, and they are currently working on another one-hour program on the history and archaeology of Charlesfort and Santa Elena. The success of these previous ventures has convinced them to embark on this new educational venture.

The new series will include reports on all aspects of archaeology. DePratter, as host, will visit in-progress excavations and interview project directors and crew for insight into the reasons for the excavation, funding sources, recent discoveries, interpretations of site occupation, etc. Archival research, artifact analysis, specialized analyses (of floral and faunal remains), conservation, artifact curation and other relevant and interesting topics will also be covered (as needed) for each segment. Each segment will run approximately 30 minutes, making them usable for classroom use, public lectures, or a variety of other purposes.

Production costs for the series will be approximately \$40,000. An anonymous donor and Dr. Bruce Rippeteau, SCIAA Director, have each provided \$2,000 to support this project. If you would like to be part of this new (and exciting) educational coverage of South Carolina archaeology, please send your tax deductible contributions to C. DePratter at SCIAA. Make checks payable to USC Educational Foundation, and note on the check that the donation is for the archaeology video series.

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moment in time when Frenchmen were vying with the Spanish for control of the southeastern United States, i.e. Spanish Florida. The swift response of the Spanish soon ended the French attempt, but the importance of the effort remains.

The Search for Charlesfort

Charlesfort, abandoned in 1563, has been the object of great interest and abundant speculation. In 1663, William Hilton, sailing from Barbados in search of a place to locate a new colony, entered Port Royal Sound and identified remains that he thought might be those of Charlesfort. Eminent 19th century South Carolina historians, B.R. Carroll, William J. Rivers, and William Gilmore Simms, among others, all published opinions concerning the location of Charlesfort.

In 1922, U. S. Marine Corps Major George Osterhout while stationed on Parris Island, excavated remains of a fort that he believed was Charlesfort. Three years later, the United States Congress erected a "Charlesfort" monument in the center of Osterhout's fort. Subsequent research by historians and archaeologists showed that Major Osterhout had excavated a Spanish fort, San Marcos, built in the Spanish town of Santa Elena in about 1583. This fueled a new round of speculation by historians concerning the actual location of Charlesfort.

Beginning in 1979, Stanley South began excavations in the Spanish town of Santa Elena, and he was joined in that project by Chester DePratter in 1991. Between 1979 and the present, we conducted several unsuccessful searches for the location of Charlesfort, but it was not until very recently that we discovered the solution to this centuries-long puzzle.

Charlesfort on Parris Island

After searching a number of likely locations for Charlesfort without success, we focused our attention on the site of the Spanish town of Santa Elena. Founded by Spanish colonists only four years after Charlesfort was built, Santa Elena occupies about 20 acres on the Parris Island shoreline now covered by the Marine Corps golf course. Major Osterhout partially excavated Fort San Marcos there, and Stanley South found a second fort in 1979. South identified this fort as Fort San Felipe, one of the earlier Spanish forts at Santa Elena. At least two other Spanish forts remain to be discovered at Santa Elena.

Beginning in 1993, we began researching the possibility that South's Fort San Felipe might originally have been French Charlesfort. James Legg joined our research team in 1993, and through a combination of archaeological and documentary research, we have discovered evidence that Fort San Felipe was built in the same location as Charlesfort.

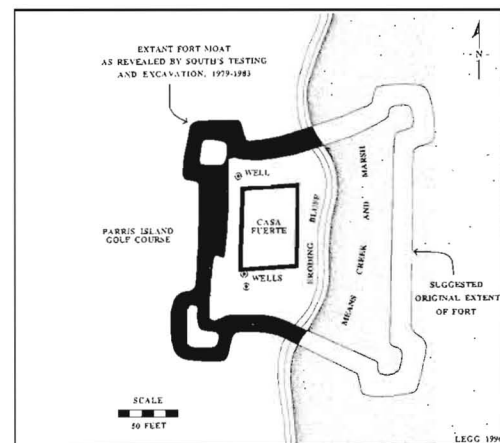
The French built Charlesfort and occupied it for less than a year before abandoning it. In 1566, Spanish Captain Juan Pardo built a new fort, which he named San Felipe. The Charlesfort moat still stood open in 1566, and Captain Pardo simply cleared out parts of the French moat and built his blockhouse inside. The Spanish then occupied Fort San Felipe until 1570 when it was destroyed by fire. A

replacement fort was built elsewhere in Santa Elena.

The Evidence

The size, shape, and overall layout of Pardo's Fort San Felipe fit with all known descriptions of Charlesfort. Because the French occupation lasted only several months and the Spanish use of the same fort lasted at least six years, the Spanish remains within the fort are much more abundant than French materials. Despite this fact, we have been able to identify a sizable collection of French ceramics that belong to the Charlesfort occupation. Mr. Ivor Noël Hume, retired director of the Department of Archaeology at Colonial Williamsburg and noted authority on European artifacts of the colonial era, has seen these ceramics and confirmed our identification. With this confirmation, we finally had French artifacts of the right period to go with our hypothesized fort location based solely on documentary evidence.

Since Charlesfort was constructed more than 430 years ago, erosion has



Archaeological plan of Charlesfort/Fort San Felipe. (Drawing by Jim Legg)

destroyed the eastern portion of the site. Slightly more than one-half of the

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fort has already eroded into the marsh. Rip-rap placed along the shoreline currently provides some measure of protection to the remnant, but a major storm could cause severe damage to this fragile archaeological resource.

Excavations conducted in 1982, 1983, and 1984 investigated portions of the fort's interior as well as the northwest bastion. A portion of the fort's interior has not yet been excavated due to time constraints, standing vegetation, and other factors. Many of the postholes and pits known to exist within the fort remain to be excavated. Only a portion of the fort moat, specifically the northwest bastion, has been excavated. The remaining eighty percent of the moat has not been excavated.

Return to Charlesfort

We plan on returning to Parris Island to complete excavation of both the moat and interior of Charlesfort/San Felipe in Spring, 1997. Fund-raising for this exciting project is currently underway. Michelin North America has already contributed \$10,000 toward the estimated total project cost which is more than \$200,000.

We need your help! If you would like to support research at this important French colonial site, tax deductible contributions should be made payable to the USC Educational Foundation and mailed to C. DePratter at SCIAA. A notation should be included on the check to indicate that the donation is for the Archaeological Research Trust—Charlesfort Project. We greatly appreciate your interest and support.



Field visit to Big Pine Tree Site excavation by several distinguished archaeologists from other states and institutions. (Photo by Daryl P. Miller)

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points, the latter being considered late Paleoindian by many archaeologists. Several well-made hafted endscrapers were recovered in the lower levels, probably related to the Taylor and Dalton occupations. Only a few fluted blanks were seen this year in the lowest artifact bearing levels. These are thought to represent a fluted point occupation, probably related to Clovis. Numerous prismatic blades were recovered and several tiny microblades were also found.

One of the highlights of this season was a visit by several archaeologists prominent in the study of Paleoindians in North America. Dr. Dennis Stanford, Chairman of the Department of Anthropology at the Smithsonian Institution led a visit to the site accompanied by Dr. C. Vance Haynes, University of Arizona, and Larry Banks of Southern Methodist University and his son Nathan. Other archaeologists who visited at the same time included Dr. Dan F. Morse and his wife Phyllis of the Arkansas Archeological Survey, Dr. David G. Anderson of the National Park Service, Dr. Alan May of the Schiele Museum of North Carolina, Dr. John E. Foss, project soil scientist at the University of Tennessee, and Mark J. Brooks, geoarchaeologist and project co-manager of SCIAA's Savannah River Archaeological Research Program (SRARP). Dr. Kenneth E. Sassaman (SRARP) and his team also conducted test excavation of the Gully Site, a nearby site known to produce fluted bifaces. Mr. Mike Anderson, Human Resources Manager of Clariant Corporation, the private industrial company that owns the site, was also on-site to greet the distinguished scientists from other states.

The staff and volunteers of the Allendale Paleoindian Expedition were the beneficiaries of two great parties held in the evening by gracious hosts. Dr. Lucius Laffitte and his wife Darryl of Allendale hosted a dinner party for the archaeologists and several invitees from the Allendale County area who are interested in

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