

8-2009

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Publication Info

Published in *Legacy*, Volume 13, Issue 2, 2009, pages 10-11.

<http://www.cas.sc.edu/sciaa/>

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Research

First Season at Palachacolas Town

By Charles Cobb

In AD 1689, the colony of Spanish Florida erected a small fort on the western bank of the Chattahoochee River in present-day Alabama. This outpost was an attempt to exert influence north of western Florida, where Spaniards and Indians were concentrated at Mission San Luis (in what is now Tallahassee, Florida) and a number of outlying missions and settlements. The new fort was built in the middle of Apalachicola Indian Territory, and its effects were opposite of what the Spanish intended. Rather than moving the imperial frontier northward while gaining new Indian allies, the presence of the garrison touched off a wholesale exodus of Native American groups from the lower Chattahoochee drainage. Many moved in a northeasterly direction with the hopes of engaging in lucrative trading partnerships with the growing English colony of Carolina.

Historical records indicate that one group of Apalachicola Indians settled on the South Carolina side of the Savannah River around 1707. They may have lived around Macon, Georgia after the 1689 migration for a period of time before arriving in what would become known as Palachacolas Town in Hampton County, South Carolina. This past May, SCIAA scholars conducted an archeological field school at Palachacolas Town, initiating a long-term project aimed at examining the wide movement of Indian peoples to the Savannah River in the early colonial era, as they hoped to take advantage of the English presence in

Charleston and elsewhere along the coast. This project was made possible through funding by a National Science Foundation grant (BCS-0852686) to Charles Cobb, Chester DePratter, and Chris Gillam.

Our goals are to document the location and ethnic affiliation of the many towns that formed along the Savannah drainage, and to evaluate the impacts of migration and colonial trade on the diverse Indian societies who moved there. In addition to the Apalachicola, other known groups who relocated to the Savannah, include (but are not necessarily

Chester DePratter, Jim Legg, and myself on the dig, which took place on the Webb Wildlife Center, where the Department of Natural Resources served as gracious hosts for our stay.

To set the stage for our work prior to the field school, Jim Legg and Steve Smith provided a metal detector survey in a locality that had been identified in the 1990s as one likely occupation (probably a small farmstead) associated with the larger dispersed town of Palachacolas. This work yielded a large number of metal artifacts that pointed to a colonial occupation—lead shot, musket parts, buckles and buttons, and a sea of nails. Metal detecting assisted in the placement of five excavation blocks across the area.

Over the course of three weeks, our investigations yielded a number of exciting

features and artifacts as our motivated students dug over 60 1 X 1 meter units. Our analyses of these materials indicate that after the Apalachicola left Palachacolas Town in 1715 as a result of the Yamasee War, this spot was probably re-occupied soon after by an English colonial farmstead. For example, we have a line of very deep post impressions we think was associated with an earthfast structure, a colonial house type characterized by widely spaced vertical



Fig. 1: Keely Lewis and Grant Hamilton take a breather while taking soil cores. (SCIAA photo)

limited to) the Chickasaw, Shawnee, Yuchi, Apalachee, and Westo.

The field school at Palachacolas Town was organized as a “Maymester” class. This is a period between the close of the regular spring semester and the start of the summer sessions, where students can take an intensive three-week course for full credit. Seven students and a number of volunteers joined SCIAA archaeologists

posts set in the ground. These served as the primary-framing members of the construction.

If our interpretation of this set of post features is correct, it confirms evidence from elsewhere in the Southeast that colonial settlers were quick to take advantage of land cleared by Indians after they had vacated. So an interesting aspect of our research is that we may be able to



Fig. 2: A pit that was filled with glass bottles. (SCIAA photo)

identify both the final Native American group and the first European colonial group to occupy this locality. But it also makes our job a bit more difficult in that these different residents used many of the same kinds of material culture, ranging from glass bottles to ceramic pots to muskets. Unraveling this mixture will be one of our major challenges.

Nevertheless, we still have a lot to go on. Our Maymester excavations uncovered a number of pit features, large and small. Many of these may have served food storage or processing functions. Dr. Gail Wagner in the Department of Anthropology at USC will be conducting the botanical analyses of samples from these features, while Dr. Barnet Pavao-Zuckerman with the Arizona State Museum will carry out studies of animal bone. Together, they should be able to give us a sense of the diet and how foodways changed as multiple cultures came together along the frontier. Dr. Wagner tells us that her first glance at a soil sample from a hearth has found a pit from a peach, one of the first imported foods widely adopted by Native Americans.

We have moved enough dirt to find a number of postmolds, but not enough yet to determine whether these may be associated with Native American houses. One of our most interesting discoveries

was an area where people were digging about one meter down to hit a layer of clay, which was then mined, presumably for purposes such as making pottery, coating the exterior of houses, and similar uses. This was a common practice among Indians throughout the Southeast, but European colonials were also known to take advantage of clay deposits for similar reasons. So we will have more work to do to determine the nature of the clay mining.

As with most first-season projects,

we are facing many more questions than answers. But our ongoing laboratory work emphasizes how rich this site is. We have a large amount of native pottery, complemented by a wide variety of English ceramics, and even the occasional sherd from Spanish olive jars. As expected for this time period, the Indian reliance on stone tools had declined a great deal, but we are still getting a small number of scrapers and projectiles made from chert. Much of the broken bottle glass shows evidence of working, presumably as Native Americans converted shards to uses formerly carried out with stone tools. After iron nails, fragments of kaolin pipes are probably our most common artifact type. There are a small number of glass beads, which were avidly sought by Native Americans as ornaments for clothing and jewelry. Even cufflinks have shown up in our work. We do not know if these are associated with either the Indian or European occupation, but they—along with the beads—emphasize that trying to determine what people wore may be just as important as what they did, as we attempt to address the complex intersection of lives and cultures along the Savannah frontier. We eagerly look forward to returning next year to explore these important issues.



Fig. 3: Evidence of digging out clay for pottery manufacture and house construction. (SCIAA photo)