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Drought Triggers Archaeology at Santee Cooper's Dry Lake Beds

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Legacy

South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology

Drought Triggers Archaeology at Santee Cooper's Dry Lake Beds

By Jonathan Leader

The drought that has gripped South Carolina for many months has lowered the water level by about eight feet below normal in Lakes Marion and Moultrie. As the water recedes in the shallow reservoirs numerous archaeological and historic sites are being uncovered. This is providing what may well be a once in a lifetime opportunity to redress an unfortunate situation that has existed since 1939.

Lakes Marion and Moultrie were the brainchild of T. C. Williams. Williams, owner of the Columbia Railway and Navigation Co, saw the formation of the lakes, a hydroelectric generator plant/dam and the lock that connected the lakes as a means of advancing his business interests and the area. This was not the first time that he had engaged in this type of project. Williams was the spark plug behind the Lake Murray

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Fig. 1: Brick structure at Ferguson Mill in dry lake bed of Lake Marion. (Photo courtesy of Jim Welch)

Office of the State Archaeologist

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dam. Although William S. Murray, the engineer and business partner, received the lion's share of the credit.

Unfortunately for T. C. Williams, the great depression started early in South Carolina and caused havoc in the state economy effectively derailing his business. The formation of the New Deal in 1933 under President Roosevelt put into place a series of massive work programs nationwide. Strom Thurmond, James F. Byrnes, Burnet R. Maybank, and Richard M. Jefferies all played a role in resurrecting T. C. Williams' project under the auspices of the WPA. This was a very controversial undertaking that resulted in a series of lawsuits and injunctions that delayed the projects start from 1933 until 1939.

By 1939, the WPA had hired thousands of local workers to accomplish the undertaking. Necessity drove the project. It is important to remember that by this time roughly 30% of the people in the area were without employment. It should come as no surprise that a number of the niceties that we have come to expect at this far removed



Fig. 3: Several construction barges that were simply left after the dam on Lake Marion was constructed. (Photo courtesy of John C. Dulude, P. E. Manager FERC Relicensing, Santee Cooper)

point in time were overlooked or given a lesser priority.

No real attempt was made to deal with the history or archaeology of the area. The Waterman Report of 1939 provided a bare minimum of information as part of the newly minted National Historic American Building Survey, but did call for a team of three to measure and draw the early historic buildings then considered to be sufficiently significant and under threat of

inundation. Considering the light regard that these historic structures were afforded by Waterman, we should be grateful that even this much was done.

By 1941 the waters had covered the archaeological sites, homesteads, churches, plantations, cemeteries, railway, roads, and mills within the flood zone. It is important to note that several cemeteries and some houses were relocated, but that the vast majority were not. They remained flooded and forgotten until recently.

Very late in November of 2007, a call came in reporting a possible Revolutionary war cannon on the newly uncovered lakebed. Steve Smith, Jim Legg, and I responded to the call in coordination with the staff and management of Santee Cooper. While the cannon turned out to be a case of misidentification, what was abundantly clear from the field visit was that a tremendous amount of undisturbed prehistoric and historic materials were becoming both easily visible and available.



Fig. 2: Remains of Ferguson Mill in lake bed of Lake Marion. (SCIAA photo by Jonathan Leader)



Fig. 4: Looted African-American slave burial in lake bed of Lake Marion. (SCIAA photo by Jonathan Leader)

Later in December 2007, and into January 2008, Chris Amer, State Underwater Archaeologist, and the staff of the Maritime Research Division came on board and provided their expertise to Santee Cooper as well. One of the strengths of the Institute has been the ability to mobilize a remarkably diverse team on the public's behalf when necessary.

The majority of people in South Carolina are law abiding. Many have an interest in history and are avocational collectors of artifacts and relics. This has always been a plus for the Office of the State Archaeologist and the Institute in general, as it tends to provide us with well-motivated volunteers on our projects and access to collections from out of the way areas of the state. In a similar fashion, many of the metal detectorists we have encountered over the years have been honest and law abiding souls. They have no interest in looting or robbing graves and will normally abide by posted rules concerning trespass or areas placed off limits to their hobby.

Unfortunately, it takes only a very few people who do engage in looting, grave robbing, and the misuse of metal detectors to make everyone else's lives miserable. This

was the situation that rapidly followed the lowering of the water level. People descended on the exposed lands like locusts on a wheat crop.

Several came with boats to affect landings from the waterside in the hopes of escaping detection and put shovels, metal detectors, and other equipment to serious work. Historic



Fig. 5: Looted cistern associated with the Bellvedere Plantation exposed in the lake bed of Lake Marion. (Photo courtesy of Jim Welch)

graves were opened and the contents disturbed in the hopes of finding jewelry, coins, or other saleable items. Skulls were taken for sale or as trophies. Most would agree that there are some things that cannot be tolerated in civilized society.

Santee Cooper rose to the challenge and placed signage and increased their patrols in the areas hardest hit. This presence has had the desired effect in that the minority

that has been engaged in looting and grave robbing have become much more wary about their activities. Unfortunately, the law-abiding public has been inconvenienced with more frequent interactions with law enforcement on what should be restful strolls on public lands. This situation does not make any of us happy, and it is hoped that the need for frequent patrol will subside over time. Fortunately, the majority of people who have met with law enforcement have been supportive once the situation has been explained. South Carolinians are deeply attached to their history, and they do not take kindly to people who would loot it for their own ends.

We would encourage the interested public to visit the area and learn more of the history and events that occurred there. Come with an open mind and leave full of memories. Please just be sure to

leave the artifacts behind so that the next visitor can enjoy the same experience. We would also hope that the public would report to Santee Cooper any suspicious activity that they may encounter during their visit. The number to call to

report a problem is: 1 (843) 761-8000.

The Office of the State Archaeologist is identifying volunteers to assist in the mapping of the exposed sites and features. We are also coordinating with colleagues to address the long and short-term issues and needs that the drought has presented Santee Cooper. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity to address the situation, and we look forward to the challenge.