Congaree Swamp is a rich and extensive bottomland environment composed of silty clay soils, various drainages in the form of swales, sloughs, creeks, and remnants of old river meanderings which constitute oxbow lakes. The area within the swamp is virtually flat and it supports a hydric community of flora and fauna that thrives on its richness. The area is given easily to flooding which prevents any long term human occupation, and as a result exploitation and utilization have always been oriented towards short term habitation and limited activities.

The valley of the Congaree River has been steadily occupied for the past 12,000 years, and based on present settlement knowledge, the southwest portion of the valley has received the greatest amount of aboriginal occupation. During the Historic period people moved from the coastal areas and from North Carolina and Virginia into what is now Lexington County and founded the small community of Saxe-Gotha. Only after the construction of ferries did people begin to move into the area of Richland County. From the earliest times onward people selected the ridge tops overlooking the Congaree River and they traveled the old trading paths that led up the southwest side of the valley.

On the northwest edge of the valley, and in the vicinity of Congaree Swamp, the prehistoric occupations appear comparatively smaller. Only one large base camp is known to exist in the area, and while extraction camps occur frequently along the peripheral zones and within the floodplain, occupations are, nevertheless, notably more infrequent. During the mid-1700s people began crossing the Congaree for home sites and lands suitable for cultivation. Early settlements occurred along the edges of the valley, and activities were apparently associated with stock raising and the cultivation of row crops and specific grains, such as wheat. By the turn of the century several farmers had evidently experienced some difficulty with the poorly permeable soil and sought higher production on the nutrient rich soils of the floodplain. With this endeavor the farmer had to construct dike systems to contend with adverse effects of periodical flooding. However, the failure to complete one of the dikes may evidence complications inherent in bottomland cultivation. Perhaps the expense involved in such a project was greater than crop return. During the same period of time people began taking advantage of the rich browse and mast that occurred on vacant and unowned portions of the swamp through livestock raising. In order to utilize this environment, earthen embankments were built for the protection of cattle and other domesticated animals. Such utilization assured a minimum of labor and high returns at the stock market.

Although other activities probably occurred within the swamp, such as the construction of a road and associated bridges, it was not until the late 1800s that activities began to accelerate again. With the purchase of the property by the Beidler family, new exploitations emerged in the form of timber harvest. For several years these large
trees were felled during flood conditions, and the trees were floated down river to a sawmill. Following the removal of select timber, the land was then leased to, and has continued to remain under the general control of, the Cedar Creek Hunt Club.

Throughout the centuries of human occupation, the high predictability of flooding and the swampy bottomlands with their swales, creeks, and oxbow lakes afforded a precarious existence for human populations and sustained residence was impractical. These environmental conditions demand specific behavior in terms of exploitation and utilization, as evidenced by cattle mounts and dikes, and the elevated axe marks which still exist on dead or dying cypress. The occurrence of illegal whiskey stills exemplifies clandestine activities and demonstrates another form of human behavior, suitably performed in an area void of human residence. Although social and cultural values have changed significantly through the millennia, and even though the economic system has seen dramatic changes, the bottomland environment of Congaree Swamp continues to allow only specific and limited activity. The swamp offers a model for settlement and subsistence within the region of the Congaree River Valley that may be applied to other drainage systems of comparable characteristics.
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