Parris Island Cemeteries, Part II

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As previously reported in Legacy, Vol. 5, No. 2, Dec. 2000, we have been working on the African-American cemeteries on Parris Island, South Carolina. This project involved shallow trenching to delineate and map four known cemeteries so that they can be marked and protected. In addition to the cemetery reported in our earlier article (38BU1895), we have now completed work on the three additional cemeteries, and we have conducted a search for others that may be present on the island. Work on the three latest cemeteries and the search for others involved 14 weeks in the field between May 21 and October 3, 2001.

All four known cemeteries on the island contain African-Americans who occupied Parris Island as plantation slaves, beginning in the early 18th century, or as freedmen after the Civil War. The island had 500 to 800 African-American residents until World War I, when the U.S. Marine Corps purchased the entire island for use as a training facility. Over the next 20 years the island’s resident population gradually diminished, and in 1937 the last remaining civilian residents were forced to leave.

The Elliot cemetery (38BU1618), is also located on the west side of the island, on the north bank of Whale Creek. The only marked grave was covered by four large fragments of an 1877 tombstone for “Eliza Scott, wife of Richard Scott.” It is not known if this stone marks the grave of Eliza Scott, or if the stone was reused as a grave cover. Our test trenches revealed that this cemetery is about 230 feet long and 100 feet wide, and contains approximately 200 burials. The site also yielded evidence for other uses, including moderate activity by prehistoric Native Americans, and Marine Corps field test trenches revealed that this cemetery is about 150 feet wide and 260 feet long, and includes between 300 and 400 burials. Several other components were identified, including various Native American occupations and associated shell middens, a late-18th and early 19th century occupation, and a WWII-era practice grenade range.

The Rifle Range cemetery (38BU39/1619) is located on the west side of Parris Island near the USMC rifle range complex. This cemetery includes six of the eight marked graves remaining on the island, all dating to 1919-1927. Test trenches revealed that this cemetery is about 230 feet long and 100 feet wide, and contains approximately 200 burials. The site also yielded evidence for other uses, including moderate activity by prehistoric Native Americans, and Marine Corps field test trenches revealed that this cemetery is about 150 feet wide and 260 feet long, and includes between 300 and 400 burials. Several other components were identified, including various Native American occupations and associated shell middens, a late-18th and early 19th century occupation, and a WWII-era practice grenade range.

The Means cemetery (38BU1895) is located on the east side of Parris Island near the USMC rifle range complex. This cemetery includes six of the eight marked graves remaining on the island, all dating to 1919-1927. Test trenches revealed that this cemetery is about 150 feet wide and 260 feet long, and includes between 300 and 400 burials. Several other components were identified, including various Native American occupations and associated shell middens, a late-18th and early 19th century occupation, and a WWII-era practice grenade range.
artillery firing in the 1930's and tactical training in 1950's to 1980's.

The Means cemetery is located within the Santa Elena site (38BU162) near the southern tip of the island. This cemetery has a single marked grave (Figure 1) dated 1909. Through excavation of more than 1,150 feet of trench, we determined that this cemetery is approximately 290 feet in length and 160 feet in width, and contains between 350 and 400 graves. Because there is active erosion of the shoreline along the east edge of this cemetery, we also excavated a series of trenches along the eroding bluff in an effort to determine whether graves were actively eroding into the marsh (Figure 2). We found no currently eroding graves, but the next major hurricane is certain to have some impact on the cemetery and its occupants.

Our work on this site exposed a variety of features and artifacts relating to other uses of the cemetery area. Evidence for prehistoric Native American activity was extensive, and included a heavy Stallings Island component dating to c. 4,200-3,100 B.P., and repeated Woodland occupations dating c. 3,100 to 1,000 B.P. Two substantially complete Woodland vessels were recovered from test trenches. The Spanish Fort San Felipe (c. 1566 to 1570) moat runs along the southern edge of the cemetery, which is intrusive on the ditch of French Charlesfort (1562 to 1563). Features and artifacts from at least four Spanish houses were found in our delineation trenches (Figures 3, 4). Eighteenth- and 19th-century material was found in the southern portion of the cemetery, originating from the Means plantation complex which was located just southwest of the cemetery. Concrete footings from a temporary Marine Corps hospital built on top of the cemetery in 1918 were present in several trenches.

We estimate that the four known cemeteries together contain between 1,300 and 1,500 graves. This is too few individuals given the large population and the duration of their occupation on Parris Island. Additional cemeteries may be entirely lost under 20th-century development, or now lack the surface clues that might suggest their presence, such as the clusters of mature live oaks that mark the four known cemeteries. Our search for additional cemeteries targeted several such live oak stands, together with formerly wooded locations identified on historic maps. Exploratory trenching in these areas located no cemeteries, but revealed several other components of interest, including two freedmen's house sites and a variety of Native American occupations. One of the most interesting discoveries of the project was in an area south of the rifle ranges, where test trenches revealed an extensive storm washover deposit as much as six feet in thickness. This deposit is believed to date to the catastrophic hurricane of 1893 (Figure 5) which, according to one report, killed half of the people living on the island at the time.

The field crew for this project consisted of the authors, Heathley Johnson, Kris Asher, John Kirby, and Linda "Polly" Worthy. Carol McCanless and Susan Hollyday each volunteered for a few weeks. The backhoe used in trench excavations was provided by Patterson Construction Company of Beaufort; our operator was Kenny Bennett. Processing of collections in the laboratory is being carried out by James Legg, Heathley Johnson, Kris Asher, and John Kirby. Work on the Parris Island cemeteries was funded by the U. S. Marine Corps.