Santa Elena/Charlesfort Excavations, Spring 2000

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Archaeological research at Santa Elena/Charlesfort is always interesting, but the work we carried out there from March 20 to May 5 this year made this one of the most exciting seasons ever. As is always the case, the U.S. Marine Corps (USMC) and their civilian staff were great hosts for this seven-week project. Although we did not intend to work at Santa Elena this spring, remodeling of the Parris Island golf course led to our taking a small crew to the site for seven weeks. As part of the remodeling, the seventh, eighth, and ninth golf holes that sit on top of the Santa Elena site have been abandoned with replacements under construction elsewhere. The former driving range, which occupied a shallow borrow pit just beyond the Santa Elena town limits, has been modified into a larger elevated range.

In support of the remodeling work, we spent two weeks excavating a 5 x 100 ft trench for a water line to supply the new driving range. This irrigation line trench contained a moderate number of Indian, Spanish, and plantation period sherds, World War I USMC material, and practice bombs dropped in the late 1930s. Running across the trench were various modern utility lines and plantation period agricultural ditches. A large feature at the eastern end of our excavations may be a trench dug as part of Marine trench warfare training on the site during World War I. No Spanish or other early features were encountered.

Once we completed work on the irrigation line ditch, we began work in the town of Santa Elena. In 1981, South worked on what we now call Lot # 3. At that time, he exposed parts of three structures around a courtyard, and this season we returned to this lot to further investigate remains of these structures (S3, S4, and S5 on the map). Structure 5 is located adjacent to the former eighth tee. Tommy
Charles used a back hoe/front-end loader to remove the tee fill so that we could look for the west wall of this structure. Our excavations indicated that this building was at least 16 ft wide and 25 ft long. Just to the west of this structure we found a compact brown soil zone containing no artifacts; we believe that this is one of the main roads through the town of Santa Elena (see map).

Structure 3, located about 50 ft east of Structure 5, was partially exposed in 1981. Work on the east and north walls of this building during this past field season indicates that it is approximately 9 ft wide and 25 ft long. After re-examining available excavation records, we no longer believe that Structure 4 exists; it is represented by only a few scattered, unrelated postholes.

Structure 7 was originally excavated in 1991 and 1992. Spring 2000 excavations around this large building located on Lot # 4 involved several tasks. Our initial work focused on defining one of the 9 large postholes of this 22 ft sq structure which we believe to be a residence. Subsequent work involved excavation of several refuse features that were only one-half excavated in 1991 and 1992. One of these features contained a large mass of locally-made oyster shell plaster; one of the plaster fragments from this feature appears to have been from the roof peak and provides additional information on how this material was used in house construction.

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In recent months we have come to believe that Lots 3 and 4 were occupied by Governor Guttiere de Miranda who resided in the town from about 1580 to 1587. This interpretation is based on a combination of archaeological data and historical documents. If we are correct in this identification, then Structure 7 was the Governor’s residence, Structure 1 was the hut of a servant in the employ of the Governor, and Structures 3 and 5 were residences for members of the Governor’s family or perhaps storage buildings.

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The final task undertaken during this field season was an attempt to further delineate the moat of French Charlesfort which preceded the Spanish occupation. We searched for the north moat, which we at one time thought might have been cut away by the moat of Spanish Fort San Felipe, which sits on top of it. We found that the Charlesfort moat continues north beyond the San Felipe moat and extends into the unmarked plantation period cemetery that occupies that part of the site. A narrow trench was excavated across the Charlesfort moat at the north end of our excavations, and the moat at that point was found to be 4.5 ft wide and 2.5 ft deep, carefully dug with a flat bottom. Further delineation of the moat will be included in the next Santa Elena excavation project.

Processing of existing collections and writing a series of reports will occupy our time for the next several months. Therefore, it may be 2001 before we are able to return to Charlesfort/Santa Elena to conduct additional fieldwork.

When the archaeologists of the Santa Elena Project began their recent field season at Parris Island, I was concluding my own exploration into the documents of the 16th-century Spanish Florida at the Archive of the Indies in Seville, Spain. This six-week trip was the high point of my first seven months working as one of the historians for the Santa Elena Project. Before my visit to Seville, I had traveled to St. Augustine and Gainesville, FL, as well as Chicago and Washington, DC, to read copies of documents from the Archive of the Indies housed in collections there. The trip to Seville gave me the opportunity to see the original manuscripts, as well as to search for items that Florida historians have not used before. In many ways, a visit to Seville is also a journey to the past, for in that wonderful city, traces of the 16th century—not to mention Roman and Moorish times—are present everywhere in the art and architecture. I returned from Seville with new information as well as the inspiration necessary to the task of revising my dissertation on the Santa Elena settlement for publication.

My research at the Archive of the Indies focused not only on items useful to historians but also those of interest to archaeologists studying 16th-century Spanish Florida. One document I found reports the arrival in the Caribbean of the French ship Le Prince-El Principe to the Spaniards—which eventually wrecked off Parris Island, South Carolina. Another account lists in detail the wine supplies lost when the ship Santiago el Menor sank at St. Augustine in 1577. Other documents I copied provide clues about and context for La Florida's material culture, such as a detailed description and inventory of Havana houses destroyed to make room for the fort there and a report on artillery research conducted at court in Madrid. In many ways searching through an archive is as slow a process as archaeologists' careful work to draw clues from the ground. As with the Santa Elena site, the Archive of the Indies needs much more attention before it yields all the information about 16th-century Florida that it surely contains. Still, research trips such as this help us move toward our goal of making the Santa Elena settlement come alive through both the historical and the archaeological record.