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Research

2011 Field School at Palachacolas Town

By Charles Cobb

For the third year in a row, a Maymester field school was held at the colonial era Indian town of Palachacolas. These field schools have been supported in part via funding from the National Science Foundation, and they have been supervised by a group that includes archaeologists from USC Columbia and USC Lancaster. This research is part of a larger project to document the migration of Native peoples to the Savannah River region after the establishment of Charleston by the English in 1670, and to explore the consequences of the resulting trade systems on both colonials and Indians.

Last year our research focused on what historical records suggest was the core of Palachacolas Town, a community of Apalachicola Indians from eastern Alabama who moved to the banks of the Savannah River in South Carolina sometime around 1708. Those excavations revealed an activity area likely associated with one or more households (i.e., lots of

glass beads and ceramic fragments), as well as what we believe may be a trench associated with a fortification wall. In 2009, we worked on what we hypothesize was a small habitation contemporary to, and possibly associated with, Palachacolas Town that was about a mile inland from the river. Perhaps this was a family group that splintered off from the main community.

We started our investigations this year with some additional shovel test units at the site of our dig last year at Palachacolas Town. This work revealed additional pit features likely associated



Fig. 2: Amy Worthington runs ground penetrating radar while Dan Elliott looks on. (SCIAA photo)

with living areas. We may have also discovered part of another fortification line, one that appears to be distinct from the one found last year (Fig. 1). We were joined for one day by our colleague, Dan Elliott, from the Lamar Institute in Georgia, who brought his ground penetrating radar unit (Fig. 2). Much of Palachacolas Town today is overlain by an asphalt parking lot. However, his radar picked up a linear anomaly underneath the asphalt that may be part of the fortification trench that we identified in 2010. One of the exciting implications of his work is that we are now optimistic that some archaeological features may still have survived the construction of the parking lot.

Our core excavations this year were placed about one-half mile south of Palachacolas Town and also near the riverbank. In our shovel test probing and metal detector survey in the larger area around Palachacolas last year, we located a ridge top (Fig. 3) with a number of indigenous ceramics and several pieces of lead shot. The co-occurrence of the two suggested yet another distinct colonial period Native American habitation in the region.



Fig. 1: Possible fortification trench at Palachacolas Town. (SCIAA photo)



Fig. 3: View of our field school site. (SCIAA photo)

Compared to the last two years, our field school this year was distinguished by an earlier onset of summer temperatures and a lack of natural shade (Fig. 4). Despite the challenging conditions, our field school students and volunteers (Beckee Garris, Charlie Darden, Amy Worthington, Noah Atchley, Rick Fogle, Kalla DePratter) did a remarkable job, excavating over 130 1 x 1 m units in a three-week period (Fig. 5). Despite the large area uncovered on the ridge top, there was a surprising lack of soil features, such as storage pits or house wall post stains, that we associate with Native American occupations.

On the other hand, we did get a great sample of artifacts. Over 1,000 Native American ceramic fragments were recovered, although we only found a handful of contemporary European pieces of pottery. Although Indians rapidly adopted many elements of European technology in this era, the strong persistence of indigenous pottery may speak to a similar persistence in a reliance on Native foods and food preparation vessels. Glass beads were scattered throughout the site, and we believe these

were important as clothing ornaments. The discovery of additional lead shot this year may be a reflection of the growing importance of European firearms over bows and arrows.

We also found some hand wrought nails, which may have been adapted

to indigenous building styles. However, many European objects were altered to other purposes, and it is possible that our lab analyses will disclose that nails could also have been used for perforating and working softer materials, such as deer hides. We know, for example, that glass fragments from bottles were often re-used as hide scrapers on many Native American settlements. So the issue of re-cycling is an important one in our research. Finally, we continued to find European kaolin clay smoking pipe fragments this year, common on our previous field schools. These are particularly interesting because they demonstrate the fusion of traditions

as multiple cultures come together—in this case, tobacco, an American domesticated plant, with European smoking technology. European and Native American alike rapidly adopted the practice of smoking tobacco in these kinds of pipes.

In light of the work in our previous two years, our field school this year emphasizes that Native American towns by the early 1700s had significantly altered their general pattern of spatial organization. Before the arrival of Europeans sizable settlements were typically nucleated or clustered. For reasons not altogether clear, by the mid to late 1600s, Native Americans increasingly lived in highly dispersed towns that could often stretch out over a mile alongside a river. These were not continuous settlements. Instead, they were scattered pockets of communities held together more by a common background or identity, rather than living next to one another.

It is interesting that these new kinds of towns often contained several tribal groups. Due to population losses from warfare, slaving, and Old World diseases, many Indian groups forged new alliances that led to thriving, multi-ethnic communities. The well-known Creek confederacy in the Southeast, for instance, was a broad regional association that contained numerous language groups

and peoples. One of the questions we will be addressing in our laboratory analyses is whether there are several ceramic traditions evident from our three seasons of field work, thus indicating that Palachacolas represented this new type of dispersed, culturally plural community.

This issue, and other questions of dynamic culture change during the colonial period in Carolina, will continue to drive our work for many more years to come. This was our last season on



Fig. 4: Our multi-tasking students manage to screen soil and to show their support for the Gamecocks' repeat NCAA baseball championship. (SCIAA photo)

NSF support, but we hope to continue to attract research funds to maintain a long-term study in the region. In addition to our intrepid students, I'd like to thank my comrades-in-arms for our several successful field seasons: Chris Judge, Chester DePratter, Chris Gillam, Kim Wescott, as well as Maggie Needham. The South Carolina Department of Natural Resources has also been an invaluable partner in our efforts, and a special thanks goes to DNR archaeologist Sean Taylor for his support, and to the staff at the DNR Webb Wildlife Center for being such gracious and welcoming hosts.



Fig. 5: Kalla DePratter and Noah Atchley wishing they were digging in sand somewhere else, like Hilton Head. (SCIAA photo)



Fig. 6: Beckee Garris, a Catawba Tribal Spiritual Advisor, conducts a blessing ceremony for the field school, which also honors the Native American founders of Palachacolas Town. Beckee was a participant in the field school as a USC Lancaster student. She also is with the staff of the Catawba Indian Nation Tribal Historic Preservation Office. (SCIAA photo)

SCIAA Awarded Two More Battlefield Protection Grants

By Charles Cobb

SCIAA has been awarded two National Park Service American Battlefield Protection Program (ABPP) grants for 2011-2012. This continues a long history of success with this program that began with a GPS study of Civil War batteries in 1999 by Steve Smith and Chris Clement and continues today. In 2010, Jim Spirek was also awarded an ABPP grant to evaluate the protracted naval conflict around Charleston during the Civil War.

This year, Steve Smith received a second year of funding from ABPP for the study of General William T. Sherman's 1865 campaign through South Carolina during the Civil War. Last year's funding

concentrated on historic research and mapping of Sherman's route between Savannah, Georgia, and Columbia, South Carolina. The second phase awarded this year will focus on Columbia and the route north to the North Carolina line. Most of the work will concentrate on fieldwork to investigate and map locations of various march activities using GPS and GIS technology. Audrey Dawson will head up much of the fieldwork.

The Institute also received an ABPP grant to evaluate a major military engagement between the Chickasaw Indians and French forces near present-day Tupelo, Mississippi. In 1736, two

French armies attempting a pincer movement on the Chickasaw Nation were decisively beaten at the battles of Ackia and Ogoula Tchetoka. These battles are of particular interest to South Carolina because some historians believe that a large Chickasaw immigrant community living along the Savannah River played a key role in providing strategic information as well as weapons to their sister towns in Mississippi. The grant will be used to define the battlefield locations and to collate historical documents related to the conflict. Charles Cobb is the Principal Investigator, and Steve Smith and Chester DePratter are collaborators on the project. We are very pleased that the Chickasaw Nation will be partnering with us. We will be joined by Dr. Brad Lieb, Tribal Archaeologist with the Chickasaw Nation.