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Exploring Fort Moore

By Mark Groover and Jonathan Leader

Forty-five years after the founding of Charles Town in 1670, a series of Native American attacks upon settlers occurred between 1715 and 1718. Called the Yemassee War, this conflict began in Beaufort and Port Royal and spread through the settled coastal area. The Yemassee War was incited by perceived European encroachment upon Native American territory. Disputes between Indians and colonists involved in the deerskin trade also contributed to the conflict.

As a response to the war beginning in 1715, the colonial government in South Carolina constructed Fort Moore in Beaufort Island near Augusta, in addition to forts near present day Columbia (Fort Congaree), Savannah (Palachacola Fort), and Port Royal Sound (Beaufort Fort). These early posts were established to provide protection to settlers along the colonial frontier and help regulate the deerskin trade with Native Americans (Jones 1971).

Fort Moore, strategically located on a tall bluff overlooking the Savannah River, was named after colonial Governor James Moore. Fort Moore was constructed in the winter of 1715 and was occupied until 1766. Fort Moore, both a military fort and a trading post, was a frontier cultural crossroads. Interestingly, during its first year of operation in 1716, half a company of African colonial militia manned the fort. Throughout the remainder of its history, European soldiers, deerskin traders, and enslaved Africans inhabited the outpost. Native Americans, such as the Creek, Apalachee, Yuchi, and Chickasaw, also traded at Fort Moore. During the period of Indian trade in the colony, Native Americans exchanged dressed deerskins for firearms, shot, powder, cloth, metal tools, and other items manufactured in Europe. During the latter years of its history, other trading posts were established in the small community adjacent to Fort Moore. Further, the frontier foothold originally established by the fort later developed into New Windsor Township, one of several backcountry townships established in the 1730s. After 1766, Fort Moore was eventually deserted when its role in the deerskin trade was eclipsed by Fort Augusta located across the Savannah River in Georgia (Maness 1986). However, the Fort Moore area continued to be inhabited by residents of New Windsor Township.

For years, archaeologists have known that Fort Moore was situated somewhere on the river bluff where the state highway crosses the Savannah River. However, the exact location of the fort has never been conclusively determined archaeologically, although several episodes of fieldwork have been conducted on the river bluff since the 1960s.

One of the most important episodes of fieldwork at Fort Moore occurred in 1971, when Stanley South and Richard Polhemus, archaeologists with the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology (SCIAA), directed salvage excavations at the river bluff with the help of local volunteers. The salvage work was conducted because a portion of the river bluff on private property was being developed for a subdivision. In a race against bulldozers, long exploratory trenches were excavated across a large open field in the area to be developed. The trenches resulted in the discovery of a palisaded compound containing several earthfast structures (Figure 1). The portion of the compound that was subsequently defined by the field crew was approximately 200 x 100 feet in size. Interestingly, the compound contained a rectangular

Figure 1: Planview of palisaded compound excavated at Fort Moore by Stanley South and Richard Polhemus in 1971. (SCIAA/SRARP figure drafted by George Wingard)
earthfast structure with a deep cellar that was thought to be the remains of a trader’s house. Although South and Polhemus discovered compelling archaeological information, they hesitated to definitively conclude that the palisaded enclosure was Fort Moore. Unfortunately, the portion of the palisaded compound discovered in 1971, was eventually destroyed by earth moving equipment.

Thirty years later in 2001, Fort Moore once again became the subject of renewed interest when local residents learned that the remaining undisturbed portions of the river bluff might be developed in the near future. Concerned members of the public subsequently contacted Jonathan Leader, South Carolina State Archaeologist, who in turn organized a cooperative research effort between SCIAA, staff members in the Savannah River Archaeological Research Program (SRARP), a satellite office of SCIAA, and Chris Judge with the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources. The purpose of this collective effort was to identify the location of Fort Moore and potentially recommend that it be purchased from private landowners through the South Carolina Heritage Trust, a state-operated program that preserves important archaeological sites.

Limited site survey and testing were conducted at Fort Moore in December 2001. Although relevant information regarding the condition of the river bluff was collected during this effort, the location of the fort was not identified. Following this stint of fieldwork, all available background information related to Fort Moore was scrutinized again for relevant clues. Fortunately, Richard Brooks with the SRARP had a copy of the detailed base map from the 1971 excavations conducted by South and Polhemus (Figure 1). After consulting this map, it appeared very likely that Fort Moore may have actually been previously discovered in 1971. A second field expedition to Fort Moore was then subsequently organized.

In August 2001, Stan South returned to Fort Moore. In textbook style, South relocated his excavation benchmark that he had placed along a fence line 30 years ago. South then quickly relocated the 1971 excavation area originally containing the palisaded compound. A 1 X 1 meter test unit was excavated in the protected wooded area adjacent to the open field where the enclosure had been excavated. The test unit contained a very dense concentration of colonial period, consumption related artifacts typical of forts and trading posts—bottle glass, tobacco pipe fragments, lead shot, colonial ware, and imported ceramics. The excavation square clearly demonstrated that abundant, undisturbed archaeological deposits were still present at the site.

Two months later in October, a third round of fieldwork was conducted at Fort Moore. During this latest effort, it was hoped that half or more of the palisaded compound discovered in 1971 might still be preserved along the wooded river bluff. To define the spatial extent of the compound and test this informal hypothesis, a 70 X 140-meter shovel test pit grid was excavated in the woods immediately adjacent to the 1971 excavation area. The results of this effort demonstrated that a preserved area of colonial period resources dating to the first half of the 18th century is located within the wooded area on the river bluff. Further, the shovel test pit survey demonstrated that an area containing densely deposited artifacts parallels the modern-day fence line, and corresponds to the location of the

Figure 2: Artifact density map of wooded area investigated in 2002, immediately adjacent to palisaded compound excavated in 1971. (SCIAA/SRARP figure drafted by Mark Groover)
palisaded compound investigated by South and Polhemus in 1971 (Figure 2). Historical sources suggest that Fort Moore was approximately 150 X 150 feet in size (Maness 1986:68). The area investigated in the woods indicates that the palisaded compound may have originally been approximately 200 X 200 feet in size, which approximates the known size of Fort Moore.

To further determine if intact archaeological features and deposits are preserved in the wooded area at the river bluff, three 1 X 2-meter test units were excavated in October. The test units indicated that at least two or more structures are preserved in the wooded lot. The area containing a heavy concentration of artifacts defined by the shovel test survey likely contains the remains of a dwelling constructed of wooden timbers seated in postholes. Called earthfast architecture, these wooden frame dwellings, similar to barns and outbuildings still constructed today in the rural South, were prevalent dwellings during the 1700s and early 1800s in South Carolina. The recovery of nails and especially window glass, typically rare on colonial frontier sites, from the test unit further supported the interpretation that this spot contained the remains of a structure. An excavation unit immediately north of the probable earthfast dwelling contained a clay hearth with burned animal bones and what appeared to be a segment of a narrow wall trench formed from banked clay. The archaeological deposits in this structure, perhaps reflecting Native American or West African inspired architectural traditions, contained tobacco pipe stems and hand headed cut nails. The cut nails date to the late 18th century, suggesting this dwelling or activity area was used after the fort was abandoned in 1766.

In addition to the identification of areas containing structural remains dating to the Fort Moore period and later, artifacts recovered from site testing in October also revealed the interaction and exchange that had occurred at the site among different cultural groups. The three test units were excavated in thin, 5-centimeter levels that allowed the sequencing and dating of artifacts by small stratigraphic intervals. Sequencing the artifacts by levels indicates that the artifacts were mainly discarded between the 1740s and 1750s (Figure 3), encompassing an approximately 20-year interval. During this time period, bottle glass, tobacco pipe fragments, colono ware made by Native Americans and enslaved Africans, and imported ceramics manufactured in Europe were deposited in abundance near the earthfast dwelling. The artifacts also indicate that the residents of the site were likewise using a large proportion of colono ware, probably manufactured by local Native Americans. Non-European ceramics comprise 71 percent of the total ceramic sample obtained from site testing. The surfaces on the sherd of the locally made ceramics were burnished, brushed, and incised, with pinched vessel rims evident on some examples—all decorative embellishments consistent with Native American contact period assemblages. Twenty-nine percent of the ceramic sample is composed of European manufactured ceramics, mainly decorated delftware and lead glazed earthenware. Native Americans who came to the river bluff to trade also fashioned tools from bottle glass. Typical finds at contact period sites, a uniface, a small blade, and a spokeshave-like tool made from bottle glass were recovered from site excavations, along with a glass trade bead. Considered together, the features and artifacts encountered at Fort Moore provide a fascinating glimpse of colonial cultures in transition along the middle Savannah River valley.

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