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Excavations at Ware Creek Ridge, a privately supported project (Photograph by Chester DePratter)

GROTON PLANTATION ARCHAEOLOGY

Chester DePratter

In October 1989, Tommy Charles, current Secretary of the ART Trustee Board received a call reporting that two whole painted Indian burial pots had recently been found on an unidentified archaeological site on the Savannah River, and that those pots were currently up for sale in an antique store in Macon, Georgia. Tommy Charles and I departed for Macon the next day, after consulting with Bruce Rippeteau, because we wanted to see what these rare painted pots looked like.

The antique dealer was unwilling to allow us to see the pots, because he knew they had been illegally removed from a burial site, and he was concerned about the legal repercussions of possessing what amounted to stolen goods. Tommy and I returned to Columbia somewhat disappointed, but we returned with information that we hoped would allow us to locate the site from which the pots had been removed. Working from a cryptic description of how the site could be reached from a boat landing on the Georgia side of the Savannah River, we concentrated our search in the vicinity of Groton Plantation located in Allendale and Hampton Counties, just south of Allendale, South Carolina.

I called Rob Winthrop, Manager of Groton Land Company and one of the plantation owners. Rob expressed concern that a site on their property

perhaps was being looted, and he granted permission for Tommy and me to come immediately to Groton. The next day, only four days after Tommy received the original call, we were on the way to Allendale.

After driving to the southern tip of the Groton plantation property, wading across three flood-swollen streams, and walking for more than a mile, we found the site. It looked like a battle field. There were looter-dug holes everywhere, and human bone and cremated human remains were visible on several of the recently deposited backdirt piles. It was a disheartening sight!

The site, a 1000 foot long, 15 foot high sand ridge on the Savannah River floodplain, was the location of a large Indian community between A.D. 1200 and 1450 (based on broken pottery we found on the surface). Collectors (or looters) had found this site long ago, and over a period of perhaps 20 years had dug more than 600 holes in search of pots and other artifacts, especially those associated with burials.

We returned to the plantation office and described our findings to Bob Winthrop, and he was appalled by our report. He promised to consult with other Winthrop family members to see what they could do to help. As a result of Rob's efforts, members of the Winthrop family personally contributed the funding needed to investigate the damage to the site (now officially called

Ware Creek Ridge--38HA148) and to determine what further work could and should be done there.

As a result of the Winthrop family's support and interest in the cultural resources located on their property, I have been able to return to Groton plantation for a total of 16 and one-half weeks of research over the past three winters. We have mapped the destruction of Ware Creek Ridge, and we have systematically collected the human bones and artifacts that littered the surface. Our excavations on the ridge have uncovered two undisturbed cremations and the remains of the two Indian houses built and occupied more than 600 years ago. Beneath these houses, as we dug deeper, we found in place deposits stretching back to more than 10,000 years ago. On days when flooding has prevented access to Ware Creek Ridge, my crew and I have conducted survey to locate sites on the upland portion of the plantation, and we have recorded nearly 300 previously unrecorded sites.

What began as a disastrous looting of burials by collectors has ended up as a research project that has significantly added to our knowledge of the prehistoric occupation of the Savannah River valley. This important contribution to knowledge is wholly due to the Winthrop family's concern for South Carolina's buried cultural heritage.

