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Fortification Search at Ninety Six National Historic Site

By Stanley South

In the summer of 2005, assisted by Chester DePratter, James Legg, and Michael Stoner, we completed a fortification search project at Ninety Six National Historic Site, assisted by USC student volunteer, Laura Litwer. The project, which was funded by the Archaeological Research Trust and SCIAA, was to relocate two bastions of a fort I found in the last days of three expeditions I conducted at the site in 1970 and 1971.

The current project was an attempt to relocate those bastions, which I interpret as a fort built in 1776 to defend against a possible attack by Cherokee Indians. The second goal of the project was to cut slot-trenches to locate and map fortification ditches dug by the British in 1780 and 1781 to defend the town against an attack by American General Nathanael Greene. The fort bastions I had seen in 1971 were not found, but the exploration of the fort ditches at the southeast corner of the town produced interesting details of the archaeological map lying beneath the grassy field and topsoil the visitor views on the site today.

Historical Note

Ninety Six National Historic Site in Greenwood County, South Carolina, is located two miles south of the present town of Ninety Six. It is the site of many forts and fortification features, dug during the French and Indian War and the American Revolution, dating from 1751 to 1781. American General Nathanael Greene besieged the Royal Provençal force defending the town under Lt. Col. John Harris Cruger, from May 22 to June 19, 1781 (South 1972b, Figure 16). The story told here is of the archaeological explorations

conducted between May and August 2005.

Background

In 1970, the Star Fort Historical Commission and other donors worked with Bruce Ezell and the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology to help fulfill the dream of the site becoming a National Historic Site in the Department of the Interior under National Park Service management. That dream was realized in 1976. (Those archaeological projects revealed and mapped 15 forts and fortification features dating from 1751 to 1781). These were documented in published reports, which included 15 maps on file at SCIAA (South 2003b).

In the years following my work (South 1970a, 1970b, 1971, 1972a-c, 1973), historians wrote about the site (Cann 1996), archaeologists came and examined various parts of it using a variety of methods (Holschlag and Rodeffer 1977; Prentice 2002, Prentice and Nettles 2003), and I summarized my work there (2005:239-265).

In 2005, I received a permit (NISI 05-001) from the U.S. Department of the Interior, through the office of Regional Archaeologist Bennie C. Keel at the National Park Service, Southeastern Archaeological Center to conduct excavation of exploratory slot trenches at Ninety Six National Historic Site. In the following sections, I summarize the Ninety Six fortification search project.

Project Objectives

As the end of the 1971 project approached, part of my crew was working on reconstructing the earthen embankments of Revolutionary War Holmes' Fort, captured by Light Horse "Harry" Lee on June 18, 1871 (South 1970a, Figure 4). Another part of the crew was backfilling the many exploratory trenches used to locate the various fortification ditches and features. While that was going on, I had other workers following a stockade ditch at the south edge of the town of Ninety Six because I wanted to determine whether it was a clue to yet another fortification (South 1972b, Figure 19). It was on the last few days of the project when I cut slot-trenches trying to locate the extent of that ditch but had trouble finding it in the slots I dug in the woods. Then, we luckily found postholes for a small bastion.

Excited by this discovery, we cut slot trenches to the north, still having little luck finding a ditch to follow. Then, in the woods, at a point parallel with the north fortification ditches of the town, we found a second set of postholes forming a small diamond-shaped bastion. There was no time left for mapping



Fig. 1: Michael Stoner, James Legg, and Chester DePratter excavating Slot 155. (SCIAA photo by Stanley South)

the bastions, and I expected I would be returning in a few months to expose and map them. I tied flagging tape to the trees and bushes around the bastions to locate them when I returned, but that never happened. Thirty-four years later, I was still bothered by not having mapped those two bastions!

The Interpretation of Fortifications on the East Side of Ninety Six

On July 1, 1776, the Cherokee Indians “poured down upon the frontiers of South Carolina; massacring all persons who fell into their power.” The people crowded together and “ran into little stockade forts, for momentary preservation” (Drayton 1821: II, 339, 341). Another source revealed that: “Ninety Six, previous to the war, had been slightly fortified for defense against the incursions of the neighbouring Indians.” “This stockade was still standing...” on June 22, 1780, when British troops occupied Ninety Six. (Johnson 1822:138-139). “These works were considerably strengthened after the arrival of the British troops” (Lee 1812).

On one of my maps of the fortifications I found around the town of Ninety Six (South, 1972b, Figure 19), I show a little two-bastioned fort measuring 190 X 220 feet. It had been intruded-upon by a later ten-foot-wide fortification ditch. Based on the above references to the strengthening of the 1776 fort by the British, I interpreted this ditch as representing “The Stockade Fort of 1776,” which was incorporated into Lt. John Harris Cruger’s 1780 defenses around the town

However, an alternative interpretation of these fortifications is shown on another map (South 1970b, Figure 3), on which I indicate the square, 190 X 220 foot stockade

fort as having been erected, not in 1776, but in 1780, by Col. Cruger, who added 95 feet to the south side of the two-bastioned stockade fort. An observer states that: “Colonel Cruger has enclosed the Court House & some other Houses that joined it within a square stockade, flanked by Blockhouses” (Cornwallis Papers, 50/11/1, F220, Letter from Wemyss to Cornwallis, October 29, 1780, Greenwood County Library, BPRO).

In December 1780, Lt. Henry Haldane inspected Cruger’s stockade and ordered more extensive works, including a star-shaped redoubt on the northeast of the town and a so-called stockade (that archaeology proved to be a stockaded hornwork [Holmes’ Fort]) on the high ground on the west. These works included the excavation of a 10- to 14-foot wide



Fig. 2: Clovis projectile point found in Slot 159. (SCIAA photo by Stanley South)

dry ditch and parapet around the town (MacKenzie 1787:143; South 1970a, Figure 3, 1972b, Figure 19). When Lt. Haldane left to return to being Cornwallis’ Aide de Camp, Col. Cruger was then responsible for carrying out the more extensive works ordered by Haldane. In this project, I refer to the stockade fort ditch as that of Col. Cruger and the wider fortification ditch as being a Haldane-ordered defensive work.

Project Goals

I was interested in relocating the 1776 anti-Cherokee fort bastions I saw in 1971. The 220 X 285-foot Cruger stockade of 1780 was the second

priority, along with the more extensive, Haldane-ordered, 10 to 14-foot wide dry fortification ditches in various parts of the town of Ninety Six. This second priority focused on the southeast corner of the fortification ditches around the town. The research was designed to provide the visiting public a more complete picture of what happened at that nationally significant site, allowing interpretive exhibits to more effectively communicate to the public the valuable information from the archaeological map that still lies buried beneath the grassy surface of the site the visitor now sees.

Project Funding

It was on this interpretation that I requested and received from the Archaeological Research Trust, and from Jonathan Leader, Interim Director for the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, a total of \$10,484 (exclusive of salaries for me and Chester DePratter) to attempt to relocate those once-seen 1776 bastions, and to cut slot trenches to follow the Cruger and Haldane fortification ditches at the southeast corner of the town. The archaeological project was a joint endeavor by the National Park Service, the State of South Carolina through the University and SCIAA (contributing the salary for South and DePratter to the effort).

Leadership and Visitors

The two-to-three-week expedition was led by me, assisted by Chester DePratter, James Legg, and Michael Stoner—all highly experienced and respected archaeologists. Volunteers from the National Historic Sites and Parks and from the National Forest Service, assisted with the research. Visitors

were welcomed to the project while excavation was underway, and I explained to a number of individuals and groups what was going on and pointed out the evidence being revealed. One of these groups was a field trip sponsored by the Archaeological Society of South Carolina at the site. Full cooperation and assistance from the Ninety Six National Park Services' Chief Park Ranger, Eric Williams, and his staff helped make the project a success.

Project Time Frame

Two to three weeks were planned for the project, but field work covered several weeks from May 23 through August 11, with a return project to reveal Col. Cruger's northeast stockade bastion planned for the fall (see the enclosed map, and Figure 3 in my 1970a report in SCIAA Research Manuscript #9). The necessary laboratory work of cataloging the artifacts onto a spreadsheet has been carried out, with a total of 365 artifacts being included in my Carolina Artifact Pattern analysis (South 1977, 2002: 83-140). Final report writing is currently underway and hopefully will be published in the fall. The artifacts will be turned over to the National Park Service, Southeastern Archeological Center, for processing and curation.

Publicity

Several articles on the fort-search research project appeared in the local Ninety Six newspaper *The Star and Beacon*.

Summary of the Archaeological Findings

By cutting several slot trenches, we located the stockade ditch I had seen in 1971 coming from the gut at the south side of the town site in the area I designated as "Area A." Then

we cut a number of slot trenches on the east side of the Charlestown Road, in "Area B," but did not find the stockade trench or the southeast bastion I saw in 1971 (Fig. 1). What we did find was that refuse from the late 18th and early 19th century was deposited in Area B by those living there, south of the fortified area, after the Revolutionary War. Ceramics, iron pot fragments, window glass, wine bottle, and other bottle glass, were discarded there more than in any other area of the site. As slot-digging progressed, though we did not sift the soil from the slots, we made an extra effort to recover metal objects from trench fill through James Legg's use of a metal detector to recover nails and a few other metal objects.

At the time I saw the two bastions in 1971, I marked their location with flagging tape tied to trees and bushes around each bastion under the plan to return within three months for an upcoming project, the funding for which had been promised by Bruce Ezell, but that funding did not materialize. In hindsight I should have put a rebar or some other marker to identify the location of each bastion, but I didn't. So, I had to depend on my memory of where the bastions had been found in the woods, and, although we dug a total of 75 slots in the current project (not all of which were dug searching for the 1776 fort), we did not find the bastions.

A Clovis Point Is Discovered

While our expedition at Ninety Six was

underway, Al Goodyear was at Allendale searching for Clovis and Pre-Clovis evidence there (Goodyear et. al. 1990; Wormington 1957). As James Legg was cleaning the side of Slot 159 in Area B, located south of the fortified area of the town, a Clovis point fell from the profile into the slot (Fig. 2). This bonus discovery demonstrated that others had lived there ten thousand years earlier than the Ninety Six period of occupation in which we were interested. This was an interesting artifact, but not one connected with the later occupation of the Ninety Six site. I later told Al that if he wanted to find evidence for Clovis he might want to try his luck at Ninety Six!

A Flèche Trench Is Discovered

However, in Area C, Slot 168, we found a 3 X 10 foot trench, Feature 169, which James cut a section through, and found it was three feet deep (Fig. 3). James Legg made a profile drawing of the trench. The profile is like the one illustrated in Diderot's *Pictorial Encyclopedia* 1763 ([1959] Plate 80) (Fig. 4). At first I thought this feature might be an observation trench for General Greene to keep informed of comings and goings at the southeast corner of the fortifications around the town of



Fig. 3: James Legg's excavated profile of the flèche ditch in Area C. (SCIAA photo by Stanley South)

Ninety Six, because the profile suggested that the defensive mound of dirt (parapet) was on the town side of the trench. My thinking changed, however, when I found that Greene had said that the British fortifications around the town included several flèches, or double-sided arrow-shaped trenches (ours was a single trench ten feet long). We took photos and James made a profile drawing of Feature 169 (Tarleton 1787: 499; Mackenzie 1787: 142-143).

Under the hypothesis that perhaps other such ten-foot military ditches may have been aligned with Feature 169, I cut a number of slots to attempt to locate another one (Area C), but no other was found in that exploratory process.

The Search at the Southeast Corner of the Town Fortifications

At this point in the excavation process, Professor Terry Ferguson from Wofford College arrived to test some of his subsurface radar equipment and Feature 169 was an ideal subsurface trench feature for this purpose. I have not yet learned the results of this experimental process, which was also tried in the grassy area where the town stockade was located.

However, once I became frustrated at not finding the bastions, I turned to the second goal of the project, which was searching for what happened at the southeast corner of the fortifications around the town (Area D). Here we had more success. We followed (cutting slots), photographed and mapped, the ditch for the east side of the 220 X 285-foot stockade (including Cruger's 95-foot addition).

Our next step was for Michael Stoner and volunteer Laura Litwer to cut slots to follow and reveal (in Area

D) the 14-foot wide 2.5-foot deep fortification ditch dug in 1781 along the east side of the town (Fig. 5). This fortification ditch was located 30 feet east from, and parallel to, Cruger's stockade ditch. We then followed the 10-foot wide south fortification ditch, also in Area D, at the southeast corner of the town.

These defensive ditches were ordered dug by Lt. Haldane (in December 1780). Haldane was an engineer sent by Cornwallis to inspect Cruger's defenses around the town. Apparently, Lt. Haldane didn't think Col. Cruger's defenses were adequate to hold off General Greene's army, so he ordered (recommended?) in December 1780, that Col. Cruger (some room for speculation as to the conversation there relative to the rank of the officers involved), build (early in 1781) the Star Fort on the northeast side of the town and the Holmes' Fort horn work I found on the high ground to the west. He also ordered the 10-to-14-foot wide ditch to be dug in other areas around the town, and from the town to the Star Fort, all of which were successful in holding Greene at bay for 28 days in 1781—thanks to Haldane's orders and Cruger's efforts to fulfill them.

At the southeast corner of the town, slot trenching revealed the south fortification ditch made a dog-leg jog of a bastion, which allowed covering fire down the ditch in case of attack against the southeast entrance to the town on the Charleston Road. Then, instead of making a large bastion at the southeast corner, as was the case at the southwest corner of the town, which was my expectation, the ditch curved to make a much smaller-than-expected mini-bastion and then ended (Area D).

Meanwhile, Michael Stoner and volunteer Laura Litwer, revealed the

defensive ditch along the east side of the town (Fig. 6). This wide fortification ditch also simply ended about two-thirds of the way toward the south from its junction with the covered way to the Star Fort (Area D). I suspected this may have indicated a gateway through the curtain at the junction with a southeast bastion (such as was seen at Ft. Moultrie) (South 1974: 26, Fig. 2). To check this hypothesis Mike Stoner cut slots to reveal the ditch, but it was not seen.

More exploration of this southeast fort corner is needed to resolve what caused both the south and the east fortification ditches to end, leaving a 70-foot wide space at the corner. One possibility is that a structure such as a barn or house was located here, which was used as a ready-made bastion. Another possibility is that a blockhouse was erected here, but discovery of that type bastion can only be determined by opening a block excavation in the area between the end of the east and south fortification ditches at this southeast corner of the fortified town.

This project has allowed us to discover and delineate only a part of the remarkable archaeological map lying beneath the grassy surface the visitor sees while visiting the 1780-81 town site of Ninety Six today. A vast quantity of that archaeological map is yet to be revealed and interpreted to the visitor through on-site exhibits tightly anchored in the original archaeological record. When I fundraise for more work at Ninety Six, I hope to be involved in such activity at the town site in the future.

The artifacts, maps, photographs, drawings, field log, and slot data sheets, etc., will be turned over to Regional Archaeologist Bennie Keel when my final report is completed.