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Archeologically Testing a Tabby Ruin on Callawassee Island, South Carolina  
By Stanley South

At the invitation of William R. and Shanna Sullivan, Chester DePratter and I viewed a square tabby ruin in the Sullivan yard on Callawassee Island, South Carolina. The walls of the ruin stand eight feet high in places and slightly over ground surface in others. The width of the square outer wall is 40 feet. Two parallel interior partition walls divide the ground floor into three rectangular areas. The ruin is an integral part of a landscaped garden with wooden walkways running through it.

It was recorded as (38BU70) by Thomas Ryan (1971) in the site survey record of the University of South Carolina’s Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, and test holes were dug on the north and south sides by James Michie and Tommy Charles in their investigation of the cultural resources of Callawassee Island (Michie 1982:38-39). Three eroded and unidentifiable Indian pottery sherds, a fire-damaged chert scraper, a brown bottle fragment [stoneware?], and three clear glass bottle fragments were the only artifacts found in the two test holes. This is the only recorded archaeology on the site.

The tabby ruin has been thought to possibly be a dwelling built by James Hamilton, Jr. who began a new settlement in 1815, to raise cotton on Callawassee, and in 1816, he constructed a tabby sugar mill (Behan 2004: 50) (also see Trinkley 1991: 30, 33).

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Thomas Ryan noted that 75 feet from the southeast side-doorway of the square ruin was a brick and tabby footing for a possible kitchen. There are at present no visible signs of this second structure (Ryan 1971).

DePratter and I expressed an interest in following the observations of Ryan and Michie with a more detailed archaeological study, and the Sullivans agreed to fund such a project. The goal was to transit-map the ruin to provide a plan drawing, and to measure and record the standing wall profiles, photograph the ruin, and excavate test squares and shovel tests with minimum encroachment onto the landscaping plants in and around the ruin. This was done with the idea that ceramics and other refuse thrown from a domestic household would allow the structure to be archaeologically dated and compared with the tabby sugar mill ruins located elsewhere on the island.

For three weeks in January 2006, Michael Stoner and I, assisted by volunteers, Bill Behan, Dick Schwarz, and Jim Scott conducted test excavations around the tabby ruin in expectation that refuse deposited at the doorways of the structure would indicate that it was likely used as a domestic household dwelling. Such refuse would also allow the time period of use to be determined through an analysis of the ceramics recovered. The absence of domestic refuse would suggest another function, in which case artifacts might reveal what that was, whether storage, outbuilding, store, barn, etc. The virtual absence of domestic refuse found suggested to Stoner and me that the structure represents other than a domestic household—perhaps an office and storage facility on this deep water point for bales of cotton and sugar mill products awaiting loading onto vessels for transport to market. The two or three ceramic fragments, recovered from 50 holes Stoner dug all around the ruin, date from the mid-19th century, but they certainly do not suggest a domestic household is represented by it.

Another goal of the project was to locate the outbuilding ruin observed by Ryan 75 feet east of the main ruin. Probing there was not successful in locating a foundation wall. Perhaps this ruin was removed by driveway construction.

I will write a report and the artifacts will be curated at the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of South Carolina.

References Cited

Behan, William A. 2004: A Short History of Callawassie Island, South Carolina.


Ryan, Thomas 1971: SCIAA Site Survey Record, 38BU70.