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Steven D. Smith

University of South Carolina - Columbia, smiths@mailbox.sc.edu

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Cultural Resources Consulting

Excavations at the North Carolina Arsenal

By Steven D. Smith

The Cultural Resources Consulting Division of SCIAA returned to Fayetteville, North Carolina, last fall to conduct a second program of intensive archaeological testing and evaluation at the North Carolina Arsenal. Back in 1994, the division excavated portions of the Confederate gun carriage shop attached to the main arsenal. In December, 1996 the consulting branch of the Institute searched for and found the remains of the Confederate blacksmith shop.

The North Carolina Arsenal was an antebellum Federal arsenal that was captured and operated by the Confederates during the Civil War. Construction of the arsenal began on April 19, 1838, and continued sporadically with financial and labor problems until 1856. Machinery was installed, and it looked like the arsenal was finally up and running in 1860. But when North Carolina seceded, the citizens of Fayetteville immediately captured it and turned it over to the Confederacy.

The seizure of an operational arsenal, a battery of field artillery, and some 37,000 stands of arms was a bonanza for the arms-poor South. Under Confederate control, the facility was put to use quickly in modernizing old hand and shoulder-fired weapons. But soon, equipment captured at Harper’s Ferry, Virginia, was transported to the arsenal, and the Confederacy expanded operations to include gun carriage production, ammunition, rifles, and pistols. Most notably, the arsenal was the home of the Fayetteville pistol-carbine and the Fayetteville rifle. The rifle is considered by some gun experts as the best arm produced by the Confederacy.

The arsenal continued production of ammunition and arms until the Spring of 1865 when it was threatened by approaching troops of General Sherman's army. In the early hours of March 11, some machinery was loaded onto railroad cars and sent away to be hidden in the coal mines of Chatham County, North Carolina. That evening the Union army took Fayetteville and the arsenal. Sherman ordered his troops to destroy the facility, and, using explosives and railroad rails, Colonel O. M. Poe’s men pounded the arsenal to the ground, then set fire to it.

But the history of the arsenal and its destruction did not end there. At the end of the war, citizens of Fayetteville turned to the complex and its brick to rebuild their city. When the Federal government found out, officials returned to the city, inventoried the brick used in downtown Fayetteville, and the brick remaining at the arsenal, and charged the city for its use. In 1872, the government auctioned off the remaining ruins and land. Slowly through the late 19th and early 20th centuries the city of Fayetteville expanded over the ruins. An archaeological treasure waiting to be discovered, the heart of the main arsenal was unfortunately impacted by the construction of the Fayetteville Central Business District Loop highway in the early 1980s. Only portions of the main arsenal and Confederate extensions exist today as archaeological remains.

Today, the Museum of the Cape Fear in Fayetteville works to keep alive the history of the arsenal, developing site interpretations and maintaining a public park in the area of the Confederate extensions. Archaeological investigation of these remains has played a role in these interpretations. In 1994, the Cultural Resources Consulting Division was asked to search for the remains of the gun carriage shop in Arsenal Park. This work revealed the builder’s trench and interior portions of this building. Last fall, the museum acquired additional land, expanding the park into the area suspected to be the location of the...
blacksmith shop. The Cultural Resources Consulting Division was asked to return and search for this building.

The last time the division excavated at the arsenal, the search was aided by a contemporary map drawn by the Federal government when the brick was inventoried. The map included distances to still existing points along the arsenal's west wall, allowing archaeologists to quickly locate the gun carriage shop. This time, however, measurements for the blacksmith shop were not clearly noted. It took considerable time and effort to locate the remains of the building from surrounding modern disturbances. Eventually though, the division found that the archaeological remains of the blacksmith shop foundation trench were extant and generally in a similar condition as the gun carriage shop. The labor details that dismantled the Confederate extensions to the arsenal dug all the way into the base of the builder's trenches to salvage usable brick from both buildings. While the gun carriage shop had been thoroughly salvaged, the laborers salvaging brick from the blacksmith shop were more selective, leaving behind more wasters and brickbats. Also, even though the remains of the gun carriage shop were found closer to the surface than the blacksmith shop, the wall trench of the blacksmith shop did not stand out as clearly as had the walls of the gun carriage shop.

Unfortunately, the excavation of the blacksmith shop revealed an almost identical artifact pattern seen at the gun carriage shop. Few artifacts beyond architectural materials (nails, brick, mortar, window glass) were found, and no artifacts relating to the military operation of the arsenal were recovered. Artifacts and features related to blacksmithing were not revealed either. However, the focus of the excavations was to find the building and reveal its archaeological signature. In this light, the work was very successful and future work can now concentrate on finding and revealing features relating to activities at the arsenal between 1861 to 1865. The work was sponsored by the North Carolina Museum of History Division, State of North Carolina.

Excavations at the Confederate extensions to the North Carolina Arsenal are part of a program of military sites archaeology conducted by the Cultural Resources Consulting Division. This program concentrates on revealing the archaeological manifestations of America's military heritage. The Cultural Resources Consulting Division is the Cultural Resource Management Arm of the Institute. Over the past year it has conducted contract research at Fort Bragg, North Carolina; Fort Polk, Louisiana; and Shaw Air Force Base, South Carolina. For further information about the division's military sites or cultural resource management programs, contact Steven Smith or Christopher Clement, Principal Investigators, at the Institute.