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Savannah River Archaeology Research

Research in the Graniteville Historic District

By Keith Stephenson and George Wingard

This past year, we initiated archaeological research in Graniteville, South Carolina primarily focusing on its industrial beginnings during the antebellum period. In 1976, the area that encompassed the original mill town at Graniteville was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places as the Graniteville Historic District. Our project involves a community-oriented outreach plan designed to include interested citizens in the historic neighborhood (Fig. 1). We actively encourage residents to participate directly in the fieldwork and discovery of their own early mill town heritage. The general archaeological objective is to gain a better understanding of the cultural landscape of the mill workers' households by identifying specific locations of outbuildings, wells, and subsistence garden-plots. Our specific agenda is to illustrate the welfare of each house's inhabitants during the 19th century on the basis of artifact types recovered from individual household middens.

The South Carolina State Legislature granted a corporate charter to industrialist William Gregg for the Graniteville Manufacturing Company on December 15, 1845. Gregg was born in Monongalia County, present day West Virginia in 1800. He apprenticed as a watchmaker and silversmith from 1814 until 1823. In 1824, he began a successful jewelry business in Columbia, SC and in 1838 moved to Charleston where he continued the business of jeweler and silversmith in the firm of Hayden, Gregg, and Company. During this time, Gregg realized the need for industry in the Deep South, a region almost completely an economy of aristocratic plantation agriculture dependent on slavery and cotton. His vision was to develop the manufacturing of textiles at an industrial scale based not on the labor of enslaved blacks, but rather drawn from the majority class of white subsistence farmers. Gregg's philosophical inclination was to raise the economic standard of living for poor white families

while at the same time industrializing the South to lessen reliance on textiles imported from New England or Europe.

During March 1846, the Graniteville Manufacturing Company bought almost 11,000 acres in the Sand Hills physiographic province of Horse Creek Valley (then the Edgefield District, now Aiken County) to ensure and protect the water rights for the company (Downey 1999; Mitchell 1928:49). Along the banks of Horse Creek, Gregg designed a model "mill village" centered on a two-and-one-half storied textile mill some 350 X 50 feet in dimension with two front towers each enclosing a staircase. Atop the northernmost tower still hangs a large brass-bell that when sounded during the 19th century regimented the daily progression of labor activity. Gregg himself seems to have designed the mill after the fashion of those in New England, and had the facility constructed of locally quarried blue granite. When completed in 1849, the mill was fronted by a large commons consisting of a courtyard lawn with trees, shrubs, flowers, and trimmed gravel sidewalks all centered on a spouting, spring-fed water fountain. The cohesiveness of the mill village is supported by the outward uniformity of building construction. Structures with similar materials, dimensions, and plans appear throughout the village. Differences in the outward appearances of buildings were primarily based on the setting of the house site and the social standing of its intended inhabitant. In his 1849 President's Report to the stockholders, Gregg stated that the village consisted of an academy, a hotel, two churches (Methodist and Baptist denominations), several stores, 10 boarding houses, 11 supervisors' houses, and 40 workers' cottages. All buildings were constructed of native long-leaf pine in the Gothic Revival style, especially popular during

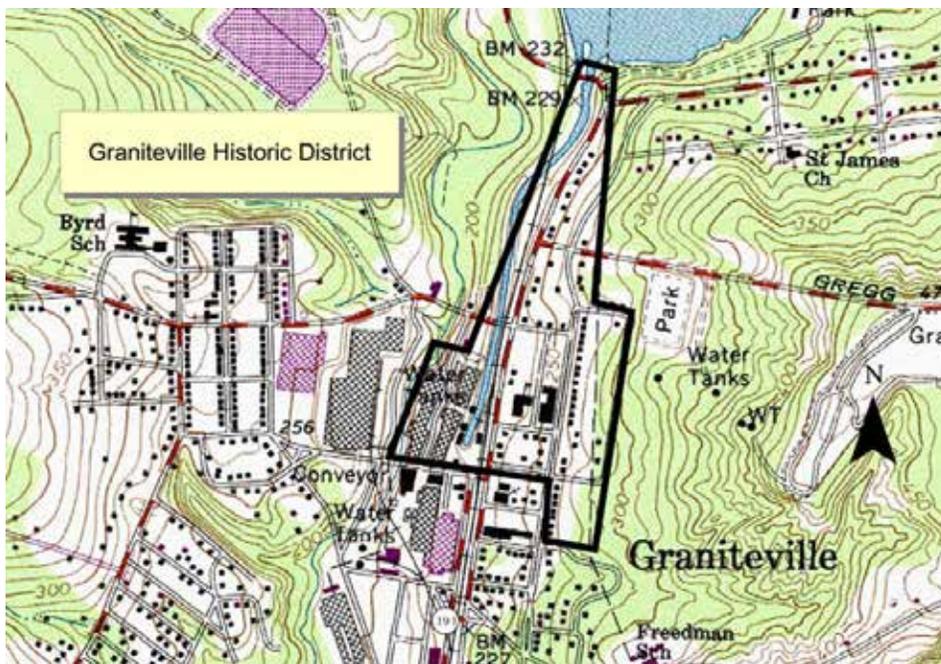


Fig. 1: Location of Graniteville Historic District (USGS 7.5' Series Graniteville Quad. 1964, Photorevised 1971). (SCIAA Illustration by George Wingard)

this era in rural settings. Each worker's cottage featured architectural symmetry with a fireplace serving two central rooms and two attic rooms. Exterior elements included steep gable roofs, vertical board and batten siding, carved vergeboard or bargeboard that decorated the gable and eave roofline, and matching hood-mold trim over the front center window. According to biographer Broadus Mitchell (1928), "William Gregg brought into existence the first typical Southern cotton-mill village." By so doing, Gregg created a pattern that would be emulated by numerous textile mill proprietors of "company towns" throughout the Deep South.

In the early 1900s, a Superintendent of the Graniteville Manufacturing Company, seemingly with intent, destroyed many of the mill's original records, ledgers, and documents. Despite this loss, numerous—albeit contradictory—narratives have been published detailing the economic history of Gregg's Graniteville textile enterprise. What we have learned from these documents is that Gregg established a division of labor among family members. Compulsory attendance at the academy was expected of children until the age of 12, after which the teenagers, mostly females, would begin employment in the factory. Young boys, if not engaged in millwork, doubtless assisted their fathers in farming the family subsistence plot. Married women with families would attend to the domestic responsibilities of household maintenance activities. So, the textile mill operated primarily with female labor, a pattern that had been established in the textile mills of southern New England.

Surviving archival records from the mill contain little about the everyday lives of the workers. Archaeology as a materialist science is particularly well suited to address the issue regarding the daily life of mill operatives and their families. Since the Graniteville Company was in operation until 2006, no archaeology has ever been conducted at Graniteville to reveal the contextual

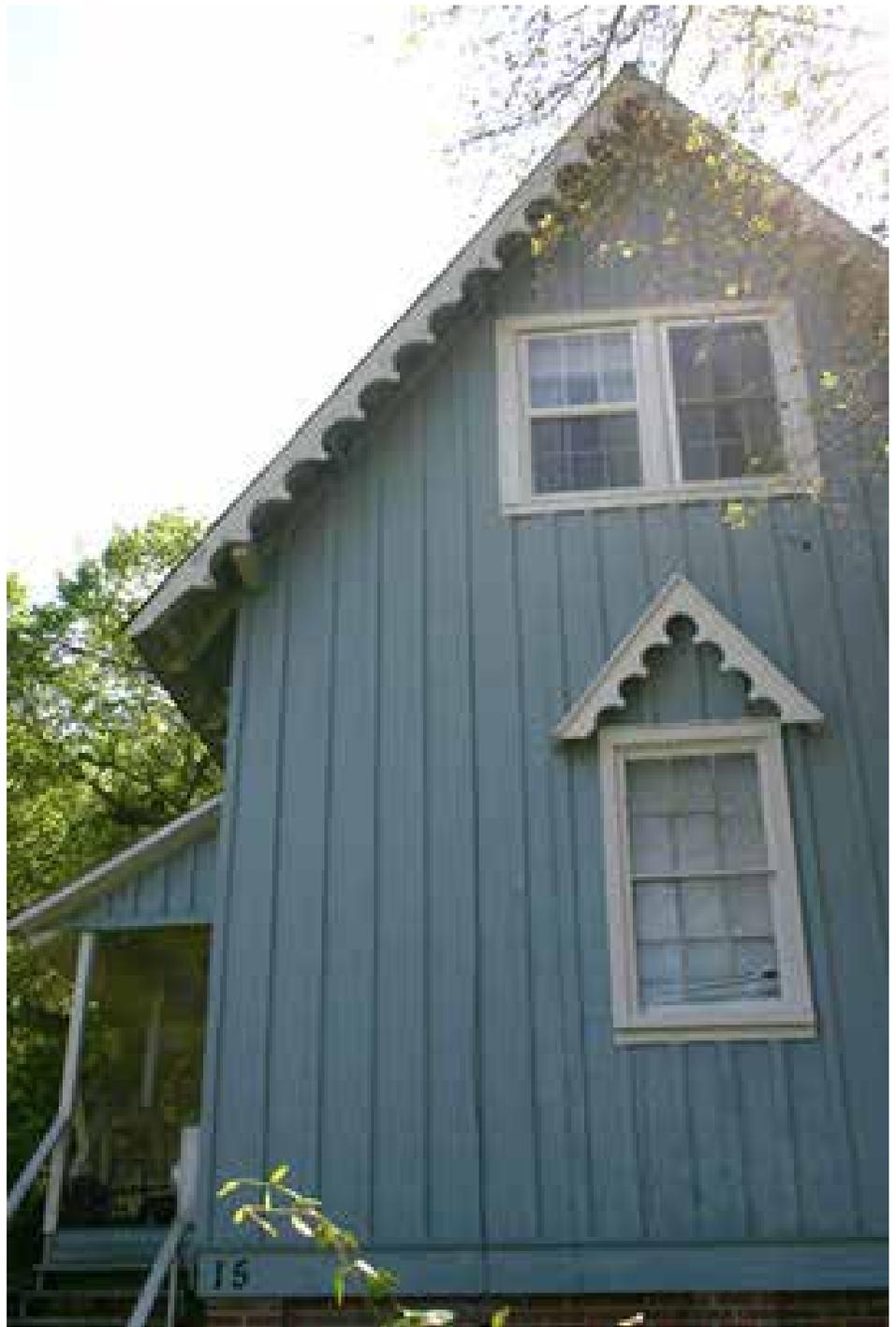


Fig. 2: Gothic Revival Style cottage constructed ca. 1846 at House Lot No. 15. (SCIAA photo by George Wingard)

record of this mill town until this project. Thus, the material condition of the mill laborers that occupied Graniteville during the 19th century remains undocumented. Our purpose is to recover artifacts and identify cultural features that will chronicle early proletariat existence in one of the Deep South's hallmark working-class communities. Since an obvious gap exists between the destroyed early documentary history and the 19th-century

archaeological deposits at Graniteville, our theoretical concern involves the political economy of Graniteville and its influence on working-class domestic life there. In other words, we are not so much focusing on the industrial archaeology of textile manufacture at Graniteville, but rather a social archaeology, to better understand the social relations of production between the capitalist objective at Graniteville and the standard of living of the resident labor



Fig. 3: Post mold in bottom right corner of shovel test at House Lot No. 11. (SCIAA photo by George Wingard)

force.

Twenty-three operatives' cottages still stand along Gregg Street, otherwise known as Blue Row (Fig. 2). Originally, these structures were painted with a decorative slate-blue wash presumably to match the blue-colored granite of the mill. According to an 1850 letter by Gregg, each worker's cottage had "from an acre to an acre and a half of ground attached to it." Currently, each house lot is about one quarter acre in extent. Apparently, during the mid-20th century, the back portion of each original lot was sub-divided for housing development. Other than the construction of a concrete sidewalk and curb lined with oak trees, the proposed subdivision never materialized. Our archaeological efforts thus far have focused on testing the immediate yard around each house. Eventually, we plan to expand sampling to include those undeveloped lots that were part of the original household landscape.

William Gregg was meticulous in designing his mill town and personally managed all aspects of its construction. All workers' cottages were built according

to identical specifications in dimension and each precisely spaced apart from one another. So we expect—based on this consistency in architecture and arrangement—that the array of outbuildings, privies, wells, gardens, and animal pens will be exactly the same for each house-yard. This landscape patterning should prove evident through cultural feature locations and non-random artifact distributions. While excavation at each individual worker's row house offers the opportunity to study single families over time, testing at multiple house-yards holds the promise of being able to make comparisons among households. In turn, this will allow us to characterize any diversity throughout the entire neighborhood for the latter 19th century.

To date, we have surveyed four house lots excavating a total of 124 50 X 50 centimeter-shovel test pits on five-meter grids. About 25 potential cultural features have been encountered, with most being possible post molds (Fig. 3). We have tentatively scheduled at least three house lots for further survey during the remainder of 2013. Presently, we are

engaged in the inventory and classification of recovered items. This information will allow us to generate data analyses of specific artifact patterns for each yard. These archaeological signatures, coupled with the location of recorded cultural features, will be employed to guide further testing and, eventually, the location of large block excavations.

For purposes of our discussion here, we focused on two of the lots surveyed so far and these are recorded as House Lots Number 11 and 15 (Fig. 4). The mill house structures were built in alignment with the plane of the hill-slope, so little if any disturbing activity occurred to the original ground surface. However, during remodeling and upgrades during the 1920s when kitchens were added to the original structures, the hill-slope was graded to accommodate the added-room structure thus, severely disturbing any 19th century archaeological deposits primarily in the midsections of each house lot. For this reason, our work primarily focused on the front and back portions of each lot.

A standard grid was overlaid on each lot with the datum consistently established off the front-center pier of each house. All shovel test pits were excavated on a five-meter grid across these yards. Our survey efforts have recovered just over 3,500 artifacts, but interestingly only about 15 percent date to the 19th century.

At this point, we note that the bulk of recovered 19th-century materials primarily include personal items, architectural hardware and tools, food storage and serving-ware containers, and home-heating/cooking fuel resources, such as coal. Especially evident are children's toys, school items (fragments of writing slate and slate pencils), personal adornment items, patent medicine bottles, as well as stoneware and refined earthenware vessels. These objects are associated with a personal use of space in the immediate yard area. Eventually, as we excavate the back portions of each original house yard, we expect to detect more generalized trash middens, as well as the location of privies, garden plots, and animal pens.

Ultimately, our research will expand to include the yards of boarding houses and particularly those of mill supervisors. The variety of artifact types recovered will point to any differences in affluence between the households of operatives and supervisors residing there. Through this socio-anthropological study, we will attain a deeper understanding of the social relations between the mill operatives and their supervisors. Please visit our Graniteville Archaeological Project page on Facebook for further details and updates on this research.

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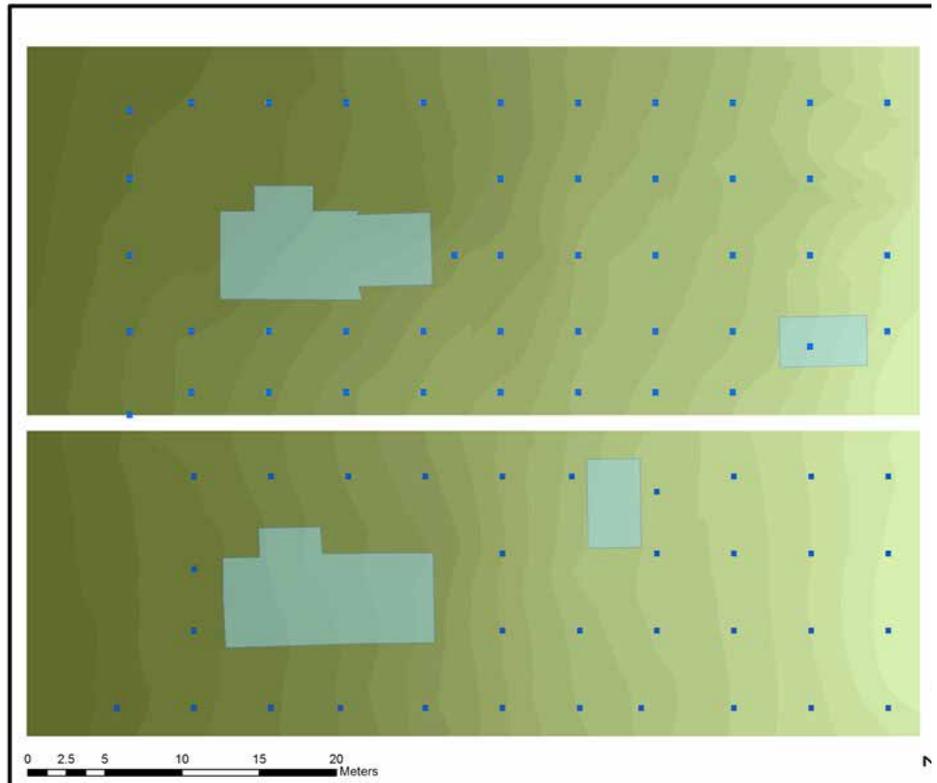


Fig. 4: House Lots Number 11 (upper) and 15 (lower) showing mill house, shed, and shovel test pit locations. (SCIAA illustration by Chris Thornock)



Fig. 5: The historic Graniteville Mill designed and built by William Gregg was constructed between 1846 and 1848. (SCIAA photo by George Wingard)