Upcoming Santa Elena Field Projects

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Upcoming Santa Elena Field Projects
By Chester DePratter

After several years during which we did no fieldwork at the Spanish colonial Santa Elena site on Parris Island, Stanley South and I have obtained funds from the U.S. Marine Corps to conduct four field projects there over the next year and a half. These projects will allow us to investigate new parts of the site as well as to complete research on the pottery kiln we discovered there in 1993.

Perhaps the most important project will involve preliminary testing along the shoreline in anticipation of bank stabilization. Since the site was abandoned in 1587, approximately 125 to 150 feet of the shoreline (including parts of at least two forts) has been lost to erosion. Now the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has been hired to produce a stabilization plan, and we will provide input to that plan based on what we know of the site’s archaeology based on more than 25 years of excavations. The new research, to be done in fall 2005, will involve looking at several areas along the shoreline to assist in planning for the stabilization of this National Historical Landmark site.

In late winter 2006, we will be working in the moat of Fort San Felipe to investigate some human remains we found there in 1997. The bones were tossed in the Spanish moat as it was being filled in the 1570s or 1580s, and we suspect that they may belong to some of the French crew of Le Prince, who were rounded up, questioned, then put to death at Santa Elena between 1577 and 1580. Dr. Matthew Williamson, a forensic anthropologist at Georgia Southern University, will be conducting the analysis of whatever remains we find. For now the bones will be left in place, but once we know the extent of the deposit, we will find funds to return to do more work in this part of the moat.

Early in the spring of 2006, we will be digging in the old eighth fairway in a search for an Indian council house seen by William Hilton when he was there in 1663. Hilton visited Parris Island as part of his search for a place for Barbadian colonists to settle along the southeast U.S. coast. He visited the Indian town of “St. Ellens” where he found a large council house in the shape of a “Dove-house” that was “round, two hundred foot at least, compleately covered with Palmeta-leaves, the wal-plate being twelve foot high, or thereabouts, and within lodging Rooms and forms.” Based on our shovel testing survey of 1995, we know where the concentration of late 17th century Indian pottery is located on the site, so we are going to do some testing in that area to see if we can find evidence of this large structure.

The final project, which we will start in summer 2006, involves continued excavations in the vicinity of the Spanish pottery kiln we discovered near the present golf course clubhouse in 1993. With the newly obtained funds, we will investigate an area near the kiln that could contain a well (none found around the kiln to date), the potter’s house, or perhaps even the potter’s waster dump. We will also do some additional testing in a sinkhole located near the kiln that may have been the source of clay for the potter, as well as a source of water and perhaps even served as a place for disposal of kiln waster material. Available funds will support these various excavations as well as completion of a final report on the kiln and its contents as well as all excavations in the area surrounding it.

Stan and I look forward to resuming work at Santa Elena. As always, our work there will be open to the public. The Parris Island Museum will have a new Santa Elena exhibit completed by the end of the year, so be sure to go see that exhibit when you come to visit our excavations. For details concerning the excavations, call Chester DePratter at SCIAA by email at depratter@sc.edu or by phone (803) 777-8170.