

4-2007

Santa Elena Pottery Kiln Revisited

Chester B. DePratter

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

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/sciaa_staffpub



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Publication Info

Published in *Legacy*, Volume 11, Issue 1, 2007, pages 6-7.

<http://www.cas.sc.edu/sciaa/>

© 2007 by The South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology

This Article is brought to you by the Archaeology and Anthropology, South Carolina Institute of at Scholar Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty & Staff Publications by an authorized administrator of Scholar Commons. For more information, please contact dillarda@mailbox.sc.edu.

Research Division

Santa Elena Pottery Kiln Revisited

By Chester DePratter

When I found the Santa Elena pottery kiln in 1993, I never imagined that I would still be working on that locality 14 years later. But sometimes in archaeology we have to go slower than we would like because much of what we do is driven by the availability of funds. That has certainly been the case with the kiln and surrounding area, but there have been other factors involved as well.

Santa Elena was a Spanish colonial settlement established on Parris Island near Beaufort in 1566. It was the capital of Spanish Florida from 1566 to 1576, when it was temporarily abandoned due to attack by local Native Americans. The town was reestablished in 1577, but it no longer served as the capital at that time. After another ten years of occupation, the town was abandoned again in 1587, and it was never reoccupied.

At its peak, the town contained approximately 40 houses, government offices, stores, warehouses, a church, and sundry other buildings. Over the 21 years of its occupation, there were four—and possibly five—forts built to defend the town and its residents.

The Spanish kiln was found through shovel testing in the area adjacent to the present golf course clubhouse. At the time, I was

looking for one of Santa Elena's forts, Fort San Marcos (I), which was built in 1577. Although I did not find that fort (and we have still not found it), one of our shovel tests penetrated the stoke hole of what turned out to be the kiln.

Stan South and I excavated the kiln (with the assistance of Jim Legg, Richard Polhemus, and Linda Carnes-McNaughton, among others) in the spring of 1993. The kiln consisted of a firing chamber about four feet square set in a shallow hole lined with bricks. There were two



Reconstructive drawing of Santa Elena potter's kiln. (SCIAA drawing by James B. Legg)

brick arches used to elevate the pots above the heat source on the floor of the chamber. There was also an arched firebox on one end where fuel was fed into the fire and through which coals were pushed beneath the pots. We found no remains of the superstructure, but we believe it consisted of a puddled clay/daub shell with pot fragments used to control airflow through the body of the kiln.

When we excavated the kiln, we found that it had been used only a few times before being abandoned. The entire firing chamber was filled with bricks from the collapsed arches and large fragments of nearly 50 pots that had been made in the kiln. None of these fragments showed any evidence of glazing, though many of the forms would have been glazed if made for everyday use. Based on our reconstructions of those pots in the kiln, we believe that it was mainly a test kiln, in which a potter was trying out local clays to see how they worked on the potter's wheel and how those vessels fired in a small, simple updraft kiln. We believe that the kiln was in use around 1586-1587 just prior to the final abandonment of Santa Elena. We found fragments of a few pots made in the kiln when we excavated on the two governor's lots in the town of Santa Elena in 1993.

In the years after those initial excavations, we went back to excavate more of the area surrounding the kiln. This work involved removal of cart paths and cart parking areas, so we had to proceed in coordination with the needs of golf course operations. In the spring of 1994, we worked in the area to the northwest of the kiln, and we found what we believe to be the potter's workshop. On the end of this structure closest to the kiln, we found the ballast stone on which the potter's wheel shaft rested; the turning of this shaft had worn a depression about 1/4-inch deep into this very hard stone. The ballast stone was held in place by a packing

of unfired clay, likely the same clay that the potter used to throw the pots we found in the kiln.

In the spring of 1997, we returned to the clubhouse area to conduct additional shovel testing in an effort to discover the location of the potter's waster dump, but we did not find it. In the fall of 1997, we excavated a large block to the north and west of the kiln with the expectation that we would find more structures associated with the kiln and perhaps the waster dump. Instead, we found a dense late 18th/19th century deposit with numerous associated features but very little material related to the kiln.

In 1999, we worked on a site (38BU1834) located about 100 yards north of the kiln. I was interested in that area because there was a small pond shown there on old maps, but today there is only a clump of trees in a small circle around the perimeter of the former pond. The pond stood open until it was filled with garbage by the Marines during World War I. We shovel tested and cored in and around the pond (likely a natural sinkhole), but we did not find any Spanish pottery or evidence that it was used in conjunction with the kiln. We did find a clay deposit on the edge of the pond, and preliminary testing suggested that the potter could have used that clay.

There was one more place we wanted to excavate before we finalized the kiln report, and that was beneath a concrete picnic shelter slab about 16 feet square located about 15 feet to the east of the kiln. Through the years we requested permission to remove this slab and excavate beneath it, and on more than one occasion we had permission to remove it. But at each

of those opportunities, we either did not have the needed funds to put a crew into the field or a new base commanding general would arrive and cancel our permission to dig there.

Finally, in the fall of 2006, we were able to dig beneath that concrete. With funds provided by the Marine Corps and assistance provided by Depot Archaeologist, Dr. Bryan Howard, we used a backhoe to lift that slab in August, 2006. As it turns out, our perseverance paid off.

Beneath the footprint of the concrete slab, we found both the potter's house and a well. The house was roughly 12 feet X 16 feet with



Removal of concrete slab to begin search for Santa Elena potter's house. (SCIAA photo)

postholes about two feet across holding posts approximately 0.8 feet in diameter. There was a shell/trash deposit on the floor at one end of the structure. The well was located several feet to the east of the house. Due to time limitations, we did not get to dig the well in the Fall 2006 field season. At some time in the future, we will return with a well point system and excavate this important feature. There is a good possibility that it will contain trash and waster material from the clean up that took place when the kiln was abandoned.

We also conducted additional excavations at site 38BU1834 in a continuing effort to determine if the potter had used that pond/sinkhole as a clay or water source or refuse dump. Our 2006 trenches did not encounter any Spanish artifacts in or around the pond. We did further expose the clay source on the pond's margin, and we took large clay samples for testing to see if this clay was indeed used by the potter. Those samples will be processed in the coming months.

So, all in all, the fall, 2006 field season at the Santa Elena pottery kiln was a great success. We found the potter's house and well for which we have been searching since 1993. We still did not find the waster dump, but we now have a new opportunity to continue our search for that feature. Adjacent to the potter's house was the mounded tee of the old 7th hole on the golf course. That hole was closed in 2001 as part of the golf course remodeling, so the tee was no longer being used. In consultation with the golf course staff, I learned that they needed fill to remodel tees on other holes, so I suggested

they use the fill from the old 7th tee. After consultation with Bryan Howard and Valerie Marcil at the S.C. Department of Archives and History, workers were given permission to remove that tee, thereby exposing a large area adjacent to the kiln that had previously been inaccessible. I plan to take a crew back to Santa Elena this spring or early summer to conduct shovel testing at 10-foot intervals to see if there is any evidence of the waster dump in this area. A future article here in *Legacy* will let you know if we were successful.