
12-2015

In Search of Yamasee Indian Villages in Upper Port Royal Waters

James D. Spirek

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

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 19, Issue 2, 2015, pages 12-14.

<http://artsandsciences.sc.edu/sciaa/>

© 2015 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 digres@mailbox.sc.edu.

In Search of Yamasee Indian Villages in Upper Port Royal Waters

By James Spirek and Chester DePratter

In 1683, a new group of immigrant Indians began arriving on the islands surrounding Port Royal Sound on the lower South Carolina coast. These new arrivals were reported to be Yamasee, who were relocating to the north as the coastal Georgia Spanish missions were being abandoned.



Figure 1: Yamasee pottery exposed on Combahee River floor. (SCIAA photo)

By the end of 1684, there were said to be about 1,500 Yamasee in ten or more villages around Port Royal Sound. A group of Scotch settlers in their new settlement of Stuart's Town near present-day Beaufort instigated Yamasee attacks against the Spanish missions in northeast and north

central Florida. Loot taken in these attacks included church furnishings and captives who were enslaved and sold to the English in Charles Town and to the Scots.

By 1686, the Spanish governor at St. Augustine had grown tired of these incursions, so he sent a fleet of ships to Port Royal to attack Stuart's Town and the Yamasee towns. The Spaniards destroyed the settlements of both the Scots and the Yamasee. The surviving Scots relocated back to Charles Town, and the Yamasee moved north to the banks of the Ashepoo and Combahee Rivers where they settled in several towns. The Yamasee remained in the Ashepoo and Combahee region until the mid-1690s when they moved back to Port Royal Sound. In 1707, the Carolina government passed an act prohibiting occupation of islands by the Yamasee, so they all were forced to relocate to the mainland areas surrounding Port Royal. One of the towns involved in this relocation was Pocosabo. Pocosabo was one of the Upper Yamasee towns composed of coastal Georgia Guala who had joined the Yamasee in



Figure 2: Chester DePratter inspecting collection of pottery and other artifacts recovered by former MRD underwater archaeologist Ashley Deming. (SCIAA photo)



Figure 3: Dredging operations in Combahee River. (SCIAA photo)

the 1683 relocation to Port Royal. DePratter located this town on the mainland inland from Whale Branch near Beaufort in 1989 and conducted limited testing there the following year.

The Yamasee only remained in South Carolina for a little over 30 years. During their stay in Carolina, the Yamasee were seriously abused by traders and eventually were heavily indebted to them. In 1715, they allied themselves with the Creeks, Apalachee, Yuchi, Apalachicola, and others and killed Thomas Nairne, Indian Agent, and traders at the Yamasee town of Pocotaligo on April 14 of that year. A large force of Indians marched toward Charles Town, but they were repulsed and forced to retreat to the south. After this war, most of the Yamasee resided in Florida near St. Augustine.

For the past two years, the Maritime Research Division (MRD) and Dr. Chester DePratter, of the Research Division, have investigated the remains of a Yamasee Indian occupation site dating to the late 1680s and mid-1690s on the banks of the Combahee River. Operations at the site in 2013, included sonar and diving operations to discover the loci of Yamasee Indian pottery sherds eroding into the river. Surface collecting from the river floor by MRD underwater archaeologists and volunteers succeeded in identifying a concentration of culturally related pottery adjacent to the suspected occupation site (Figures 1 and 2). DePratter had hoped to conduct shovel tests to identify the site on land, but the landowner never granted permission to



Figure 4: Nate Fulmer and Jim Spirek, along with volunteer Ted Churchill, sorting through dredge spoil for pottery sherds and other artifacts. (SCIAA photo)

excavate. Refer to a previous *Legacy* article by DePratter that recounts the methods and findings from this phase of the project (Vol. 17, No. 2, November 2013, pp. 10-11). In 2014, the MRD and DePratter returned to the river to conduct underwater excavations in an attempt to discover ceramics and other related artifacts, especially beads, buried near the bank. Underwater excavations recovered some pottery sherds, but no beads or other associated artifacts, and determined that by far the most prolific means of recovering artifacts remained in surface collecting ceramics exposed on the river floor (Figures 3 and 4).

Due to the success of finding artifacts associated with the Yamasee occupation on the Combahee River, the principal investigators looked to expand their research by investigating related habitation sites on the rivers in the upper Port Royal Sound region. As mentioned above, DePratter had located evidence of Pocosabo on a creek off Whale Branch River. The site of Pocosabo sits atop a bluff adjacent to a small tidal creek that has gradually eroded back into the village terrestrial deposits. DePratter had also speculated on the location of other suspected Yamasee habitation sites based on historic maps, place names, and

locations of high lands adjacent to other waterways in this area. To undertake this new direction and expansion in their research, the principal investigators secured funding from an Archaeological Research Trust grant.

We spent a week, June 8-12, 2015, searching for high ground and other likely habitation sites at several creeks and rivers in Beaufort County looking for evidence of Yamasee Indian villages dating to the early 1700s. The first two days were spent conducting remote-sensing operations in the adjacent waterway next to the land features. The primary tool for this phase

was the side-scan sonar used to depict the creek bottoms, primarily looking to determine sediment compositions, typically mud, sand, or marl, to distinguish geomorphological features, such as sandbars or gravel beds, and to identify potential diving hazards, including submerged trees (Figure 5). A high and actively eroding bluff characterized the waterfront at Pocosabo with many fallen trees littering the intertidal zone (Figure 6). Initial interpretation of the sonograms of the creek floor suggested a series of sand or mud ridges perpendicular to the channel (Figure 7). Instead, divers unexpectedly encountered a strata of exposed sedimentary rock that hindered searching for artifacts that was compounded by extremely poor visibility. We checked in the hollows and along the ridges but did not find any pottery or any other artifacts, except one green push-up bottle dating to the 1730s—outside our targeted time period (Figure 8). Unfortunately and despite our best efforts, we came up empty for any type of pottery, other diagnostic artifacts, or evidence of Yamasee settlements along the waterways. The most interesting aspect we encountered was the rock lens at two underwater locations, as well as a surface outcrop at a small hammock along one of the creeks (Figure 9). A poor quality chert was also present and according to Dr. Al Goodyear, may have served in a pinch for making lithic tools by local inhabitants. Despite the negative underwater results,



Figure 5: Survey crew composed of Joe Beatty, Jim Spirek, and Chester DePratter. (SCIAA photo)

archaeological testing of the adjacent investigated high-grounds may reveal Yamasee-related artifacts much like at Pocosabo. Nonetheless, the week was well spent with new MRD staff member, Jessica Irwin, our volunteers, Cat Sawyer and Jimmy Armstrong, and of course any opportunity working with our colleagues to bridge the land and water divide in search of South Carolina's archaeological legacy is well worth the effort. The principal investigators appreciated the support from the Archaeological Research Trust board members to undertake this project.



Figure 6: Eroding bluff at Pocosabo. (SCIAA photo)

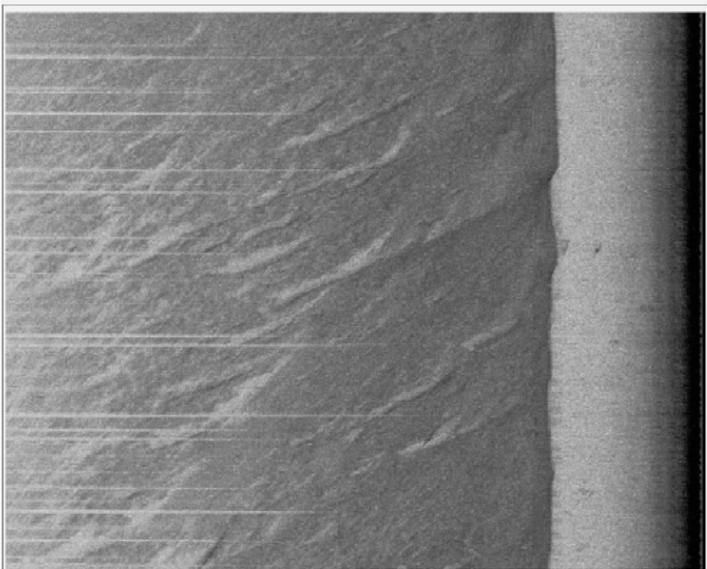


Figure 7: Rock ridges on the floor of creek adjacent to Pocosabo. (SCIAA photo)



Figure 8: Volunteers Catherine Sawyer and Jimmy Armstrong prepare to search for artifacts on creek floor. (SCIAA photo)



Figure 9: Nate Fulmer, with Joe Beatty and Jessica Irwin in johnboat, inspecting the shore of a small island composed of sedimentary rocks, interspersed with pieces of poor quality chert. (SCIAA photo)