

12-2020

Numismatic History of the Charlesfort/Santa Elena Site: The Plantation Era

Heathley A. Johnson
lucistar@hotmail.com

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



Part of the [Archaeological Anthropology Commons](#)

Publication Info

Published in *Legacy*, Volume 24, Issue 2, 2020, pages 12-13.

This Article is brought to you by the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology 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.

Numismatic History of the Charlesfort/Santa Elena Site: The Plantation Era

By Heathley A. Johnson

In all of the excavations across the Charlesfort/Santa Elena multi-component site on Parris Island, S.C., a common personal possession that has been found in varying frequencies are coins. The majority of the coins that have been found date to the early 20th-century, from the U.S. Marine Corps World War I era “Maneuver Grounds” training complex. Only a few coins dating to the 16th-century Spanish occupation or the 18th and 19th-century Plantation era occupation have been recovered. This article focuses on the Plantation era coins and what they can tell us about the early numismatic history of colonial and post-colonial America at the site.

During the early history of America, coinage was always in short supply, mostly due to the negligence of England to provide coins for the colonies. To overcome this lack, colonists freely used the coinage of foreign countries, minted their own coins or tokens, or used privately minted coins produced in England for use in America. While this satisfied some of the need, there was still a shortage of coins, especially in small denominations. The use of a variety of coins and tokens created additional issues, such as having disparate values in different parts of the country. Even after America won independence from England in the Revolutionary War, relief from the troubles with coinage was not resolved quickly. The United States Mint was not established until 1792, and it would be decades before the mint was

able to put enough coins in circulation to meet demand. As America struggled with finding the correct balance between coin denominations and metallic compositions, foreign coinage still circulated as legal tender until its use was banned in 1857.

Excavations at the Charlesfort/Santa Elena site have revealed two areas with high concentrations of artifacts from the Parris/Barnwell/Means plantation complex—around the golf course clubhouse and near the Spanish Fort San Felipe (I) (see DePratter et al. 2016). While there are artifacts and features from across the site dating to this period, it is from these two areas that all of the coins under discussion have been recovered. A total of seven coins dating from between 1735 and 1862 have been found, with one of these coins coming from England, two from the Spanish colonial mint in Mexico City, while the remaining four are of regular U.S. mintage (Table 1). The 1735 farthing, 1786 real, and 1852 three-cent coins were all recovered from excavations near the golf course clubhouse, where an early-18th to mid-19th-century slave settlement was located (Figure 1). The 1814 real, 1854 one-cent, 1858 one-cent, and 1862 one-dollar coins were found in excavations centered around Fort San Felipe (I), where the main plantation complex was likely located (Figure 2).

The study of coins in archaeology has a long history, but one that to a large degree has been mainly descriptive, with the primary benefit seen as providing a means

of dating features. In recent decades, however, researchers have been looking into what else coins can inform upon when they are used in ways beyond their primary role as a medium of exchange (e.g., Burström 2018; Haselgrove and Krmnecik 2016; Kemmers and Myrberg 2011). What then does the collection of Plantation era coins from the site have to tell us?

Given the number of coins that have been recovered, what can be learned from them is limited. The small sample size is an indication that the plantation residents had few coins, which is not completely surprising, since the plantation was on an isolated island occupied mostly by slaves. However, the sample size could also be reflective of sample bias. The area to the west of Fort San Felipe (I), which has the densest concentration of plantation era artifacts at the site as revealed in the Santa Elena boundary survey, has only been sampled through shovel tests (DePratter and South 1995:60). Were larger-scale excavations be conducted in this area, perhaps more coins would be found.

All of the coins were recovered from the upper mixed-context levels of excavation units. This suggests that they were simply lost and not deliberately placed with a specific purpose in mind, such as within the foundations of a structure in a ritualistic context. Nor are any of the coins pierced to facilitate suspension, which would be an indication that they had been transformed into charms or items of symbolic significance. In looking at the coins, it is interesting to note that the three from around the clubhouse are worn to a much higher degree than the four from near Fort San Felipe (I), suggesting that they circulated for a greater amount of time before being lost. Finally, the coins from around Fort San Felipe (I) may have belonged to and been lost by soldiers of a Federal picket camp during the Civil War, as the same area

Issuing Country	Mintage Date	Denomination
England	1735	1 farthing
Spain (Mexico City mint)	1786	1 real
Spain (Mexico City mint)	1814	1 real
U.S.A.	1852	3 cents
U.S.A.	1854	1 cent (large)
U.S.A.	1858	1 cent (small)
U.S.A.	1862	1 dollar

Table 1: List of Plantation era coins from Charlesfort/Santa Elena. (Table by Heathley Johnson)



A



B



C



Figure 1: Charlesfort/Santa Elena Plantation era coins from the club house vicinity. A) 1735 British farthing, B) 1786 Spanish 1 real, C) 1852 United States three cent. (Photo by Heathley Johnson)



A



B



C



D



Figure 2: Charlesfort/Santa Elena Plantation era coins from the Fort San Felipe (I) vicinity. A) 1814 Spanish 1 real, B) 1854 United States one cent, C) 1858 United States one cent, D) 1862 United States one dollar. (Photo by Heathley Johnson)

has produced a number of other artifacts related to such a camp.

References

Burström, Nanouschka Myrberg
2018 Money, Coins, and Archaeology.
In *Money and Coinage in the Middle Ages*,
edited by Rory Naismith, pp. 231-263. Brill,
Leiden.

DePratter, Chester B., and Stanley South
1995 Discovery at Santa Elena: Boundary
Survey. *Research Manuscript Series 221*.
South Carolina Institute of Archaeology
and Anthropology, University of South
Carolina, Columbia.

Haselgrove, Colin, and Stefan Krmnicek
2016 Archaeology of Money: From
Electrum Rings to Mobile Money. In *The
Archaeology of Money*, edited by Colin
Haselgrove and Stefan Krmnicek, pp. 1-18.
Leicester Archaeology Monograph Vol.
24. School of Archaeology and Ancient
History, University of Leicester.

Kemmers, Fleur, and Nanouschka Myrberg
2011 Rethinking Numismatics: The
Archaeology of Coins. *Archaeological
Dialogues* 18(1):87-108.