Archaeological Survey at Rose Hill Plantation State Historic Site

Stacey L. Young

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

Part of the Archaeological Anthropology Commons
Archaeological Survey at Rose Hill Plantation State Historic Site
By Stacey L. Young, Director, SCIAA Applied Research Division

The South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, Applied Research Division (SCIAA-ARD) recently completed a Phase I archaeological survey of Rose Hill Plantation State Historic Site located along the Tyger River in Union County, South Carolina. The work was performed on behalf of SC Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism (SCPRT) to assist park staff with management of the property and site interpretation. Rose Hill is an early 19th to mid-20th-century plantation site that was home to William Henry Gist, his family, and families of enslaved laborers, sharecroppers, and tenant farmers, until it was sold in 1939 to the US Forest Service (USFS). The site now operates as a State Historic Site operated by SCPRT. Rose Hill was listed in the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) in 1970 for its association with William Henry Gist, his prominence in politics, and the architecture of the house.

William Henry Gist (1807-1874), perhaps mostly known for his secessionist views, served various positions in the South Carolina government between 1840 and 1862. Now known as Rose Hill, the 44-acre tract was part of a nearly 2,000-acre plantation that served as his home place. W.H. Gist received the property from his father Francis Fincher Gist who had a mill nearby on the Tyger River.

Cotton and corn were grown on the plantation that was maintained by a population of about 200 enslaved laborers. Gist employed a farm manager to oversee the daily operations of the plantation. After Gist’s death in 1874, the nearly 2,000-acre tract of land and most of his possessions were transferred to his wife Mary E. Gist. When Mary died, the land was divided between their grandchildren. It is not clear from surviving documents if members of the Gist family resided on the home place tract after Mary E. Gist passed away in 1889, although it appears that former enslaved workers and their families remained nearby and worked as sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Property transfer records indicate that the tract was rented out to various tenants, and the land was used for pasture, farmland, and timber. A 1938 (USFS) land acquisition map shows nine buildings on the property; seven are within the 44-acres that would become Rose Hill (Figure 1). Notes from the land transfer indicate that...
three African Americans (Jack Booker, Henry Jeter, and Clark Glenn) were tenants and working as sharecroppers. Jack Booker was recorded as living in the Gist mansion and additional tenant houses, outbuildings, fences, and terraces were inventoried on the property. Five years later in 1943, the US Forest Service sold the property to the Daughters of the Revolutionary War (DAR) and Clyde Franks. Franks restored the mansion and developed the ground for public visitation. He hired a family to live on the property as caretakers and give guided tours.

While much is known about the political dealings of W.H. Gist through surviving letters and court documents, no journals or ledgers have been located that detail the daily tasks and procedures of the plantation. Furthermore, there are no 19th century maps that show locations of buildings associated with the plantation. Much of what is known about the mid-late 19th century plantation has been revealed thorough census data and land transaction records. Currently, 12 buildings are located on the property, including a two-story Georgian-style brick covered stucco house, flanked with Greek Revival-style porches that was home to William Henry Gist and his family. Besides the Gist mansion, a kitchen building/park office, caretaker/tenant house, pump house, well house, loom house, carriage house/shed, restrooms building, picnic shelters, and two staff residences are located on the park (Figure 2). A short hiking trail follows an old roadway through the woods and passes near the locations of former tenant houses. The extant buildings were constructed between ca. 1820 and 2018 and reflect the various ownerships histories. The earliest building is believed to be the Gist mansion (ca. 1828-1830), although a precise construction date is not currently known.

The archaeological survey was successful in locating at least 11 distinct site locations. Most of the artifacts are indicative of late 19th to 20th century occupations and several locations encountered above ground architectural remains or sub-surface features. Results of the survey found little evidence of discrete 19th century components. Since the 44-acres is only a small portion of the approximately 2,000 acres that once comprised Gist’s plantation, it is possible that farm buildings, workshops, and former houses for slaves were located on another area within the property. However, additional excavations at Rose Hill may identify these locations.

Three sites (Tenant House 1, Tenant House 2, and Tenant House 4) contain above ground architectural remains.
associated with house sites occupied by tenant farmers or sharecroppers. An aerial image taken in 1933 shows each of the houses (Figure 3), and they are illustrated on the 1938 USFS map. At two of the sites; Tenant House 1 and Tenant House 4, fieldstone support piers remain aligned surrounding chimney remains and therefore, the size and layout of the buildings can be inferred (Figures 4 and 5). Both houses contained a central chimney constructed of brick and porches. The houses are different sizes and are oriented differently. Interestingly, at Tenant House 2, no piers were observed, and the chimney was constructed of stone and brick (Figure 6). Few artifacts were found in shovel tests excavated in the areas surrounding the house site locations, except for Tenant House 1. However, test units were excavated at each of these locations by David Jones, Andrew Agha, and Nicole Isenbarger in 2018, and numerous artifacts were recovered and will be incorporated into the results presented in the final report.

Several previously recorded late 19th to 20th century archaeological sites with above ground architectural remains similar to those described above are located in the vicinity of Rose Hill and are situated on lands formerly owned by W.H. Gist. Presumably, these sites were occupied by former slaves who later worked as contract laborers, sharecroppers, or tenant farmers for Gist. In 1865, following emancipation, several of the enslaved laborers owned by Gist left the plantation, although many of them remained and signed labor contracts that allowed them to stay on the plantation, and they worked in exchange for food. In 1866, there were approximately 67 laborers, which is less than half of the 179 who were enslaved by Gist in 1860. Over the next ten years, the number of contracts decreased, and the nature of the contracts changed. In 1875, there were seven individuals. The 1913 Union County Soil Map shows dispersed settlement on and just beyond the Gist property boundary in 1860 (Figure 7).

Park staff have conducted extensive background research, gathered primary documents, and conducted interviews with families who lived at Rose Hill. Further review of property records and land transactions along with Census data, maps, aerial images, and archaeological remains, may provide additional details of settlement patterns of emancipated slaves and the formation of tenant farming communities.

Acknowledgments
Thanks are extended to Al Hester, David Jones, and Matt Lawson of SC Parks, Recreation, and Tourism; Nate Johnson and Stephanie Cohen at the Rose Hill Plantation State Historic Site; Josh Chaplin, John Fisher, Caroline Hall, Elena Vories, and Tamara Wilson who assisted with the fieldwork.