

Spring 2023

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### Publication Info

Published in *Legacy*, Volume 27, Issue 1, Spring 2023, pages 9-11.

2023 by The South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology

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# The Search for Stuarts Town (1684-1686)

By Dr. Chester B. DePratter

More than a dozen years ago, I approached Dr. Charles “Charlie” Cobb, at the time SCIAA’s Director, concerning collaboration on a search for Stuarts Town (occupied 1684-1686), a settlement of Scots on Port Royal Island near Beaufort, South Carolina. At that time, I had been conducting research on this lost colony for more than 20 years, and I believed that previously identified locations by historians were wrong. Charlie listened to my evidence and agreed to work with me in mounting a search for the remnants of Stuarts Town. A multitude of other projects and Charlie’s departure from SCIAA to take a position at the Florida Museum of Natural History put our search on hold until early in 2020 when we met at his home in Gainesville, Florida, to begin planning a field project in Beaufort, South Carolina with the goal of finding Stuarts Town. We were joined at that meeting by Dr. Peter Moore (Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi) who was writing a book-length treatment of Stuarts Town history (Figure 1).

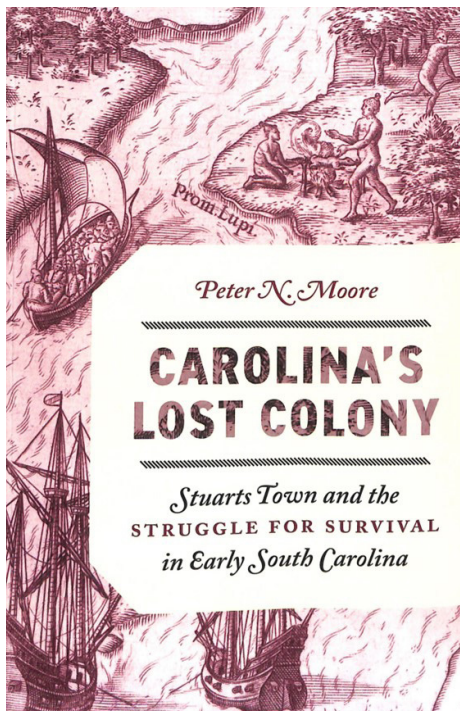


Figure 1: Cover of Dr. Peter Moore’s history of Stuarts Town published by University of South Carolina Press. (See Page 37)



Figure 2: Dr. Larry Rowland, Emeritus Professor of History, USC Beaufort, speaking at the Stuarts Town search kickoff on June 6, 2022. (Photo by Jamie Koelker)

Our plans for a Spring, 2020, field project had to be postponed due to the Covid pandemic, and it was not until June 6, 2022, that we completed planning and hosted a kickoff event in Beaufort (Figure 2) (see *Legacy* Vol. 26 No. 1, August 2022). Our search area, contained in The Point neighborhood of Beaufort, was located on more than 150 parcels of privately owned lots, city parks, and other holdings that would require permission to access (Figure 3). We believed that a public event would alert the local populace to our research plans and facilitate approval of our work by property owners. In the end, we received permission from the City of Beaufort, Beaufort County Open Land Trust, and 31 other property owners to excavate shovel tests measuring approximately 1 X 2 feet (30.5 X 61 centimeters) in our selected research area that covered approximately 45 acres. Our field research was conducted August 8-12, 2022.

All past identifications of Stuarts Town’s location had placed it at Spanish Point about 1.5 miles down the Beaufort River from downtown Beaufort (Figure 4). This location was based on a warrant for land awarded to a Mr. Pinny in 1699. This warrant described his property at Spanish Point as follows: “Pinny had a Warrt out

of ye. Secretry’s Office for that Point of Land, lying on Port Royall River below the Bluff, on wch the Scott’s Town formerly was commonly Known by ye. Name of ye. Spanish Point Dated Janury 12th. 1698 /9.” In reading this warrant, I realized that Spanish Point was not the location of Stuarts Town but that, by shifting placement of a single comma, it described Spanish Point as being “below the bluff on which the Scot’s Town formerly was.” In this context, “below” meant down river from or to the south.

I met historian Dr. Louis Roper (State University of New York-New Paltz) at a conference in Charleston in 2000, and after learning of my interest in Stuarts Town, he sent me an image of a map showing the “Scotts Settlement” on the north end of Port Royal Island in the area now occupied by Beaufort and not at Spanish Point (Figure 5).

Given this evidence, Charlie Cobb and I realized that the 220 town lots laid out in 1684 for Stuarts Town were most likely located beneath downtown Beaufort and the adjacent Point neighborhood. With most of the Beaufort portion covered by buildings, streets, parking lots, and other obstacles to excavation, we focused our shovel testing in The Point neighborhood east of Craven Street and south of Prince



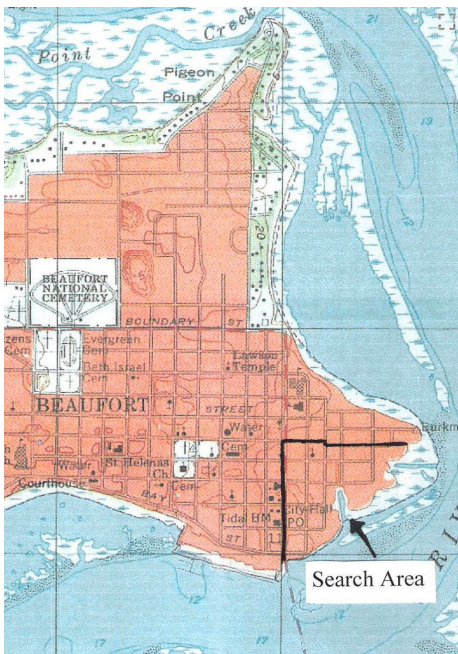


Figure 3: Stuarts Town search area in The Point neighborhood. (SCIAA photo)

Street.

At our June 6, 2022, kickoff event, Hannah Hoover (University of Michigan Ph.D. candidate) excavated the initial shovel tests, one in Morrall Park and the other on the house lot owned by Beaufort's Mayor, Stephen Murray. These two shovel tests produced an abundance of artifacts down to a depth of approximately 40 centimeters (c. 16 inches) (Figure 6). I mistakenly assumed that the depths of these two tests were representative of what we would encounter throughout the



Figure 4: Map showing location of Spanish Point.

search area, and so Charlie and I planned on using a crew of 10 excavators to dig approximately 250 shovel tests on 35 properties in a single week. As it turned out, those shovel tests located south of Craven Street were much deeper, in most cases 80 to 100 centimeters (2.6 to 3.3 feet) deep, and thus the number of shovel tests we could excavate in a week was reduced by half. The field crew excavated 93 shovel tests on 17 private house lots and another 25 in parks.

Our hope was to find artifacts dating to the 1684-1686 habitation period and,



Figure 5: Location of "Scotts Settlement" shown on map by Joel Gascoyne, "A Plat of the Province of Carolina in North America," ca. 1685.

if we were exceptionally lucky, to find remnants of a structure burned in the August 1686 Spanish attack that destroyed the settlement. We also knew that perhaps fewer than 50 house lots were ever claimed, and that not all of those would have had any kind of building constructed on them. We realized that both of our research goals were truly long shots given the very limited number of shovel tests in an area covering 45 acres, but if nothing else, archaeologists must remain optimistic in the face of such long odds challenges. As that old proverb says, "Nothing ventured, nothing gained."

Figure 7 shows the location of all of our excavated shovel tests and the red stars indicate where we recovered ceramic artifact types that date to the late 17<sup>th</sup> and

early 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Identification of a two-year occupation (1684-1686) in an area continuously occupied for nearly 300 years is difficult to pin down due to the long-time span over which most ceramic types were produced (Figure 8). The best we can say based on our limited excavations and small artifact sample size is that there was occupation in The Point area in the Stuarts Town period, and that early occupation was scattered throughout our search area as well as along the bank of the Beaufort River. It seems likely that more lots would have been taken up by the Scots on the higher bluff area where the city of Beaufort now sits rather than in the more low-lying area now occupied by The Point. If that is indeed the case, then our chance of finding evidence of Stuarts Town was even more of a long shot. I should note that we also found evidence of Indian occupation spanning 4,000 years in our Point shovel tests (Figure 9).

Two properties produced evidence that will require further investigation. On one property, a deep shovel test produced ceramics and artifacts of the Stuarts Town period, and in the very bottom on that shovel test at a depth of nearly a meter (3.3 feet) we exposed what archaeologists call a "feature." In this case the feature was a straight-sided area of soil indicative of the presence of a pit, ditch, or perhaps even a fort moat (the Scots did have a fortification with at least three cannons). The other property of interest contained an area with



Figure 6: Artifacts recovered from shovel test in Morrall Park. Upper left: shell; upper right: construction debris; lower left: ceramics and glass; lower center: iron; lower right: stone. (Photo by Hannah Hoover)



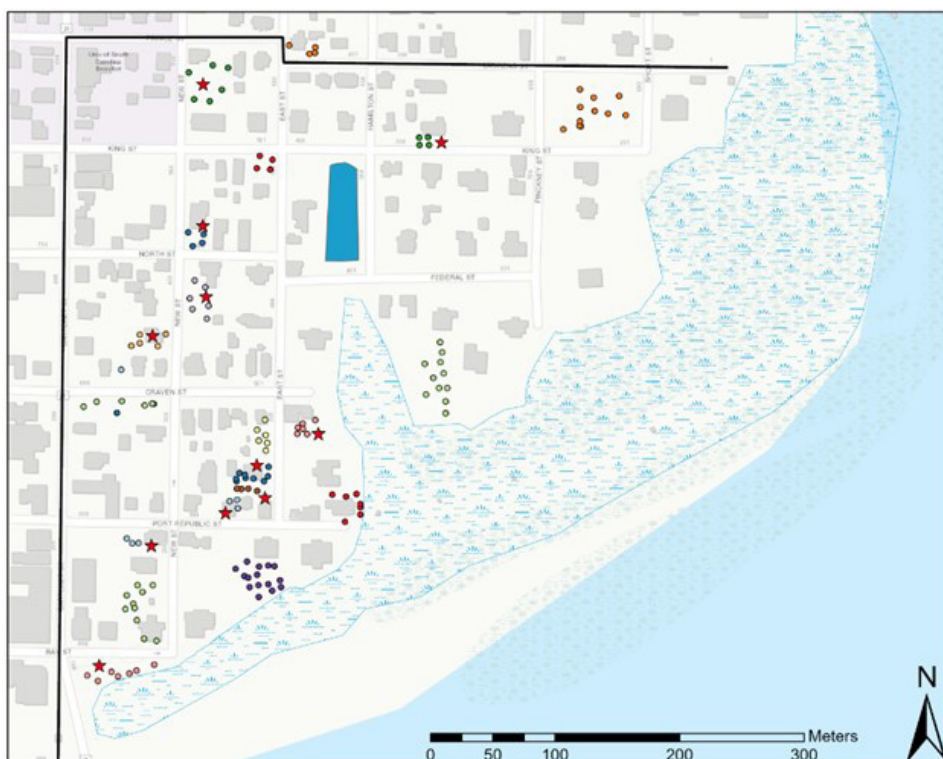


Figure 7: Plot of all shovel tests excavated in The Point with stars indicating locations of potential 17th century deposits. (Map by John Fisher)

late 17<sup>th</sup> or early 18<sup>th</sup> artifacts and nothing later. At some time in the not-too-distant future, Charlie and I will return to these two properties to continue our search for the long-lost remnants of Stuarts Town.

Our search project would not have been possible without the work of STAG (Stuarts Town Action Group) headed by my good friend, Larry Koolkin, now an Archaeological Research Trust (ART) Board Member at SCIAA. STAG planned and coordinated the June 6, 2022, kickoff event, and they assisted in every aspect of the fieldwork from raising funds to sponsoring public visitation to delivering bottled water to our hard-working crew.

Beaufort's Mayor, Stephen Murray, was a strong supporter from the very beginning, and because of his interest the City of Beaufort assisted in every way possible including allowing access to city parks and allowing us to raise funds through their Pride of Place program. Matt and Laura McAlhaney, owners of City Loft Hotel, were outstanding hosts for all the crew who spent the week in very comfortable accommodations. Jamie Koelker filmed the field work for production of an educational video or other products in the coming months.

An exhibit on the search project at the recovered artifacts is being planned for the Beaufort History Museum.

The author of this article was ferried around in a comfortable golf cart by Larry Koolkin to coordinate with homeowners and oversee locations and excavations of all shovel tests. Our project had many partners and sponsors, and they are all

acknowledged on our website: <http://stuartstown.com>. This work could not have been done without the generous cooperation and assistance of Point property owners.

The search is not over. Charlie and I believe we are looking in the right area and that conclusive evidence of Stuarts Town will eventually be found there. As we often say in archaeology, "More work is needed."



Figure 9: Native American pottery found in shovel tests. Top left: Stallings Plain, ca. 3,500 years old; top right, Refuge Dentate Stamped, ca. 2,800 years old; lower left, simple stamped or cord marked, ca. 2,000 years old; lower right, Irene Complicated Stamped rim with cane punctations, ca. 500 years old. (Photo by James B. Legg)



Figure 8: These early ceramic types recovered from shovel tests existed as early as the Stuarts Town period, but they were still in use after the settlement of Beaufort. Top row, (left to right), North Devon Gravel Tempered ware, lead glazed redware, lead glazed earthenware; middle row, (left to right), Staffordshire slipware (2), brown salt-glazed stoneware, Chinese porcelain (2); bottom row, (left to right), polychrome Delft (2), blue on white Delft (2). (Photo by James B. Legg)