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The Search for Sixteenth Century Santa Elena

Stanley South

University of South Carolina - Columbia, stansouth@sc.edu

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A fort site on the southern tip of Parris Island, South Carolina, has been of interest from the 1850s, when Captain George Parsons Elliott and the historian Jeptha R. Simms dug looking for the gate (Hoffman 1978: 5). Other digging was done in 1916, and 1918 and in 1923, with the latter work by Major George H. Osterhout being the most revealing (Hoffman 1978: 14). As a result of Major Osterhout's work the site was designated as the site of the French "Charlesfort" of 1562 (Hoffman 1978: 14-20; Osterhout 1923).

A controversy developed soon after when historians Mary Ross in 1925, and A. S. Salley, Jr. in 1927, clearly identified the fort site as that of the city of Santa Elena and its forts San Felipe I (1566-1570), San Felipe II (1570-1576), and Fort San Marcos (1577-1587) (Hoffman 1978; Ross 1925: 356-57; Salley 1925; 1927: 113-124). In 1957 the artifacts from the 1923 dig were identified by Albert Manucy of the National Park Service as Spanish in origin (Manucy 1957). With the identification by these historians of the Parris Island site as that of the Spanish colonial city of Santa Elena of 1566 to 1587 and its protective forts, and the research by historian Paul Hoffman of Louisiana State University who concurred with these interpretations (Hoffman 1978), the next step was archeology on the site to test these determinations.

A proposal for funding exploratory archeology on the site of Santa Elena and its forts was submitted to the National Geographic Society in May, 1979, after an earlier proposal had been turned down by the Research Committee. More specifics were desired by the Committee as to location of the Santa Elena site and a one week expedition was launched by the Office of Research and the Institute of Archeology and Anthropology at the University of South Carolina on July 1, 1979, to obtain such specific information. The discovery of Fort San Felipe II and the probable location of one structure in the city of Santa Elena resulted from this one week project. These discoveries were followed by the approval by the National Geographic Society's Research Committee of a grant for the purpose of conducting a seven month project of exploratory archeology in order to assess the potential the Parris Island sites have for extensive archeological research. This project was completed in the fall of 1979 with Stanley South as Principal Investigator and Robert L. Stephenson as Project Director.
If the "Charlesfort" site on Parris Island was actually the site of the Spanish Fort San Marcos of 1577-1587, then documents suggested that the site of the city of Santa Elena would be found to the north of Fort San Marcos during the period from 1566 to 1576, and adjacent to the fort during its occupation. Somewhere to the north of Fort San Marcos the earlier fort of San Felipe II was known to have been located, having been lost to the Indians in an attack in 1576 when the town and fort were abandoned (Hoffman 1978). Archeological testing on the high ground of Fort San Marcos seemed advisable and it was here that a sampling strategy was undertaken to discover the remains of the structures once a part of this capitol of Spanish Florida.

The major evidence expected was Spanish pottery of the sixteenth century and fired clay daub which would have been produced when the structures in the town burned in 1576. The structures were known to have been made of wood and clay, and were probably thatched with local materials such as palmetto leaves.

Given this means for identifying the location of burned clay-daubed structures it is possible to conduct a stratified systematic unaligned (Redman and Watson 1970) sampling design which will allow clustering of concentrations of daub fragments (representing houses) to be seen on a map as printed by a computer (Dudnik 1971; South and Widmer 1977: 119; Lewis 1977: 151). Such clustering would then allow pinpointing of specific sites for further more detailed excavation. It was expected that such a sampling method applied to the suspected site of Santa Elena would reveal house locations through fired daub fragments. Artifacts, whether nails, Spanish pottery or other objects would also reveal clustering provided they were present in quantities large enough to be revealed by the sampling units. It was expected, however, that because of the large quantities of fired daub compared with other artifacts left by Spanish occupation that daub would be the major means for identifying house sites through a sampling strategy.

The area to be tested was located between the Marine Corps golf course and the marsh, an oak-covered site about 200 feet wide and several hundred feet long. Such an area cannot be adequately sampled in a one week project so a smaller zone 90 by 420 feet was selected and divided into 42 thirty-foot squares. Inside of each of these large squares a single three-foot square was chosen for excavation and the contents sifted through a 1⁄4 inch screen. This sample represents a 1% sample of the entire area of 37,800 square feet.

As excavation of the 42 sample squares was being carried out toward the goal of locating the houses in Santa Elena some of the squares were found to reveal the edge of a ditch which was in surprising alignment with the archaeological grid. When exploratory trenches were cut from these squares to determine the width of the ditch it was found that a large ditch 14 feet in width had been found. When other exploratory trenches were cut to determine the extent of this impressive ditch a two-bastioned moat for a fort was revealed (Fig. 1). From the documentation on the Spanish occupation, it was apparent that we had discovered the moat of Fort San Felipe II, which guarded the town from 1570 to 1576 (Hoffman 1978). The moat itself, however, dated from 1574 to 1576, and was in use only two years.
Figure 1
The discovery of this bonus was exciting but nevertheless resulted in cutting down the area in which potential structures could be delineated as revealed by the clustering of fired clay daub and Spanish pottery. However, when the computer-printed map of the concentration of these artifact classes was in hand a suspected house site was pinpointed at the southwest edge of the research frame (Fig. 2A and 2B). The one week project had resulted in the discovery of the fort of San Felipe II and the site of one of the structures in the town of Santa Elena. As a result of these discoveries a more intensive assessment of the archeological potential of the site was funded by the National Geographic Society.

The concentration of daub and Spanish pottery was thought to be a certain indication of a Spanish structure of Santa Elena, but the demonstration of this was not possible until an area 20 by 30 feet was removed from over the area of the concentration and the posthole pattern for a Spanish hut was revealed. The three-foot sample square had been placed at the entranceway to a "D" shaped structure twelve feet wide having a burned hearth area in the center (Fig. 3). The structure was built of posts set into holes five feet apart. Large nails found beside each post reveal that horizontal timbers were fastened to each post. Cane impressions in the fired clay daub found beside each post revealed that canes were likely woven vertically between the horizontal timbers and the entire fabric plastered with gray clay to be found beneath the marshes of Parris Island. As the vertical posts burned, the clay wall in the immediate area was fired to an orange to red brick color and crumbled to the ground to lie beside the posthole for four hundred years until again seeing the light of day as a result of the archeological removal of the soil blanket covering the site. The quickness with which the town was set on fire after the fort of San Felipe II was abandoned in 1576 (Connor 1925: 201) suggests that the structures were roofed with highly flammable roofs, probably locally available palmetto thatch.

The discovery of the small "D" shaped hut constructed of local materials and probably once housing a single soldier or perhaps a slave was a demonstration that the combination of elements of fired clay daub, Spanish pottery, and a posthole are positive clues to the location of a structure in Santa Elena. With this knowledge in hand three other research frames were established for sampling using the three-foot square approach found to be so successful in the first project. This time it was found that those sample squares placed away from the edge of the shoreline revealed less Spanish pottery and almost no evidence of such structural clues. Those squares placed along the shoreline between the two forts, however, revealed a dozen areas where the proper combination of daub-pottery-posthole was present. These data suggest that each of these holes represents a structure in Santa Elena.

One of these areas was expanded and a large rectangular posthole pattern was seen, revealing that much larger structures than the little Spanish hut are to be found on the site of Santa Elena. In addition to the twelve structures, a large hole nine feet wide was found, possibly a well. The alignment of this well and ten of the twelve structures suggests a row of houses has been found extending along the edge of Parris Island as it is seen today. However, the fact that two of the bastions of Fort San Felipe II have been washed away by erosion suggests
Concentration of Fired Clay Daub

- Sample point: ○
- Value range: 60-250 gms.

Concentration of Sixteenth Century Spanish Pottery

- Sample point: ○
- Value range: 21-30 sherds
- Value range: 31-40 sherds

Computer projected artifact densities at the site of Fort San Felipe II in Santa Elena, S.C.
The Site of a Spanish Dwelling (Ruin #1) at the First

SANTA ELENA (1566-1576)
(38BU162A)

on Parris Island, South Carolina
Excavated September 10-28, 1979

A Joint Project of

THE INSTITUTE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY
University of South Carolina

and

THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY
in Cooperation with

THE U.S. MARINE CORPS

NOTES ON THE DWELLING

12 foot wide U-shaped structure with door on straight side
Horizontal slots spiked to upright posts were faced with vertical canes.
Fiber-tempered daub was hand-smoothed against the cane wattles.
Dirt floor with central hearth
Smokehole in pecked, palmetto thatched roof
The alignment with Fort San Felipe is that used from 1566 to 1576.
The dwelling was burned, probably in 1576, by Indians.
Household refuse (Indian and Spanish pottery, animal bone, etc.)
was discarded near the door.
The dwelling is a product of the blending of Spanish and
Indian building materials and methods.
The site was used as a vineyard during the period of the
second Santa Elena (1577-1587) when vineyard ditches
aligned with Fort San Marcos intruded on the dwelling ruins.
A thriving vineyard was at Santa Elena in 1568.

Haffenreffer, Paul E., Sixteenth century fortifications on

Lynes, Eugene, The Extremity of Florida. The University
also that a block or two of the town of Santa Elena may well have been washed away and what we are seeing is the row of structures remaining on the back side of town.

To obtain a sample of the moat of Fort San Felipe II a ten-foot wide section was excavated across the fourteen foot wide moat near the center of the west curtain wall. As a result it is clear that the moat at this point was backfilled with the exception of a small accumulation of humus at the bottom of the five foot deep ditch which had built up during the period from 1574 to 1577 when the ditch stood open. This is consistent with documentation which reveals that the fort was leveled in 1577 to prevent Indians from using it as a protection from which to launch an attack against nearby Fort San Marcos (Eugene Lyon, personal communication). Large fragments of majolica, olive jars, and a whole bullet mold were found in the fill soil of the moat.

An additional aspect of the assessment phase of the Santa Elena Project was the excavation of exploratory squares over the four walls of Fort San Marcos to locate the palisade posts seen in 1923 by Major Osterhout (1923). Such posts were indeed revealed as well as the neat trenches cut by the Major. Work at this fort site revealed that the fort has great potential for revealing architectural data of great value in interpreting this last Spanish fort on Parris Island.

A search was made for the site of the first Fort San Felipe (I), with negative results. It is apparent that this fort was located in an area now seen to be tidal marsh and locating the site of San Felipe I and recovering data of archeological value is highly unlikely.

Now that the site of the capitol of Spanish Florida has been located with two of its forts (Figure 4), extensive archeological excavation is needed on the three sites to reveal the story lying beneath the soil of Parris Island. The book has been found. It remains now to read and interpret the pages this archeological treasure has to reveal. We hope to do this in the years to come.
Archeological Map of the Forts and Other Site Features at
SANTA ELENA I (1566-1576)
(38BU162)
and
SANTA ELENA II (1577-1587)
(38BU51)
A Joint Project of
THE INSTITUTE OF ARCHEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY
University of South Carolina
and
THE NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY
in Cooperation with
THE U.S. MARINE CORPS

Incised Indian sherds from the Spanish hut
Feo. 162A-159

Incised olive jar sherd from the Spanish hut
Feo. 162A-159

Fairway

Rosetta stone area for discovery of the alignment of the town plans of SANTA ELENA I and II

Archeologists:
Stanley South
Leland Ferguson
Michael Hartley

Assistants:
John Goldsborough
Bryan Watson

Project Director: Robert L. Stephenson

Feo. 162A-159

-400 -300 -200 -100 0 100 200

scale: feet
10 30 60 90

Figure 4
Acknowledgements

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