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Delineation of an African-American Cemetery (38BU1895B) on Parris Island, South Carolina

By Chester DePratter and James Legg

In July 2000, historic map research by the authors led to the identification of an unmarked African-American cemetery (38BU1895B) on the Parris Island Marine Corps reservation. The cemetery appears on at least four USMC maps dating between 1916 and 1921. The site was deliberately avoided when an extensive temporary barracks complex, the West Wing Extension (38BU1895A), consisting of barracks, mess halls, latrines, and a hospital, was constructed in the area during World War I (Figure 1). The barracks were removed in 1927, and the cemetery site appears intact on a 1933 map. Apparently any surface indications of graves were removed some 60 years ago, when several small warehouses were built around the edges of the cemetery, and knowledge of the cemetery began to fade.

This cemetery is one of at least four cemeteries on the island containing graves of slaves, freedmen, and later island residents. In the decades prior to the Civil War, there were about 500 slaves living on several Parris Island plantations. In the years after the war, the island had between 500 and 800 African-American residents. When the U.S. government began purchasing large tracts of Parris Island land during World War I, Black residents were permitted to remain on the island under a lease arrangement. In 1927, all residents except those who were employed by the Marine Corps were forced to leave, and in 1937, the last Black residents were relocated off the island.

The cemetery's location was misplotted by previous researchers who placed it beneath a recruit mess hall located approximately 1,000 ft from its actual position. When we notified the Marine Corps of the actual location, they immediately requested that we conduct fieldwork sufficient to delineate the boundaries of the cemetery. The tract occupied by the cemetery is a grassy, sparsely wooded recreation area with picnic tables, horseshoe pits, and a volleyball court.

A ground-penetrating radar survey of the site was undertaken in August by a team consisting of Dr. [Further text continues here.]
Ervan Garrison and Nina Serman from the University of Georgia and Dr. Kent Schneider of the U. S. Forest Service (Figure 2). The radar results were intriguing but were too ambiguous for site delineation, although final results of this work are pending.

Boundaries were established through test excavations conducted by Santa Elena Project staff between September 5-14, 2000. Twenty-eight, shallow (1.0 ft to 1.5 ft-deep) backhoe trenches totaling 935 ft in length were excavated, screened, cleaned, drawn, and mapped (Figure 3). Trenches were excavated only to the base of the topsoil layer in order to limit intrusion into graves. All or portions of 55 grave features were recorded (Figure 4). The maximum dimensions of the cemetery were revealed to be about 265 ft X 165 ft, with the total number of burials estimated at between 450 and 500. The cemetery was found to lay substantially undisturbed, with only minor infringements by the warehouse complex (Buildings 856, 866, and 867 on Figure 3) developed during World War II. The size of the cemetery, among other clues, suggests that it may have been in use for several generations, and it is reasonable to suppose that 38BU1895B was originally the cemetery for the slaves of one of the five or six major plantations that occupied Parris Island after the mid-18th century.

Sea Island African-American cemeteries dating to the late-19th and early-20th centuries typically exhibited an array of surface grave goods such as bottles, ceramic vessels, clocks, whelk shells, etc. No such objects were present on the surface at 38BU1895B, and only two of the 55 graves encountered had associated artifacts—one had a collection of glass bottles and tumblers dating to ca. 1900, and the other had a broken whiteware bowl. In addition, a small collection of other items that were possibly grave goods was recovered from disturbed, topsoil context, including parts of several pressed glass vessels and a porcelain dog figurine. The general scarcity of grave goods at 38BU1895B suggests either that the practice of placing personal items on top of graves was not common among Parris Island residents, or, more likely, that landscaping during World War I barracks construction or World War II warehouse development resulted in removal of most such materials. All grave-related artifacts have been analyzed and photographed, and all will be re-buried at their original locations in December, 2000.

Our testing yielded evidence of other occupations of the 38BU1895 area. A variety of prehistoric materials was recovered, including ceramic sherds and three projectile points, spanning a period from about 4,000 to about 500 years ago. A possible Late Archaic period (4,000-3,000 B.C.) habitation site was suggested by a cluster of Stallings Island fiber-tempered potsherds in association with a faded, linear stain that may be a house wall feature. The 1918 West Wing Extension complex was

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research at Santa Elena, it turned out to be an interesting project. Our work on this cemetery will allow it to be preserved and protected from disturbance. A final report on this project will be completed in Spring, 2001.

Field crew for this project consisted of Chester DePratter, James Legg, Kris Asher, John Kirby, Lisa Hudgins, and Rebecca Barrera. Transit work was done by Stanley South and Chester DePratter; Lisa Hudgins produced the final site map. The laboratory crew consisted of James Legg, Kris Asher, John Kirby, Erica Bruchko, and Frank Talbot. The backhoe was provided by Patterson Construction Company and was operated by Kenny Bennett. Work on the site was funded by a grant from the U. S. Marine Corps.

represented by World War I USMC artifacts, including uniform buttons, web equipment hardware, rifle and pistol cartridges, and architectural debris (Figure 5). A posthole, foundation rubble, and iron pipes from a 1918 latrine/bathhouse building were found just beyond the northeast edge of the cemetery.

Although this work was a departure from our long-time involvement in

Figure 4: One of the 28 backhoe test trenches dug to define the limits of the cemetery. The features with light, subsoil fill are graves; Building 856 is to the right. (SCIAA photo)

Figure 5: World War I USMC artifacts from the West Wing Extension occupation. Items include an unfired .30'06 cartridge, a blank .30'06 cartridge, a .30 caliber rifle bullet, an unfired .45 caliber automatic pistol cartridge, a Springfield .30'06 6-round clip, a web equipment strap end, a bootlace tip, and USMC uniform buttons. (SCIAA photo)