New USC Press Book on the Discovery of Rock Art in South Carolina

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By Tommy Charles

For a decade, I have scoured South Carolina’s upcountry for examples of ancient rock art carvings and paintings, efforts conducted on behalf of the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology (SCIAA). As SCIAA’s collections coordinator, I have amassed considerable field experience in both prehistoric and historic archaeology and have firsthand involvement in cataloging 64 sites of South Carolina rock art. I have chronicled my adventures in exploration and preservation in a new book, Discovering South Carolina’s Rock Art, to be published by USC Press in September 2010.

Although Native American rock art is common in the western United States and even at many sites east of the Mississippi, it was believed to be almost nonexistent in South Carolina until the 1980s, when several randomly discovered petroglyphs were reported in the upstate. These discoveries set in motion the first organized endeavor to identify and document these ancient examples of human expression as they exist in South Carolina. Over the ensuing years, and assisted by a host of volunteers and avocational collectors, I have scoured the Piedmont and mountains of South Carolina in search of additional rock art sites. Frustrated by the inability to find these elusive artifacts, many of which are eroded almost beyond visibility, I

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Audrey is embarking on her dissertation work related to Archaic sites excavated at Fort Jackson.

David Rigtrup, another graduate student, is conducting analyses on stone tools recovered from some of these same Archaic sites at Fort Jackson. David’s expertise in stone tools can be attributed to site collections that were made available by the Savannah River Archaeological Research Program (SRARP) for his thesis research. He used these sites to assess mobility patterns of hunters and gatherers who inhabited South Carolina over 8,000 years ago.

Mark Brooks’ leadership at SRARP has led to a long history of student research support. At present, Chris Thornock, a PhD candidate and graduate assistant for SRARP, is doing highly innovative work reconstructing the details of prehistoric Native American towns through computer modeling.

Our projects have also proven alluring to students from other universities. Al Goodyear’s Topper site project in Allendale County has been a magnet for graduate students from universities ranging from Tennessee to Arizona, all eager to gain a chance to work on one of the premier Paleoindian sites in North America. Doug Sain from Eastern New Mexico University recently completed an M.A. thesis based on stone blades from Topper, while Ashley Smallwood, Ph.D. student at Texas A & M, just had an article published in the Journal of Archaeological Science related to Clovis points from the site.

Christopher Amer, Director of Maritime Research, and Jonathan Leader, Director of Office of the State Archaeologist, received a grant from the Bruce and Lee Foundation to evaluate the wreck of the CSS PeeDee near Florence, which also provides opportunities for students from other universities, notably Eastern Carolina University’s Maritime Studies Program. Nolan Caudell has been conducting archival research for his thesis to accurately locate and delineate the extent of the Confederate Mars Bluff Naval Yard where the CSS PeeDee was built. Adam Edmonds is doing a thesis on the Confederate Navy and the gunboats featuring data from our work at Mars Bluff and on the CSS PeeDee.

Finally, three graduate students with longstanding ties to SCIAA, Erika Shofer, Meg Gaillard, and Helena Ferguson, have recently embarked on a major archaeological educational outreach initiative, based on a start-up grant that we provided. Their work has progressed to the point where they now have developed an independent non-profit group, SCAPOD, which they describe on pages 22-23 in this issue of Legacy.

The funding for these graduate and undergraduate students comes from many sources. The College of Arts and Sciences generously provides graduate assistant lines to help with our logistical and research needs. Our regular SCIAA staff provides student support from a variety of external granting agencies. And last but not least, we have had many generous private contributions earmarked for various research projects; some of these funds frequently are used to support students. All of these types of financial assistance have been essential for incorporating students into our work. They have also allowed SCIAA to make teaching and mentoring central elements of our mission.

One cannot underestimate the importance of the youthful energy and intellectual curiosity of our undergraduate and graduate students to our research and outreach initiatives. Thanks to you all, past and present!

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began employing methods still considered unorthodox by current scientific standards for archaeological research to assist with my search and documentation.

Survey efforts led to the discovery of rock art created by Native Americans and Europeans. Of particular interest are the many circle-and-line petroglyphs the survey found in South Carolina. Seeking a reason for this repetitive symbol, my investigation into these finds led to the discovery that similar motifs have been identified along the Appalachian Mountains from Alabama to New York, as well as in the American Southwest and Western Europe.

The engrossing account of the search for South Carolina’s rock art in this new book brings awareness to the precarious state of these artifacts, threatened not only by natural attrition but also by human activities. I argue that, if left unprotected, rock art is ultimately doomed to exist only in our historical records.

More than 100 black-and-white photographs and drawings, along with 18 color illustrations, give the reader a visual guide to this adventure tale of archaeological research, discovery, and preservation.

A native of Union, South Carolina, I began my interest in archaeology as a child. In 1979, I joined the staff at the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology (SCIAA), a research arm of the University of South Carolina. I have participated in many research projects over the years, and in 1993, I joined the SCIAA Research Division to pursue my research interests in prehistoric Native American cultures.

Now retired, I continue many research interests in the South Carolina upstate.

To order a copy of Discovering South Carolina’s Rock Art, please send $38.05, including shipping and 7% tax, to USC Press, 718 Devine Street, Columbia, SC 29208. To order on-line, go to: www.sc.edu/usepress.