A Search for the French Charlesfort of 1562

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A SEARCH FOR THE FRENCH CHARLESPORT OF 1562

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES. .......................................................... ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS. ..................................................... iii

THE SEARCH FOR THE FRENCH CHARLESFORT OF 1582. ............. 1

- Historical Background ............................................. 1
- Background of the Search for Charlesfort ....................... 2
- Archeological Project Background ................................ 3
- The Location of Charlesfort ........................................ 3
- The Explorers' Club Project on the Naval Hospital Grounds ... 6
- The Explorers' Club Project on Pigeon Point .................... 7
- The Explorers' Club Surface Survey North of the Hospital Site 7
- Summary of the Explorers' Club Search for Charlesfort ....... 8

THE EXPLORERS CLUB PROJECT AT THE SITE OF SANTA ELENA. ... 9

REFERENCES ................................................................... 10

LIST OF FIGURES

FIGURE 1: Map of the area of Port Royal, where Charlesfort was
like located ............................................................... 5

FIGURE 2: The Naval Hospital Grounds at Port Royal Island,
showing the sample squares and Fort Frederick ............... 8

FIGURE 3: Architectural features at Santa Elena showing the
location of Structure 6, discovered with funds from
the Explorers' Club of New York ................................. 12
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Although negative results were a distinct possibility in this project due to the lack of pinpointing of the Charlesfort site, the Explorers' Club funded the project in the interest of discovery of new and important information. The directors of the Explorers' Club are to be congratulated on their enlightened support of such a project. In the event of negative data the research strategy was designed to insure positive results through excavation at Santa Elena and such a positive contribution was forthcoming.

I would especially like to thank Dr. Charles Brush, President of the Explorers' Club, Mr. Horace Byrd, Chairman of the Greater Piedmont Chapter and Dr. Robert L. Stephenson, Director of the Institute of Archeology and Anthropology at the University of South Carolina and State Archeologist for their role in obtaining funding for this project.

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THE SEARCH FOR THE FRENCH CHARLESFORT OF 1562

Historical Background

After Ponce de Leon undertook his search in Florida for the fountain of youth in 1513, Spain undertook many expeditions in Spanish Florida. By 1562 the Spanish presence in the New World was well known, especially the frequent journeys of the treasure ships passing close to the Florida shore (Lorant 1946: 5). Such activity prompted the French to attempt a settlement on an island in Port Royal Sound in present-day South Carolina, an area known by the Spanish as Santa Elena. Jean Ribaut was the leader of the expedition which left France February 18, 1562, and who, about the middle of May, ordered a fort to be built and manned with thirty men (Lorant 1946: 8; Cumming 1963: 27).

The fort was built 13 by 16 fathoms in size (ca. 78 by 96 feet). A moat surrounded an inner structure of wood and earth covered with straw (Salley 1919: 5; Hoffman 1978: 20). Ribaut sailed on June 11, 1562, for France, promising to return in six months, but hunger and a fire in the fort, along with a mutiny of the garrison, resulting in the death of their leader Albert de la Pierria, changed the plans for the fort and settlement known as Charlesfort (Lorant 1946: 8). The mutiny focused on the exile to a small island of a comrade La Chere who was slowly starving to death. After Pierria's death La Chere was rescued by his companions who built a small boat and, with inadequate supplies, set sail for France.

When the supplies ran out the little group from Charlesfort was reduced to eating their shoes and leather jackets and drinking sea water and urine. The boat began to leak, some died, and a storm damaged the makeshift vessel. They were crazy with hunger. The decision was made to draw lots and to eat one unlucky comrade so that the others might live. The unlucky lot fell to La Chere, who had been rescued from the island. They killed him and divided his flesh equally among themselves. The survivors were found, drifting and almost dead, by an English ship and taken to England where they were revived and where they met Queen Elizabeth (Lorant 1946: 9). One of the survivors was the leader of the group, Nicholas Barré, who drew a map of the coast of Florida and the location of Charlesfort. Through a mistranslation of "Barré" the map had come to be known as the "Parreus" map of 1562 (Cumming 1963: 27-30). It is of great interest, of course, in locating the site of Charlesfort.

In 1564, Spanish soldiers under Don Hernando de Manrique de Rojas arrived in St. Helena Sound and found a Spanish boy living among the Indians. He had run away to them rather than attempt the trip back to France in the ill fated makeshift boat. This boy was Guillaume Rouffi, who showed the Spaniards where Charlesfort was located, as well as the stone monument erected by the French to lay claim to the land. When the
Spaniards found Charlesfort (which had been equipped with two brass falcons and six small iron culverins in the four bastions), they burned it. They also loaded the French monument on board their vessel as well (Lorant 1946: 10; Hoffman 1978: 17). There were only two of the determined efforts made by the Spaniards to rid Spanish Florida of the French threat.

To protect against a new French attempt to settle in Port Royal Sound the Spaniards built a city, Santa Elena, and a fort, San Felipe, on a large island in Port Royal Sound, known today as Parris Island. This was done in 1566 (Connor 1925: I; Hoffman 1978), one year after a small fort was built at St. Augustine. In 1570 a second fort, San Felipe II, was built and burned by Indians in 1576, along with the city. A new city and third fort were begun in 1577. The Spanish city of Santa Elena, sometime capitol of Spanish Florida, lasted for 21 years, being abandoned in 1587, after Sir Francis Drake burned St. Augustine the year before (Hoffman 1978: 40).

The ruins of the third fort erected by the Spaniards to protect Santa Elena (Ft. San Marcos 1577-1587) were seen on Parris Island by William Hilton in 1663, who thought they were the ruins of Charlesfort of 1562 (Salley 1959: 41; 1919: 7), being the first of many to follow who mistakenly identified the fort ruins on Parris Island as that of Charlesfort (Hoffman 1978: 1).

Background of the Search for Charlesfort

After Hilton mistakenly took the Spanish ruins on Parris Island to be those of Charlesfort, it was not until the 1840s when local historian Dr. R. E. Elliott began a search for Charlesfort (Hoffman 1978: 1). Elliott's son Captain George Parsons Elliott dug into a fort on Parris Island and concluded that it was Charlesfort. Paul Hoffman, historian at Louisiana State University, has researched the background of the search for Charlesfort in a report to the National Geographic Society (Hoffman 1978). His sequence of events regarding the Parris Island fort site (now known to be the Spanish Fort San Marcos) reveals that those researchers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were unaware of the Spanish documents relating to Santa Elena on Parris Island. One tradition, however, suggested that the site of Charlesfort was located on Port Royal Island not far from the town of Beaufort. Thus there were two traditional locations for the site of Charlesfort (Hoffman 1978: 2).

In 1923 Major George Osterhout reported on digging he had done at a fort on Parris Island, concluding that it was the site of Charlesfort (Osterhout 1923). Historians Mary Ross (1925: 353), Jeannette Connor (1927: 7-8), and A. S. Salley (1927: 114) challenged this interpretation, stating that the fort found by Osterhout was that of Fort San Marcos, the Spanish fort at Santa Elena, and not the ruins of Charlesfort. In 1957 National Park Service Ranger-Historian Albert Manucy (1957: 1) at St. Augustine examined the artifacts recovered from the Parris Island fort and found that they were Spanish. By 1963, therefore, three hundred years
after William Hilton (in 1663) had first made an error of identification of the fort on Parris Island, scholars were finally accepting the fact that the ruins there were Spanish and not French.

With the demonstration that the fort on Parris Island was the Spanish fort of San Marcos (Manucy 1957; South 1979), the idea of the location of Charlesfort on Port Royal Island took on more credence.

_Archeological Project Background_

As a result of the historical research of Paul Hoffman and historian Eugene Lyon of Vero Beach, Florida on Spanish colonial history, National Geographic Magazine Associate Editor Joseph Judge became interested in Santa Elena during the Institute of Archeology and Anthropology at the University of South Carolina to obtain archeological funding for exploration of the site on Parris Island.

The first project was a one week, exploratory, sampling study carried out in the summer of 1979 under the sponsorship of the University of South Carolina (South 1979). A second fort, known as Ft. San Felipe II, was discovered as well as a concentration of architectural data thought to represent a Spanish structure.

A second project, sponsored by the Committee for Research and Exploration of the National Geographic Society, excavated the Spanish structure as well as an additional structure with a well, and tested Fort San Marcos and Fort San Felipe II (South 1980).

The third season of work at Santa Elena was funded by the National Geographic Society and resulted in the discovery of four additional structures in Santa Elena and the recovery of a virtually intact Spanish barrel from the previously identified well.

Through these archeological projects the location of the Spanish city of Santa Elena and the forts San Felipe and San Marcos were firmly established. The question then arose as to the location of Charlesfort, the French fort and habitation area of 1562 memorialized by the large stone monument erected on the site by the Congress of the United States in 1926 (Connor 1927: 8). Where was Charlesfort?

_The Location of Charlesfort_

When we look for cartographic data on the location of French Charlesfort, we find that the earliest map was made in 1562 by Nicholas Barré (Parreus), a Captain with Ribaut (Cumming 1963: 36-37). An analysis of this map by the cartographic historian W. P. Cumming produces the conclusion that "Charlesfort was apparently built on Battery Creek, Port Royal
Island, probably near the present site of the town of Port Royal."

The La Moyne map of 1578(?) shows Charlesfort on the second island in Port Royal Sound going north (Hoffman 1978: 18; Lorant 1946: 34-35) which is Port Royal Island. The historian Paul Hoffman, after analysis of the Spanish and French documents, concludes that "Charles Fort was on the island where modern Port Royal and Beaufort are located. The exact site may well be lost due to erosion on the eastern side of this island" (Hoffman 1978: 19).

In an evaluation of documents in 1979, Joseph R. Judge, Associate Editor of the National Geographic Magazine, concluded that the site of Charlesfort might well be on the grounds of the Naval Hospital between Beaufort and Port Royal, South Carolina (Judge, personal correspondence, October 25, 1979).

In addition to the maps indicating that Charlesfort was on Port Royal Island and not on Parris Island, we have a written description by Rene Laudonnière who, in 1564, was sent to provide relief for the Charlesfort group left by Ribaut (Lorant 1946: 33; Salley 1919: 5). In this account he describes the selection of the Charlesfort site by Ribaut after his men had expressed great willingness to build a fort and stay in the area of Port Royal Sound.

The account describes Ribaut as sailing up the great river on the north side of Port Royal Sound, which is the Beaufort River. While coasting (sailing along the shore of) an island which ended with a sharp point toward the mouth of the river, (this is Parris Island), Ribaut was sailing along the coast of Parris Island (which was to his left), and after he had sailed for awhile he came to a small river which entered into the island. He explored this river and found it deep enough to harbor galleys and galliots in good number. The only stream worthy of the name of a river that one discovers while sailing in the Beaufort River along the coast of Parris Island that would fit this description is Battery Creek. He then proceeded further. We assume this is in reference to proceeding further up Battery Creek, where he found a very open place, joining upon the brink thereof, suggesting that he found high, open ground touching on the deep water channel of Battery Creek. Here he went on land and built Charlesfort. The critical word here is "thereof," which refers to the small river, being Battery Creek. The place where high ground touches deep water is at the site of the town of Port Royal (Fig. 1).

An alternate interpretation for the location of Charlesfort is seen when we interpret the words "proceeding further," as in reference to proceeding further up Beaufort River after exploring the small river. If this is the case the first high ground where the deep water touches the "brink" is at the U.S. Naval Hospital grounds (Fig. 1), with a similar high ground continuing to the town of Beaufort and touching again at Pigeon Point north of the town. If Charlesfort was at Port Royal, signs of it may one day be found, though construction activity through the years may well have destroyed the site. If Charlesfort was located at the present town of Port Royal it would not be surprising, given what we know about the important relationship between deep water and high ground as an important
FIGURE 1: Map of the area of Port Royal, where Charlesfort was likely located.
consideration in site selection during the early settlement period of this nation (South and Hartley 1980).

The important statement of Laudonnière in 1564 locating the Charlesfort site is presented here with interpretive comments in brackets.

Whereupon John Ribault being as glad as might be to see his men so well willing, determined the next day to search the most fit and convenient place to be inhabited. Wherefore he embarked himselfe very earely in the morning and commanded them to followe him that were desirous to inhabite there, to the intent that they might like the better of the place. Having sayled vp the great rieur [Beaufort River] on the North side [of Port Royal Sound], in coasting an Isle which ended with a sharpe point toward the mouth of the rieur [i.e. sailing past Parris Island], having sailed a while, he discovered a small rieur [Battery Creek], which entred into the Islande, which hee would not faile to search out. Which done [i.e. exploring Battery Creek], and finding the same deep enough to harbour therein Gallies and Galliots in good number, proceeding further [up Battery Creek, but possibly on up Beaufort River] he found a very open place, ioyning vpon the brinke thereof [the wording here suggests that the "brinke" was high ground adjacent to deep water], where he went on land, and seeing the place fit to build a Fortresse in, and commodious for them that were willing to plant there, he resolued incontinent to cause the bignes of the fortification to be measured out. And considering that there stayed but sixe and twentie there, he caused the Fort to be made in length but sixteen fathome [c.a. 96 feet], and thirteene in breadth [ca. 78 feet], with flankes according to the proportion thereof. The measure being taken by me and Captaine Salles, we sent vnto the shippes for men, and to bring shouels, pickaxes [for digging a defensive moat for building a parapet] and other instruments necessarie to make the fortification. We travailed so diligently, that in a short space the Fort was made in some sort defenciable [a four bastioned fort around a central wattle-and-daub, thatched roof structure (Hoffman 1978: 17)]. In which meane time John Ribault caused victuals and warrelie munition to be brought for the defence of the place [2 brass falcons and 6 small iron culverins (Hoffman 1978: 17)]. After he had furnished them with all such things as they had neede of, he determined to take his lease of them (Salley 1919: 5).

Historian W. P. Cumming concluded that Charlesfort was very likely located near the town of Port Royal (1963: 36-37), and our analysis of the evidence supports this interpretation. However, an alternative possibility exists if the "open place ioyning vpon the "brinke" was the first
high ground up the Beaufort River above Port Royal. If this were the case then the high ground of the U.S. Naval Hospital would be an excellent possibility for the location of Charleston. Discovery of sixteenth century artifacts here would provide clues to the discovery of Charlesfort. A sampling strategy designed to sample the high ground at the U.S. Naval Hospital grounds was certainly in order.

The Explorers' Club Project on the Naval Hospital Grounds

As a result of the above research a proposal for an exploratory search for Charlesfort was written and subsequently funded ($8,000) by the Explorer's Club of New York, through the office of the Greater Piedmont Chapter, Columbia, South Carolina.

The proposal was designed to sample an area of the U.S. Naval Hospital grounds, 90 by 840 feet in size through excavation of a series of three foot square holes to recover any evidence of sixteenth century pottery or other artifacts thus providing clues to occupation during that century. This plan was later altered to allow sampling of a long transect of squares to increase the length of the area sampled. This was done when it became apparent that considerable erosion had taken place along the river front and any remains of sixteenth century occupation might well be located along the river edge of the Naval Hospital grounds. A long transect of sample squares, therefore, would allow the greatest length of the shoreline high ground to be sampled.

The sampling project was carried out in August 1981 and as it progressed the scope of the project was expanded to include far more than was originally anticipated on the Naval Hospital grounds alone.

The sampling strategy to locate sixteenth century artifact remains was planned in three stages. The first stage was to excavate three foot squares at fifty foot intervals along a northward line beginning at the northwest corner of the tabby ruin of Fort Frederick on the southern end of the hospital grounds and a similar series of sample squares running southward from the boy scout building at the north end of the hospital grounds (Figure 2). If sixteenth century objects were found in this series of 35 squares a second stage of testing would focus on the area where such data were recovered and a third stage would involve exploratory trenching to pinpoint any subsurface features in the area of such sixteenth century artifact concentration. As it turned out no sixteenth century objects were found in the first stage of sampling thus negating the need for the second two stages of exploratory work on this site.

The three stage approach was designed to allow the area from Fort Frederick north to the water tank along the river front of the U.S. Naval Hospital grounds to be sampled for sixteenth century data without the need to expend all the research funds on that site if there was no evidence for sixteenth century occupation. With negative results in the first stage it
FIGURE 2: The Naval Hospital Grounds at Port Royal Island, showing the sample squares and Fort Frederick.
was possible to carry out an additional sampling transect on Pigeon Point in an effort to discover sixteenth century artifacts there.

The Explorers' Club Project on Pigeon Point

Finding no evidence of sixteenth century occupation along the shoreline (considerably inland from the sixteenth century shoreline due to erosion) at the Naval Hospital site, we turned to a fact that concerned us in reference to the hospital site. The bothersome fact was that Jean Ribaut's manuscript account of 1563 states that the 30 men who remained in Charlesfort and "inhabytacion" area were "in an iland on the northe est side" (Hoffman 1978: 15). If this reference is to an island then the hospital site is not on the northeast side of the island. However, it may have had reference to the location of the fort site in relation to Port Royal Sound. If we assume that Port Royal Island is the correct island, there might be some merit in sampling an area that might be considered the northeast side. This led us to Pigeon Point where the deep water channel of the Beaufort River touches the high ground of the island.

The Pigeon Point site did indeed fit the deep water channel adjacent to the high ground, and since it was on a narrow peninsula, there were two "brinks" here adjacent to the deep water since the river turns here. At any rate Pigeon Point seemed like a good site to sample, especially since it was accessible for testing, being owned by the City of Beaufort.

We placed a transect of nine sample squares down the center of this high ground peninsula adjacent to the deep water channel of the Beaufort River (Figure 1) to look for sixteenth century artifacts. Negative results disappointed us here also.

The Explorers' Club Surface Survey
North of the Hospital Site

As a result of the negative results at the Naval Hospital site and at Pigeon Point, a surface survey was undertaken from the Naval Hospital grounds northward to the Beaufort County Hospital. The object here was to explore on foot the lay of the land and examine any high ground sites that might be likely candidates for the location of Charlesfort. This was based on the fact that the Spanish Fort San Marcos was still visible as a parapet and moat in 1923 when Major Osterhout began his work, and the earthworks at Charlesfort were visible as were San Marcos of the same period, provided no extensive damage to the site had taken place.

A major brickyard ruin and extensive occupation of the high ground along the river as residences were observed, but nothing that would provide a suspicion for sampling for Charlesfort in this area.
Summary of the Explorers' Club Search for Charlesfort

There is no doubt but that Charlesfort was located on Port Royal Island. This comes from documentation from maps and descriptions and from French and Spanish sources. No evidence for sixteenth century occupation was found on the U.S. Naval Hospital grounds or at Pigeon Point. This being the case the location of Charlesfort at the site of the town of Port Royal appears to be the strongest possibility at present. The analysis of the Laudonnière description suggests this site as a major possibility. Discovery of the site in Port Royal, however, is complicated by the long occupation of the site by those who came after the French. Perhaps someday clues will be found as the soil is disturbed for construction of a building or street. If such is the case, hopefully some sharp-eyed individual will bring the discovery to the attention of archeologists before total destruction of the site comes about. A major contribution of this study has been to reduce the alternatives for the location of Charlesfort by focusing attention on the town of Port Royal as the most likely site for discovery of Charlesfort.
The Explorers Club Project at the Site of Santa Elena

With negative results in the Naval Hospital sampling and at Pigeon Point and in the surface survey, we turned our attention, using remaining funds, to the concurrent excavations being carried out at the Spanish site of Santa Elena on Parris Island, where parts of three structures had been located with funding from the National Geographic Society.

The National Geographic Society Projects at Santa Elena in 1979 and 1981 were designed to locate structures in the city of Santa Elena, which had been the capitol of Spanish Florida in the 1560s (Hoffman 1978). Five structures and a well had been located, but the 30 by 200 foot area opened in the 1981 season had revealed only parts of three structures. The project was about ready to be backfilled when the negative results of the Charlesfort search were determined and it was decided to use the remaining Charlesfort funding to assist in discovery of additional data at Santa Elena.

A large 30 by 200 foot "L" shaped area had revealed parts of three structures. The additional funding from the Explorers' Club allowed the north wall of Structure #3 to be determined through excavation of additional squares in that area. Also, an additional area south of Structure #4 was excavated, revealing more of the east wall of that structure. At Structure #5 an extension toward the west at the northwest corner of the excavated area revealed the northwest corner of that building (Figure 3).

A special bonus came, however, with additional squares excavated north of Structure #3, revealing postholes for yet another structure, Structure #6. These postholes contained quantities of fired clay daub as well as oystershell mortar fragments, correlating with a description of the use of such a coating on clay daub walls in 1580 (Connor 1930: 283). This type construction material was also seen in the western half of Structure #4 (Figure 3).

The extension of the Santa Elena Project through the use of Explorers' Club funds resulted, therefore, in the discovery of an additional structure and further details of three other structures, making the information about these structures far more complex than would otherwise have been the case. A full report on the Santa Elena excavation is now in preparation and that report will be the result of the joint effort by the Explorers' Club, the National Geographic Society and the Institute of Archeology and Anthropology at the University of South Carolina, in cooperation with the United States Marine Corps, on whose property the Santa Elena site and forts are located.
FIGURE 3: Architectural features at Santa Elena showing the location of Structure 6, discovered with funds from the Explorers' Club of New York.
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