Two Santa Elenas?

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ART TOUR TO SANTA ELENA

On May 13, 1993, the SC Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology will sponsor a bus tour to the Spanish capital site of Santa Elena! This will be a splendid opportunity to visit this famous site while archaeologists Stanley South and Chester DePratter are in the process of excavating a well and part of a house structure in the town of Santa Elena. We will also view excavations of another section of the town that may represent the first occupation of Spanish settlers over four hundred years ago in 1566, discussed in this issue of PastWatch by Chester DePratter on page 1. The bus will leave the Institute at 8:15 am and arrive on Parris Island near Beaufort in time for the lecture and tour of the site. A catered lunch will be provided as well as the popular book, Archaeology at Santa Elena: Doorway to the Past, autographed by Stanley South. The bus will return to Columbia by 4:30 pm. The cost of the tour is $25.00, payable to SCIAA by May 10, 1993. Seating is limited. Please fill out the registration form on page 8 and send it to: Nena Powell, SC Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of South Carolina, 1321 Pendleton Street, Columbia, SC 29208. If there are any questions, please contact Ms. Powell at (803) 777-8170.

TWO SANTA ELENAS?
By Dr. Chester DePratter

Stanley South, SCIAA archaeologist, has been excavating at the site of Santa Elena on Parris Island since 1979. Beginning in 1991, excavations were opened to visitors through the efforts of the Columbian Quincentennial Commission of South Carolina. During the past two field seasons, nearly 3000 people (about half were school children in organized groups) have visited the excavations to view the remains of this Spanish colonial town as they were uncovered.

Over the past 14 years Stan South has excavated in the remains of two forts on the site, and he has dug a portion of the town containing several houses. Work during the past two years has focused on a single structure approximately 24 feet square. This building was constructed of posts one foot in diameter set in postholes three feet across. Wells were found at the two corners on the west side, and refuse filled pits were found nearby. This was a substantial building, and it may have been a public building rather than a private residence. Stan is still working on the report on this structure, so we will have to wait to read his conclusions concerning this buildings' origins and function. An interesting feature of this building concerns the details of its construction. A framework of large posts was erected, and then a light framework of branches or cane was woven between them. The walls were then plastered inside and out with a layer of clay several inches thick. This clay was in turn covered with a one-half to three-quarters inch thick layer of white plaster made from burned oyster shells. This white plaster is important, because it provides a clue to the dating of this building.

On March 25, 1580, Governor Pedro Menéndez Márques stated in a letter to the King that houses in Santa Elena were being "covered with lime inside and out, and with their flat roofs of lime." He goes on to say that this "lime" was made by burning oyster shells, and that because of this new construction technique the Indians had "lost their mettle" (i.e. they no longer were able to successfully destroy houses in the town with flaming arrows as they had previously).

This reference means that the house excavated in the past two years must date to the year 1580 or later.

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Santa Elena Continued

This places it in the second occupation of Santa Elena. The town was established in 1566, and by 1569 there were 327 people living there. Over the next several years, relations with local Indians deteriorated, and Santa Elena was temporarily abandoned in 1576. The town was burned by Indians as its former residents fled the harbor, so we know that the first town was destroyed.

In 1577, a new contingent of soldiers and settlers arrived with a prefabricated blockhouse on their ships, and within six days the blockhouse was up and work was underway on rebuilding the town. This second town was occupied for ten years before it too was abandoned in 1587, and the site was never again occupied by the Spanish.

The assumption has always been that the second town was built on the exact same location as the first town. But, while working on the site last year, I began to consider what was known about the town’s remains excavated so far. First, there is no evidence of rebuilding of structures in the town. If the second town were built over the remains of the first town, there should be some intrusion of postholes and features into the remains of the first town. To date, no such evidence has been found. Second, given the position of the town relative to the forts, we know that the guns from the first fort would have had to fire through the town to reach the entrance to Port Royal Sound if the first and second towns were indeed at the same location. That did not seem right to me. And then we found the burned, oyster shell mortar—plastered structure that had to have been built during the second occupation. I looked at the reports describing the other houses that have been exposed through archaeology, and they too showed evidence for the use of oyster shell plaster. Clearly we were digging in the second town. So was the first town beneath it? No, it wasn’t!

So where is the first town? I do not yet know, but I have an idea (hypothesis in the archaeological jargon) that I will be testing in the 1993 field season. After looking at the placement of the known forts, the location of the second town, and the contours of the ground surface, I noticed that there was a high bluff just to the north of the area that has been the focus of all archaeology at Santa Elena to date.

What if the first town were located here, on this high, well-drained piece of land? If so, it would solve the problem of the first fort having to fire through the town, because then all of the known forts would be south of this first town and closer to the harbor. It would also solve the dilemma of no intrusions on earlier remains, because then the two towns would have been located several hundred feet apart rather than one on top of the other. And finally, it would provide an explanation for why all of the houses excavated to date have plaster made from burned oyster shells. They are all in the second town and date to a time after the Spanish discovered that they could make this plaster out of oyster shells. Problem solved.

Well, the problem is not exactly solved. We need to conduct archaeological testing to determine whether remains of the first town actually exist in the proposed (or hypothesized) location north of previous excavations. I have received a $990 mini-grant from the South Carolina Humanities Council that will in part fund this testing, so the search for this second town will begin in April of this year when Stan South and I return to Santa Elena to continue the project that he began 14 years ago. While I am off searching for the first town, Stan will continue working in the same area where we have worked for the past two years in what we now believe was the second town. He will be excavating at least one of the two wells discovered last year, and he will be opening another large excavation unit in an attempt to discover another building or two.

This will be an exciting year at Santa Elena! Work will begin April 5 and continue through May 21. Prime time to view the excavations will be between April 19 and May 14. Come see us, and bring your neighbors along.

P.S. The 1993 field research at Santa Elena will be supported by grants, gifts, and awards from an anonymous donor, the Robert L. Stephenson Archaeological Research Fund, South Carolina Humanities Council, Columbian Quincentennial Commission of South Carolina, SCIAA, and contributions by several individuals. Additional funds have been requested from the USC Research and Productive Scholarship Committee, but no decision has been made by that committee. As usual, raising money for fieldwork is much easier than raising money for the equally important tasks of artifact cataloging, analysis, and report preparation and publication. When fieldwork at Santa Elena ends on May 21, we shall have spent all of the funds raised for 1993. Please help us find funds necessary to complete the processing and analysis of collections. Contributions in any amount will be appreciated. If you know of individuals, corporations, or foundations that may be interested in supporting this important work, please contact The Archaeological Research Trust at SCIAA. Thank you for your help!