Three Recent Santa Elena Projects

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Publication Info
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Three Recent Santa Elena Projects
By Chester B. DePratter

Beginning in Fall 2005, funding obtained through the U.S. Marine Corps, Parris Island, allowed Stanley South and me to continue our long-term research on the Spanish colonial Santa Elena site (occupied 1566 to 1587). Stan has been working there since 1979, and I joined him in Parris Island research in 1989. In previous projects, we have investigated two Spanish forts, a French fort that preceded the Spanish presence, several structures, eight wells, a pottery kiln, and numerous other Spanish features.

One of our long-term concerns in regard to the Santa Elena site has been the ongoing erosion of its eastern margin by Means Creek and high water during storms. This erosion has resulted in the loss of between 125 and 150 feet of shoreline in the last 420 years. In 2005, Bryan Howard, Parris Island Depot Archaeologist, assisted us in obtaining funds to address the impact of that erosion. Part of the funds Bryan obtained was used to contract with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to provide an estimate of shoreline stabilization costs. The remainder of the money allowed us to conduct archaeological testing at three places along the shoreline to help assess the impact of erosion and to provide information needed for stabilization planning.

Inside Fort San Marcos II (constructed 1582 or 1583), we dug three trenches perpendicular to the present shoreline. In each of these trenches we found evidence of fill placed by the Marine Corps; this fill extended 25 feet or more inland from the marsh edge. It appears that by the time the Marine Corp acquired the property in 1918, the shoreline was jagged and uneven. The shoreline was subsequently filled north along the shoreline to further investigate an area adjacent to where Stan had opened a 20 X 30 foot block in 1982 (38BU162D—South Block). We excavated eleven 10 foot squares in this area with the hope that we would find the remains of a building (possibly a church) that appears on a 1578 plan of Fort San Marcos I. We found numerous Spanish features, but we were not able to define a structure. In the eastern edge of our excavation block, we encountered a large area of Marine Corps fill. This fill was adjacent to a meander of Means Creek. We suspect that Means Creek had previously cut into the site in the area of our excavations, but the Marines had filled this erosional cut with rubble and other debris some time since 1916.

We next excavated several trenches to the north of Fort San Felipe I in the area where the Charlesfort moat approaches the present shoreline. We have been working to define the outline of French Charlesfort (occupied 1562-1563) since we discovered it in 1995, and this brief project was just a part of that long-term effort. We were able to further define a possible entranceway to the French fort that we first exposed in 2002, and we found the point where the Charlesfort moat corners to form the tip of a bastion. This moat corner is right on the edge of a steep bluff, and we now know that it is in an area that will need special consideration during shoreline stabilization work.

Fig. 1. Excavations in search of 17th century Native American council house at Santa Elena site. (SCIAA photo by Chester DePrattelj
Another project that we initiated this spring was a search for a Native American council house observed on the site by William Hilton in 1663. Hilton described this structure as being "in the shape of a Dove-house, round, two hundred foot at least." If Hilton was providing an estimate of circumference, then the building was about 64 feet in diameter. We began our search for this structure by excavating a trench through an area where we had found a concentration of late 17th century Indian material during our boundary survey shovel testing project in 1994. Our trenching and follow-up block excavations exposed numerous features, but we were unable to define a circular structure with the appropriate dimensions. The search for this council house will continue in coming seasons.

Our final project involved investigation of human remains that we encountered in 1997 while working to define the southwest bastion of Fort San Felipe II. At that time, we thought that these remains were in moat fill and that they might represent the disposal of executed French seamen from the ship, Le Prince, that wrecked at the entrance to Port Royal Sound in 1577.

Our 2006 excavations demonstrated that this interpretation was incorrect. We found, instead, that when the Spanish dug the Fort San Felipe moat in 1566, they had cut through a pre-existing Native American burial. The entire burial, except for its upper torso, upper arms, and skull, was cut away by the Spanish and thrown up to form the parapet of the glacis surrounding the fort. Then when the Spanish refilled the moat, those same disturbed bones were thrown back into the moat as part of its fill. We excavated the portion of the moat adjacent to the remaining intact portion of this burial, and we found no evidence of disposal of Frenchmen or anyone else in the moat. The date of the original burial has not yet been determined.

Field crew for these projects consisted of James Legg, Michael Stoner, and Henry Mintz. The entire archaeological crew from the Palmetto Bluff Project assisted us for a week in the excavation of the block just north of Fort San Marcos. We extend our thanks to Dr. Mary Socci and Dr. Ellen Shlasko for bringing their crew and making it possible for us to open a much larger block than we would otherwise have been able to do. Carl Halbirt, St. Augustine, Florida, City Archaeologist worked with us for a week in the moat excavations. We also appreciate the assistance of Dr. Matthew Williamson, Georgia Southern University, and Dr. Ted Rathbun, retired USC professor, in identification of the human remains from the moat excavations. None of these excavations would have been possible without the assistance of Dr. Bryan Howard.

In September 2006, we will return to Santa Elena (with additional Marine Corps funding) to complete work around the pottery kiln that we first exposed in 1993. We will be searching for the potter's house and the waster dump, and we will also be investigating a possible clay source on the margin of a nearby sinkhole.