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Exploring the Native American Colonial Landscape of the Central Savannah River Area, Late 17th -Early 18th Centuries

By J. Christopher Gillam, Charles Cobb, Chester DePratter, and Tammy Herron

Research conducted by the Savannah Valley Frontier Project (hereafter, Frontier) and Savannah River Archaeological Research Program (SRARP) has yielded many valuable insights into the Colonial era of the Central Savannah River Area (CSRA) over the years. Prior research by the SRARP has focused on examining archaeological sites of the period in the hopes of identifying potentially influencing factors that may account for Colonial site location, such as agricultural, ecological, geographic, and social factors (Brooks 1981; Brooks et al. 2000; Crass et al. 1996, 2002; Forehand et al. 2004; Meyers 2001).

Most recently, the colonial interactions of Native Americans and their European counterparts have become a major focus of this research through the Frontier project (Cobb and DePratter 2012; Cobb et al. 2012). The CSRA and neighboring locales were particularly dynamic during this era as multiple Native American immigrant populations moved into the region to trade with the English after the 1670 establishment of Charles Town and the English Carolina Colony (Figure 1). Only the Westo, likely the Erie from western New York, arrived in the Savannah Valley prior to the English, in 1659. Native groups that immigrated to the Savannah River after the English Carolina Colony was established, included the Shawnee from the Ohio Valley, the Chickasaw from northern Mississippi, the Apalachicola from the lower Chattahoochee drainage of Alabama and Georgia, the Apalachee from the Florida panhandle, and the Yuchi, who moved to Carolina from eastern Tennessee (DePratter 2003).

One objective of the 'Frontier' study was to gain a greater understanding of

the cultural landscape, interactions, and corresponding activity of these immigrant Native American groups that settled the CSRA's Colonial (late 17th-early 18th centuries) frontier using the methods of Geographic Information Science (GISci). Examining the distribution of sites, it is possible to identify six archaeological site clusters along the Central Savannah River (Figure 2). These clusters of sites likely represent the locations of dispersed Native American Colonial towns (Cobb et al. 2012). Observations of the geographic

loamy sand of the floodplain and adjacent terraces offered an abundance of edible and herbaceous vegetation and was also the most suitable land for native agriculture. Low terrace slopes, levees, and islands adjacent to and within the floodplain were, and are, well drained for much of the year providing stable habitation sites. Beaver were plentiful along the tributary streams, as were white-tailed deer, and other mammals, providing ample resources for trade with the English along the coast. Chert was

also available for expedient stone tools, occurring as secondary river gravels and as primary outcrops in nearby Allendale County, South Carolina and Screven County, Georgia (Goodyear and Charles 1984).

There are two apparent site cluster concentrations in the current sample that yield additional information about the cultural landscape of the time (Figure 2). The northern concentration consists of four site clusters within the Fall Zone (ca. 90-meters to 120-meters amsl), the interface between the Piedmont and Upper Coastal Plain near present-day Augusta, Georgia (Murphy 1995); and a

southern concentration consisting of two site clusters, also along a topographic transition below the Orangeburg Scarp, between the Middle and Lower Coastal Plains (ca. 15-meters to 30-meters amsl) (Murphy 1995). Such natural breaks on the landscape offer greater biodiversity than nearby terrain and served as natural cross-drainage passageways for both animals and humans. Likewise, adjacent physiographic zones were more difficult

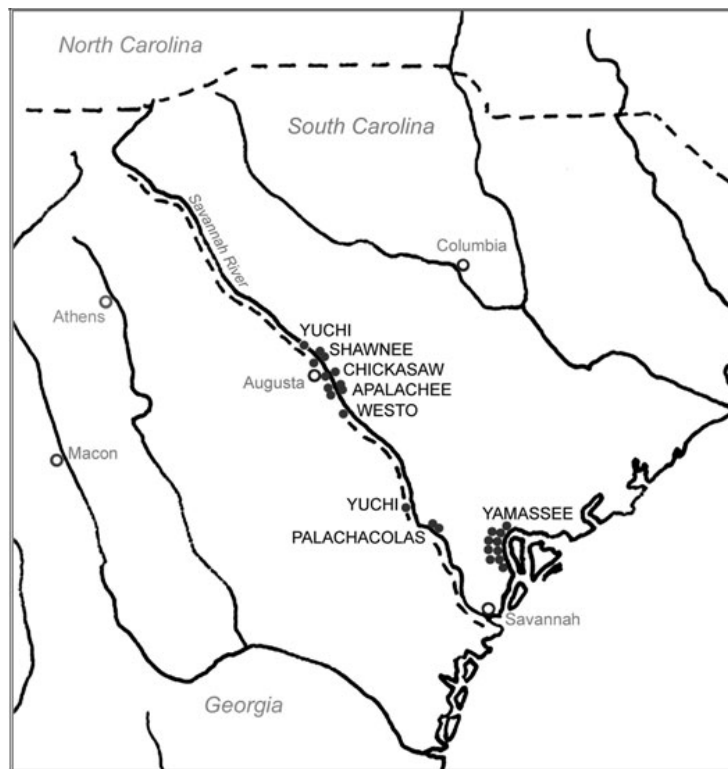


Figure 1: Primary locations of Colonial Native American towns on the Savannah and neighboring locales (after Cobb et al. 2012). (SCIAA map)

context of the six site clusters provide valuable insight into the character of the CSRA's Native American Colonial landscape. Perhaps most notable is the similar context of sites along floodplains within a few 100 meters of running water, a pattern that these "extra-local" groups that emigrated from other regions of eastern North America shared with their local prehistoric forebears (see Cabak et al. 1996; Sassaman et al. 1999). The

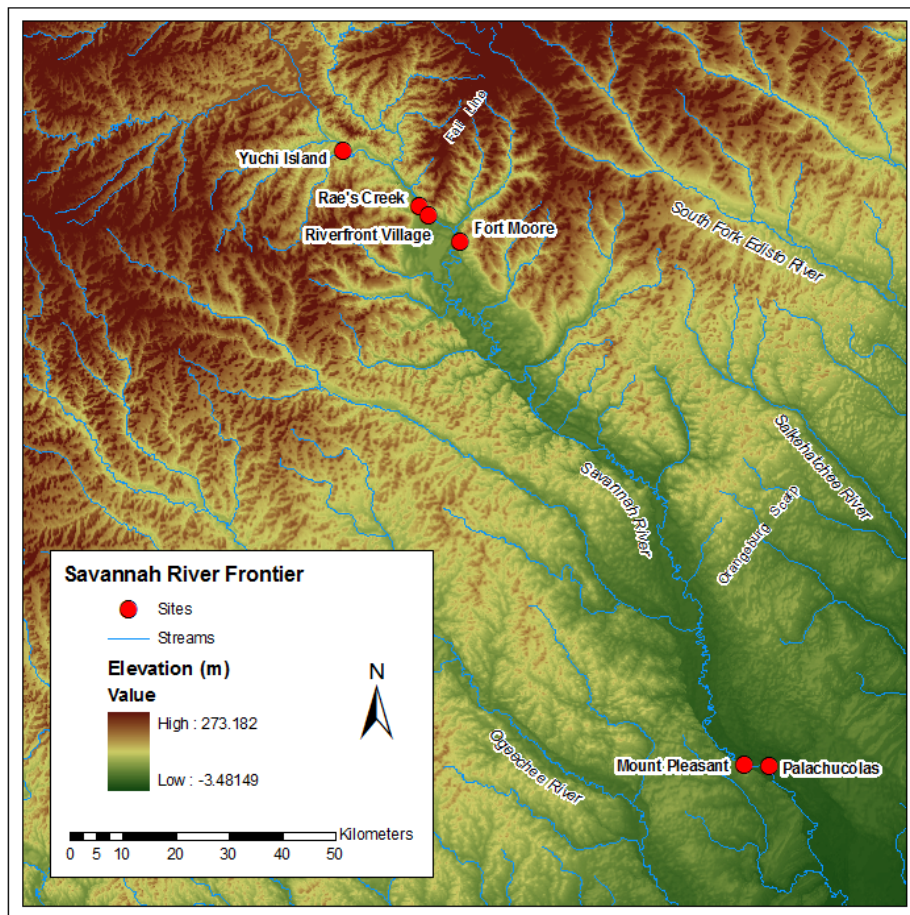


Figure 2: Colonial Native American site clusters of the Central Savannah River Area (late 17th-early 18th centuries). (SCIAA map)

to traverse, with the Piedmont to the northwest being a highly-dissected, hilly, and densely-forested landscape and the Lower Coastal Plain to the southeast being relatively flat topographically, but difficult to traverse due to the poorly-drained, unconsolidated soils of its broad, wet floodplains. As cultural pathways, there were also strategic advantages to placing settlements near the Fall Line and Coastal Plain Scarps, such as deterring incursions by Spanish-armed natives from points south. This strategic advantage would have served-well the security of both the Native and English populations of the region. From an economic perspective, these strategically located positions between the English and Spanish colonies would also have afforded the native communities the opportunity of trade with both parties. Critical trading paths to Charles Town are known to have traversed the two regions, one leading to Ft. Moore at Savannah Town and the other passing by Palachucolas Town. Thus, a complex array of ecological, political, and economic

factors account for the appearance of two major Native American site cluster concentrations during the Colonial era.

Much has been learned about the cultural landscape of the CSRA's Colonial Period Native Americans as a result of this research. Key observations of the existing archaeological site clusters and challenges for future research and fieldwork include: the low frequency and mobility of primary habitation sites exhibiting significant cultural materials, a lack of exposed native architecture or a visible built environment (e.g., earthworks), the low archaeological visibility of secondary/extractive cultural sites, the occupation of floodplain and adjacent environs with probable destruction of cultural remains by river meander and erosion, and a low overall archaeological visibility due to the temporally contracted/episodic nature of occupation. Such challenges are common in archaeological research here in South Carolina and elsewhere. Results of the project highlight the need for further archaeological research and fieldwork to

increase the current sample of six known archaeological site clusters. The low site numbers have prevented significant quantitative evaluation of the CSRA's Native American Colonial landscape and its development as an economic and strategic asset during this period. Further work is needed to build an improved and statistically-valid archaeological site sample to further explore the character of this dynamic frontier landscape!

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ART tour of Graniteville, in celebration of SCIAA's 50th anniversary, November 2, 2013. (Photo by Nena Powell Rice)

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