Gullah-Geechee Landscapes on Ossabaw Island, Georgia

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ABSTRACT

The North End Plantation on Ossabaw Island, Georgia (9CH1062) has been almost continually occupied since the 1760s. Although a large number of enslaved Africans (later Gullah-Geechee) resided there, the remains of three tabby duplexes are the only substantial evidence associated with them. This paper summarizes the results of two field seasons of landscape reconstruction that were aimed at identifying the locations of additional non-tabby cabins, historic plantation roadways, and adjacent yard areas associated with the cabins. In conjunction with historic aerial photographs, domestic and architectural artifacts recovered from an extensive systematic survey were used to generate artifact density contour maps that define the slave and Gullah-Geechee occupations at the site over time. The application of this approach at other coastal plantation sites is also considered.

Introduction

As one of several barrier islands stretching from the Savannah River to the St. Marys River on the Georgia coast (Figure 1), Ossabaw Island possessed environmental and climatic characteristics that made it suitable for producing various crops during the antebellum period. This paper is concerned with reconstructing part of an Ossabaw plantation historic landscape and is centered primarily on questions about the location and definition of slave quarters and/or Geechee residences on the island’s North End. Three extant tabby duplexes associated with the North End Plantation undoubtedly represent only a small sample of slave residences that were occupied there over time, and an architectural study indicates they were probably constructed relatively late in the antebellum period (Barrickman et. al. 2004). Identifying additional cabin locations was the main goal of the archaeological research carried out over two field sessions (2011-2012) by the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.
Site Background

Due to its close proximity to Savannah, Ossabaw Island was settled relatively early by European and African groups: John Morel, Sr., established the island’s first plantation on what is known as the North End (Figure 2) by 1763. Indigo, Sea Island cotton, and livestock headed the list of plantation products that were originally grown for Morel by his North End slaves. By the Revolutionary War Morel was a prosperous planter, owning several plantations and numerous slaves. Besides growing crops, the slaves harvested timber and engaged in maritime vessel construction. In addition, Morel was a successful Savannah-based merchant for luxury goods, including chocolate, coffee, sugar, Jamaican rum, claret wine, Dutch tiles, marble slabs, and gold and silver lace (Elliot 2007:45). While his high-end retailing and his Ossabaw plantation appear to have thrived, by 1774 Morel had moved his residence to the mainland, where he died in 1776. A year later an estate inventory included 155 slaves and this “human wealth” is a clear indication that the Morels were part of the elite planter class on the coast. The three substantial tabby duplexes that served as North End slave quarters also suggest Morel’s affluence (Figure 3). As successful planters, Morel and his oldest son (John Morel, Jr.) joined the Sons of Liberty during the Revolutionary War, which in turn drew the unwelcome attention of British forces who eventually raided the plantation in 1782. A “new vessel on the stocks, nearly finished,” along with 30 slaves and 2000 pounds of indigo were lost (Martin 1917:335). Morel’s main house may have been damaged or destroyed during this raid.

Unfortunately, determining which of the slaves who lived and worked on Ossabaw rather than on a mainland plantation is vexing at best since information specifying where they worked is nonexistent. While specific slave demographic data is missing for the North End, Dan Elliot (2007) located several newspaper advertisements for runaway Morel slaves, and the relatively high number of these unmistakable examples of resistance suggest an unusually harsh environment for the enslaved Africans. A contributing factor may have been the primary crop that was originally grown there: indigo. This complex, messy and labor-intensive crop was often lethal to its labor force, thanks to the noxious fumes associated with processing indigo with lye. An early 19th century account of the production process stated: “…and such is the effect of the indigo upon the lungs of the laborers, that they never live over seven years” (Roberts 2001:28).

One newspaper notice found by Elliot describes a group of 10 men, women, and children who used a 20-foot-long sloop to make good their 1781 escape. Three of the adults had
previously escaped from another Morel plantation on the mainland and, ironically, had been banished to Ossabaw so as to discourage future escape attempts! From the frequency of redundant escapee names, it appears that some slaves were serial fugitives, particularly an individual named Titus who successfully escaped in the late 1780s and seemingly made it his business to assist other Morel slaves to do the same. In all, Elliott documents a minimum of 20 slaves who escaped or attempted escape from the North End. Interestingly, and perhaps paradoxically, he also indicates a small number of slaves who were manumitted by the Morels. Suffice it to say that the planter-slave relationship at Ossabaw seems to have been complex.

After the senior Morel’s death the plantation experienced a chequered economic history under the Morel family’s ownership. Slaves associated with Morel plantations decreased over time, and the Morel family abandoned the North End by 1861. Thanks to the implementation of Sherman’s Field Order 15, 78 Freedmen claimed 2000 acres on Ossabaw by 1865; Elliott (2007:44) identifies the freedman John Paul family as residing at the North End in that year. Tunis G. Campbell, a minister in charge of Sea Island resettlement, aided Ossabaw’s freedman in building a school (Elliot 2007:78). However, Field Order 15 was rescinded by 1867 and the Morels soon re-possessed their holdings.

Following the Civil War, many of the Freedmen who inhabited Ossabaw Island lived there for several decades as tenants or workers for the white property owners. The population of the island in the 1880 census numbered 180 persons and most, if not all, were of African-American descent. Elliott (2005:35) reasonably speculates that the scarcity of whites on the island allowed these Geechee residents to live relatively unmolested lives there, although their numbers declined over time. At least one Geechee church existed on Ossabaw by the 1870s. With a congregation of 68 souls, the Hinder Me Not Baptist Church was relocated to the mainland at Pin Point sometime before 1900. Its original location and the slave and Freedman cemetery or cemeteries on Ossabaw are unknown. Between 1881 and 1898, when several hurricanes ravaged the coast, most Geechee inhabitants moved to the mainland. The few who remained were primarily in the employ of the Island’s absentee landowners or were sharecroppers. A succession of wealthy white landowners used the island primarily as a private hunting preserve. The island was sold to the State of Georgia as a wildlife and heritage preserve in 1978. The Georgia Department of Natural Resources, in partnership with the non-profit
Ossabaw Foundation, now manages the island. Both organizations sponsored the UTC field schools.

**Research Questions and Methodology**

From the documentary summary presented above, it is obvious that the three extant tabby duplexes housed only a small proportion of the slave force at the North End, and the line of structures shown on the 1910 Nautical Chart suggests the possibility of more than three cabins in the 20\(^{th}\) century and probably earlier. Thus a primary research goal for both UTC field sessions was to locate any additional cabins. To that end, a UTC archaeological field school was carried out under the direction of the senior author during the summer of 2011. A survey methodology using a modified systematic sample distribution was employed. Survey units measured 50 cm square, were placed at 20-meter intervals, and dug to sterile soil. Some survey units were expanded to one-meter squares to chase features. Fill was screened with ¼ inch mesh. The survey grid was established using a total station, with grid north laid out parallel to the extant slave cabins. A total of 94 half meter survey units were completed during the project (Figure 4). Minor modifications to the 20-m-grid layout were necessary due to the presence of several modern structures, including the Club House, a dormitory used by the field school crew. According to oral history, this 1920s-era structure was supposedly built directly on top of the original Morel main house foundations (Foskey 2001:13).

From the preliminary results of the 2011 survey it became apparent that remains of buried slave cabins could not be identified with much confidence. As a result, the 2012 survey expanded the grid and in some cases created a denser sample interval, as shown in Figure 5; a total of 52 additional units were added to the original survey sample. The most intensively surveyed section for the site was south along a line established by the three tabbies. This coincided with the line of structures (including the tabbies) shown in the 1910 Nautical Chart map (Figure 2).
An aggressive field lab was established during the fieldwork so that preliminary artifact frequencies from each unit could be generated on a daily basis. This interactive field/lab approach allowed decisions to be continuously made about the effective placement of new survey units.

**Survey Results**

The total ceramic assemblage \((f=1040, 64\) types) collected from the site is presented in Table 1. The wide range of types span the 18\(^{th}\) and 19\(^{th}\) centuries and is consistent with the continuous use of the site by succeeding generations of residents, as implied by documentary records and oral history.

In addition, a total of 31 subsurface features were defined at the site. Table 2 lists all features defined during both field sessions. Given the continuous occupation of the site, several features identified in the survey were associated with modern utilities. Other features turned out to be natural in origin, such as root stains. As indicated in Table 2, a small number of historic postholes and/or pits were recognized, but a definite drawback to a survey-level of research is the difficulty in making sense of isolated features due to the small size of the survey units; no patterns can be defined from such limited spatial samples. Numerous fence posts and porch supports appear in historic photographs of the tabbies, and these later additions can complicate the archaeological record. At any rate, survey units containing eight possible historic postholes and four small pits are indicated in Figure 5, but the presence of these mostly isolated features are not sufficient to identify the locations of structures.

But what about the slave quarters? The 1910 nautical map shows a straight line of nine structures that probably represent the former homes of Geechee residents and possibly slaves, including the three tabby duplexes. This same map shows adjacent cultivated fields and a straight dirt road just west of the structures. Thus, at least six structures have gone missing sometime after 1910, and the dirt road has been altered with a slight curve in it, as shown in Figure 4 (more on this below). Either the missing cabins were (1) tabby structures whose walls were recycled, in which case traces of their foundations should still be present; (2) earth-fast post constructions that are not discernible in our sample; or (3) they were wood frame cabins. Cabins that are supported by floor joists attached to small earth-fast posts or, more likely, small brick or tabby piers, would be expected to leave little if any traces in the archaeological record, particularly if
the piers were recycled after the cabins collapsed or burned. If residents of such structures used cast iron stoves for cooking and heat, no remnant fireplaces or chimney falls would be present. Thus, locating such structures is a considerable challenge since they left little if any substantive subsurface features behind.

A way to circumvent this pessimism is to attempt to identify the elusive wooden cabin locations using an indirect approach. Instead of relying on the presence of (probably) non-existent foundation elements, we used the presence (and absence) of domestic and architectural-related artifacts. This approach has previously been used at a plantation on nearby Sapelo Island, with positive results. Some of the basic assumptions undergirding this procedure are as follows:

(1) Wood cabins on piers would probably have wood floors. Thus, primary domestic refuse (Schiffer 1972, 1976) such as ceramics and food bone would be rare inside cabin footprints. Instead, domestic trash would likely be deposited in secondary context, that is, outside the cabin footprint. Such artifacts could either take the form of sheet deposits or be buried in subsurface features.

(2) Artifacts associated with the structures themselves would consist primarily of “nail rain” resulting from disintegration or burning. Since the nails essentially were deposited where they were used, they are in primary context. Shuttered rather than glazed windows would be expected for such structures.

(3) These two classes of artifacts would tend to be mutually exclusive. That is, high frequencies of ceramics should be associated with low frequencies of nails, and vice versa.

The manner in which this approach was applied was to use each of our half-meter survey excavations as a data point, and plug in the artifact frequencies to form density distribution contour maps. Due to its minimal learning curve, Surfer 11 (Golden Software) was used to generate the density maps, but any GIS-based utility will do. The maps were then compared to determine if the artifact concentrations we predicted for “feature-free” cabins were present. If so, we assume we ultimately were identifying the location of the “missing” slave cabins. The results of this approach are presented below.

Before generating the artifact density maps, we tested our proposed inverse relationship between ceramics and nails by calculating a correlation coefficient for them. As shown in Figure ?, the positive slope of this regression line bodes ill for our predicted inverse relationship.
Instead, for the site overall, high ceramic counts generally occur with high nail counts, and vice versa. A fine-grain difference between these two artifact classes may not have been discernible with our survey interval. Or we may simply be wrong. At any rate, a five-meter interval was used on a survey of the Spaulding Site on Sapelo Island (Honerkamp and Bean 2010) that successfully identified an inverse ceramic/nail relationship.

Despite this melancholy result on Ossabaw, we can still focus our attention on indirect indications of the presence of cabins. Figure ? illustrates a linear series of artifact concentrations that includes ceramics, container glass, faunal remains and cut nails. While the peaks and valleys are not at identical locations, they are close, and they indicate a consistent depositional tendency that aligns quite well with a line formed by the row of tabby duplexes, the tabby barn, and the Bunkhouse (aka Morel manor). It seems unlikely that these concentrations represent random refuse deposits that by chance line up precisely with these five extant structures. Instead, we suggest that these linear concentrations are associated with refuse disposal, probably as sheet deposits, from corner pier wood cabins that contained stoves rather than chimneys. We also suggest that systematic surveys may be the only way to indirectly tease out the presence of such structures. In his earlier research at the North End, Dan Elliott has suggested that there may be additional cabin remains to the west of the North End tabbies, and we plan to investigate this possibility next summer.

By examining ceramic types that were first produced in the second and third quarters of the 18th century, a spatial-temporal hypothesis could also be tested: if the 18th century Morel main house was located under the extant Club House dormitory, as oral history would have it, 18th century ceramics would be expected to cluster near this location, marking the presence of early planter and slave assemblages. Over time, as later slave cabins (such as the extant tabbies) were built farther away from the planter’s house, early ceramics should show reduced frequencies or be completely superseded by 19th century wares. When ceramics with 18th century beginning manufacturing dates (English delftware, faience, Astbury, slipware, Buckley earthenware, creamware, Whieldon ware, white salt glazed stoneware, Shaw stoneware, and Eller’s stoneware) are used to generate density maps, a regular linear pattern of peaks is produced (Figure ?). Although these types are certainly not abundant (about 12% of the site total), the nonrandom distributions are pretty consistent with our prediction of clustering at the southern half of the site. (Interestingly, this pattern was not apparent in the 2011 sample.) This
compensates somewhat for our disappointment with the positive relationship between ceramics and nails.

There may be another important temporal dimension to the sequencing of these structures. On Sapelo Island early slave cabins were either wattle and tabby daub or earth-fast wooden structures; poured tabby duplexes were common during the first half of the 19th century. During the late antebellum and post-Emancipation periods cabins were almost exclusively wood-on-pier constructions. The Sapelo data suggests that we have identified a late slave or a Geechee component on Ossabaw, something that is supported by the preponderance of whiteware at the site. But on the North End there seems to be an early dimension to that settlement patterning.

Finally, a landscape-related question that emerges from a consideration of specific cabin locations concerns the dirt road that is adjacent to (west of) the tabbies, tabby barn, and Bunkhouse. An aerial view shows a slight dogleg that shifts to the west, beginning at the Boarding House. This shift has vexed most researchers at Ossabaw, because there is no intuitively obvious reason for it. The 1910 Tidal Map (Figure 2) shows this dirt road on the west side of all of the tabby structures and the Bunk House, just as it is today. However, the accuracy of this map has been called into question by Jennifer Bedel of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources. She discovered an aerial photo of the site (Figure ?), facing north, that probably dates to the late 1930s – well after the 1910 map was produced. The dogleg is absent in the aerial, so that the road occurs on the east side of the tabbies. This straight-line route from the duplexes to the barn is a more logical arrangement than the dogleg version which apparently post-dates the 1930s. This means that the “front” yards of the cabins were on the east, while the “back” yards were adjacent to the fields to the west. We are currently comparing the hypothesized front and back yard deposits to see if we can recognize any meaningful differences between these two areas.

**Conclusion**

From research conducted since 2006 on sites at Sapelo and now at Ossabaw, the following things have become apparent to us: (1) half meter tests on systematic 20 m intervals are a fairly cost-effective way to discover and delineate the general presence of slave cabin components in the sandy soils of the Georgia coast; (2) conversely, if those cabins were frame-on-corner-post construction, it is quite difficult to pinpoint their locations, and this is considered to be a fairly major drawback for understanding the lives of the folks who lived in these types of
structures; and (3) it is very easy to focus research on tabby slave cabins only, simply because they are so obvious, the low-hanging fruit of plantation archaeology. Such myopia often fails to take into account the fact that tabby remains at a site may be just one architectural phase in a continuum of pre- and post-Emancipation housing over time. Assuming that tabby foundations represent the only occupation phase at a plantation is simply an untested assumption, one that is aided and abetted by small sample bias.

Since wood frame structures can be so hard to locate, what can be done about it? Refinements in GPR and other remote sensing technologies will eventually address this problem at least at some sites. However, many archaeologists simply cannot afford the luxury of owning, leasing or renting GPR technology. Nor can they afford the expense and time that secondary testing entails when it is inappropriately used at a discovery level of research. Instead, we suggest an approach that relies on systematic sampling, with the smaller the survey interval, the better.

Over half a century ago Charles H. Fairbanks jump-started plantation archaeology by de-emphasizing the big house and focusing on the archaeology of slave cabins. We believe that his vision included all the slave cabins.

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Figure 1. Pleistocene and Holocene Georgia Barrier Island Formations. Map courtesy of National Park Service.
Figure 2. The North End Plantation in 1910. From a “Nautical Chart of Ossabaw Sound.”

Figure 3. Restored Tabby Duplexes and Dirt Road at the North End Plantation. Facing grid north.
Figure 4. Survey Unit Locations at the North End Plantation, 20 Meter Intervals. Club House is on the right.

Figure 5. North End Plantation Survey Grid, 2011 (red) and 2012 (blue). North arrow indicates grid north; magnetic north is to the top of this Google image.