

Shiner's Trench: Recycling the Archaeological Record at Fort Frederica

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Abstract

Transforming a sow's ear into a silk purse, a unique educational program has been instituted at Fort Frederica National Monument through the combined efforts of the National Park Service and the Glynn County (Georgia) School System. Following the discovery of a modern trench backfilled with colonial artifacts from previous excavations at Frederica, the National Park Service developed an educational program highlighting colonial archaeology for Glynn County fourth grade students and their teachers. The program consists of a training workshop for teachers, one day of excavation by each class, artifact analysis in the classroom, and student-designed artifact displays. The trench is virtually a renewable archaeological resource: it is scheduled to be refilled with the recently-excavated artifacts this year, and excavations will continue indefinitely.

Since burying artifact collections in lieu of curation is a surprising procedure to most contemporary archaeologists, the genesis of Shiner's Trench is reviewed in this paper. An overview of the teaching program is then presented that assesses the strengths and weaknesses of a remarkable cooperative venture in historical archaeology education.

Introduction

The town and fort of Frederica, located on St. Simons Island, Georgia, was established in 1736 as a defensive outpost between Spanish Florida and important British settlements and plantations in Georgia and South Carolina. Consisting of a regiment of soldiers along with several dozen families from which the civilian militia was derived, the small fortified settlement was too large for the Spanish forces based in St. Augustine to ignore if they were to attack Savannah, yet it was small enough for England to sacrifice in the defense of her more important holdings. But the Georgia colony's founder, James Edward Oglethorpe, an English nobleman and military leader, had social and economic motives in mind when he established the town. Besides its strategic importance, Oglethorpe naively envisioned the settlement as a self sufficient transplanted English village, populated by the mother country's "deserving poor," complete with cordwainers, dyers, coopers, and candlestick makers, all of whom were also expected to be part-time farmers. Predictably, most of these city slickers quickly transplanted themselves to the bright lights of Savannah or Charleston; those who stayed depended largely on governmental handouts for their existence, or else served the thirsty needs of the 630-man regiment. The death knell of this military-based economy was sounded when a remarkably incompetent Spanish invasion of the island was repulsed in 1742. The British regiment was disbanded in 1749, and the few residents who remained by that late date soon departed. Much of the town's surviving structures burned in 1758 because no one was there to put the fire out.

Over the next two and a half centuries the site was sporadically occupied and farmed, and an orphanage was established there at the turn of this century. Thanks largely to the efforts of the Colonial Dames of America and local historian Margaret Davis Cate, the area of the town and

fort became a national monument in 1945, predating by 25 years the advent of affordable metal detectors and the human hogs who operate them. Thus, looting at the site has been minimal. Archaeological explorations of the largely undisturbed fort and defensive earthworks began in the late 1940s under the supervision of Charles H. Fairbanks, the monument's first superintendent. His pioneering work aided greatly in the location, interpretation, and restoration of several key military elements (Fairbanks 1953), and in collaboration with Margaret Davis Cate, he was able to establish the original layout of the civilian sections of the town (Fairbanks 1956). But following Fairbanks' departure, over 40 excavations were undertaken under a "let's see what's there" approach (Deagan 1975) that emphasized trenching for substantial foundations. If none were noted, the site was considered to be "uninteresting," even if numerous postholes for earth-fast structures had been uncovered. Reflecting this dualistic evaluation of site worthiness, site reports were sometimes distilled down to single sentences, such as this one by one post-Fairbanks archaeologist: "The usual assortment of colonial artifacts was found." Of course, for the time and place, this approach was not uncommon at historic sites, especially if the archaeologist involved had been trained in the Southwest as a prehistorian, didn't like the field of historical archaeology in general, resented being assigned to Fort Frederica in particular, and held the people, climate, geography, and southern cooking of the Georgia coast in contempt (Charles Fairbanks, personal communication).

A Sow's Ear

Even without screening, the trenching technique used at Frederica did produce large quantities of colonial artifacts. Without a problem-oriented approach to the excavations, however, any artifacts that were not deemed "museum quality" or otherwise "interesting" were automatically labeled as "superfluous" or "redundant." Since the majority of artifacts found were not in the former category, a serious redundant-artifact storage problem emerged at the Park after a decade of sustained excavations. From a series of extraordinary NPS memos written in 1966, it has been possible to reconstruct what happened to a substantial number of these artifacts: many of them ended up buried in an artifact disposal trench.

The flurry of memos about the trench were inspired by a request from T. M. Hamilton. Hamilton doing research on muskets (1976) and had apparently asked the Supervisor if it was possible to examine the contents of a large collection of colonial artifacts that had been buried in a trench at Fort Frederica by NPS personnel from 1959 to 1964. Hamilton evidently hoped to discover gun parts in the trench that had been overlooked and inadvertently included with all the uninteresting pieces. That trench now bears the name of its maker. One memo clearly states that Joel Shiner made a "unilateral decision" to create the trench and fill it with what was described as "duplicate artifacts; pipe stems, nails, pins, etc.... Most of it was small fragments or completely uninteresting trash." Prior to their burial, the artifacts were "culled" so as to remove the "passable and interesting specimens ahead of time" (3-11-66; on file at Fort Frederica National Monument).

Another memo (3-22-66) is more specific about the disposal process at Fort Frederica and elsewhere. Jackson Moore carried out excavations at the fort for a number of years, although he states he had nothing to do with Shiner's Trench. He explains that storage space was lacking at the Park, so "large quantities had to be marked for disposal." He goes on to describe the buried assemblage:

These quantities, as I recall, consisted of duplications as well as bulk items. “Bulk” of course, meant nails, bolts, bottle bases, body fragments, and necks, flat glass, body sherds of all kinds (unique sherds were kept, even though unrepresentative). I don’t recall whether there was any category that was kept altogether, so presume that some mainsprings, frizzens, etc. might have been buried. (emphasis in the original)

Moore also states that during his tenure at Frederica he simply piled excess artifacts in the vicinity of the trench rather than burying them, and that several NPS personnel retrieved “valuable” artifacts from the pile. He also indicates that it was a common practice at National Parks to bury surplus artifacts, especially in the northeast region.

Hamilton’s request to inspect the buried artifacts struck a sensitive nerve with the Park Service. In October of 1966 Fort Frederica’s Superintendent W. H. Glover and the Park Historian Robert R. Madden directed a one-week excavation of the trench using maintenance personnel for the labor. In his letter to Hamilton (10-12-66), Glover reported the following:

The excavation was carefully made. Each shovel of dirt was sifted through a wire screen. Every scrap of material was taken from the trench, and each item was examined individually. At least 95% of the artifacts were readily recognizable as pottery and bottle shards, projectile fragments [hollow shot?], and building materials (nails, hinges, bolts, etc.). The remainder included such items as pipe fragments, bones, and other non-metallic [sic] objects. Little copper or brass was found. There were, however, a few unidentifiable metal artifacts, and we are sending these to you under separate cover...Again, let me assure you that the forwarded artifacts are the only items recovered from the trench that could possibly be gun parts.

A letter by Madden (10-16-66) reiterated Glover’s assessment of the newly-excavated collection, adding that “.by and large the whole thing was a disappointment... Its difficult for an old farm boy not to recognize hinges, nails, bolts, etc., and that’s what most of the metal artifacts were.”

Finally, in November of 1966, Hamilton sent the culled metal fragments back to Frederica with a letter identifying what he had found, consisting only of a pistol sideplate, some candlestick fragments, and some 19th century lamp and garden tool items (11-27-66). He suggested that Stan South be contacted to verify his identifications, and then offered this prophetic statement:

Though opening this trench has been pretty much of a water haul so far as my own field is concerned, I am under the impression that men like South would find this particular collection or assortment very interesting and, perhaps, helpful.

What was not established from the documentary outline of Shiner’s Trench was its size and location. An earlier memo, authored by the Superintendent in 1959, gives the dimensions of the trench as 2 by 30 feet and 3 feet deep; another memo (3-11-66) mentions a trench 10 feet long, “just to the rear of the old archaeology storage bldg.”; Moore’s note (3-22-66) references a long

deep trench in front of a septic tank, while a third declares that the trench contains “about 100 cubic feet of discarded material” (8-10-66). Still another states that the trench is “two feet wide, three feet deep, and 18 feet long, marked by a 4” X 4” concrete post four feet high at each end” (4-4-66). This suggests that either there is more than one trench or the original 1959 trench was expanded.

In 1994, when Frederica’s Chief Ranger Ray Morris came across records about the trench, a single concrete post was present in the presumed vicinity of the former archaeology storage shed. Test pits dug by archaeologists from the Southeast Archaeological Center (SEAC) confirmed the existence of a solid mass of buried colonial and 19th century artifacts, some with accession numbers still present on them, but the trench was determined to be at least five feet wide and extending 50 feet to the east of the marker. The archaeologists were unable to reach the bottom of the trench due to the density of artifacts. Clearly, though, this sow’s ear was quite large, dwarfing contemporary descriptions of the trench dimensions. Perhaps Moore’s pile of artifacts were eventually reburied with the original trench material after the 1966 excavation.

What was also clear was that the trench contained a substantial quantity of diverse artifacts from over 40 sites at Frederica, all unprovenienced, with the “interesting” and “unusual” pieces removed but not documented.

A Silk Purse

The transformation of this archaeological embarrassment into a positive educational tool is without precedent. Once SEAC had established the presence of the feature--and that its archaeological assemblage would not qualify for a Section 106 permit due to its redeposited context--the possible educational value of the trench began to be explored. By chance a new elementary school was being constructed near the Park. Superintendent Mike Tennet suggested using the trench as part of an archaeology addition to the school’s curriculum. Principal Barbara Kriner enthusiastically agreed. The scope of the program expanded to include the entire Glynn County School system. Fundraising then got serious. A wide variety of partners made direct and in-kind contributions to the archaeological initiative: the school district dedicated a classroom at Oglethorpe Point Elementary School as an archaeological laboratory and provided a part time (later changed to a full time) Archaeology Coordinator (Ellen Provenzano); the Fort Frederica Association, a private support organization of the Park, donated \$10,000; and the Park itself contributed \$45,000 in direct and in-kind assistance. A lead grant was awarded by the Board of the National Park Foundation, through the Parks as Classrooms Program, for \$45,000. Organizations offering support and assistance ranged from the St. Simons Optimist Club to the Coastal Georgia Historical Society to Armstrong Atlantic State University in Savannah.

The successful fundraising efforts resulted in the acquisition of excavation equipment and supplies, the equipping of what has become known as the Fort Frederica Archaeological Center’s laboratory at Oglethorpe Point Elementary School, and most importantly, financial support for the ambitious teacher-training program, with a goal of training every fourth-grade teacher in the county school system through participation in a one-week of intensive field and laboratory course. The training course was to take place at the dedicated laboratory at Oglethorpe Point Elementary and at Fort Frederica. During 1994/95, only teachers and students at the host school were involved in the program in order to field test the curriculum and facilities.

From 1994 to date, a total of 57 fourth grade teachers were trained at the Center by the consulting professional archaeologists and archaeology educators, and by NPS personnel. The training course curriculum typically included an overview of the project by the Park's Educational Specialist (Noelle Conrad), followed by an introduction to the field of historical archaeology by Meredith Poole of Colonial Williamsburg. Due to my past involvement in archaeological research at Frederica (Honerkamp 1975a, 1975b, 1977, 1980, 1984, 1994; Honerkamp, Council, and Reitz 1984), I presented a background slide presentation on archaeology at Frederica in conjunction with a walking tour of the Park. To wrap up the first day, Dr. Anne Yentsch and Judd Kratzer of the Public History Department at Armstrong Atlantic State University provided examples of Armstrong's archaeological education efforts.

Thoroughly shell shocked by this crash course in historical archaeology, the teachers began the second day with a case study of the archaeological children's program at Colonial Williamsburg, the aptly named "Camp Dirt Diggers" field school. They were then ready to hit the trench. The teachers were taken to the site and divided into five digging teams, corresponding to the five two-by-two meter units that the consultants had laid out over the trench. Each teacher received individual instruction by the consulting archaeologists in note taking, use of the transit, excavation techniques, and screening. After a morning of digging, the teachers brought the excavated artifacts to the lab for an afternoon of cleaning, analysis, and initial identification.

The next morning was also devoted to hands-on laboratory procedures, with an emphasis on classroom management applications. In the afternoon curriculum lessons were reviewed by Ellen Provenzano. The lessons combined a variety of archaeological- and history-based curriculums with an emphasis on those provided by Meg Heath, who heads the Bureau of Land Management's educational program at the Colorado Anasazi Heritage Center. The curriculum provided to the teachers is a moveable feast; Ellen Provenzano, teachers, and Park staff, along with help from Colonial Williamsburg educators, continually revise and adapt the lesson plans. Currently the curriculum units include fundamental concepts, the process of archaeology, laboratory work and conservation, and issues in archaeology. An extensive appendix is also provided that contains historical background information, a vocabulary list, resource materials, etc. Students spend at least 15 hours of class time on archaeological fundamentals before undertaking the fieldwork.

Toward the end of the third day of teacher training the use of material culture in the interpretation of historic sites was introduced; such stellar lights as Pam Cressey, City Archaeologist of Alexandria, and Corky Mayo, Chief of Interpretation for the NPS, have shared their ideas with the teachers. The final day of the training continues the interpretation theme and includes a session on exhibit design and construction by Pat Morris of the Coastal Georgia Historical Society. A discussion and written evaluation of the training experience by the teachers caps the program. On their own initiative, some teachers have also participated in organized trips to Colonial Williamsburg for additional experience.

To date a total of 51 fourth grade classes and 12 fifth grade classes, composed of nearly 1700 students, have participated in the excavation of Shiner's Trench; approximately 75 students from private schools have also been involved. Over 1000 students are expected to participate this year. Prior to the fieldwork, an extensive archaeology unit is covered in the classroom. Excavation is under the supervision of the teachers, with the Archaeology Coordinator on site at all times. In addition, NPS personnel are often present, particularly the Educational Specialist,

and archaeologists from Armstrong Atlantic, including faculty and experienced students, lend professional expertise to the excavations. The field day is followed by a trip to the Archaeological Center for cleaning and classification. An extensive collection of comparative artifacts are kept in the lab to assist in identification. Students write a site report incorporating the field and laboratory activities as part of their assignment, and are also encouraged to build interpretive exhibits to display the artifacts they identify. They end the unit by discussing issues dealing with archaeological ethics, conservation, and preservation.

By any standard the archaeology program has been a huge success. The project has received extensive local, regional, and even national media coverage. The program has also received two prestigious awards: Georgia's Partners-in-Education Award in 1996 and the National Park Service Freeman Tilden Award in 1995. But another measure of success can be found in the descriptions of the program that come from teachers, parents, and the students. From the beginning of the program, those descriptions have been glowing. Many teachers have noted how the program integrates several subject areas at once. In an article by Ray Morris in *Federal Archaeology Magazine* (1995: 29), he summarizes this major strength:

The hook for teachers is that this is not an add-on to their already busy schedules. The curriculum folds into--and enhances--segments on science, history, mathematics, writing skills, and other disciplines that teachers must cover under the Georgia State Education Quality Core Curriculum Requirements. In short, teachers teach and students learn concepts required to be taught during the school year.

As Archaeology Coordinator Ellen Provenzano has also pointed out, this program provides a level playing field for all students, since there aren't usually any gifted or remedial fourth grade archaeologists--they are all equally inexperienced. And she has observed that "in several instances students with a long history of discipline problems became better students, some even want to become archaeologists" (Morris 1995:31). The students themselves show tremendous enthusiasm and an eagerness to learn; many have commented on how archaeology makes learning fun, and how exciting it is to find their first artifact. And the students come away from their experience with a sense of accomplishment, and even a sense of wonder as they contemplate artifacts that are 250 years old. They also learn an appreciation of their own history, and of the fragile nature of the archaeological record.

A unique aspect of this program is that it is designed to continue indefinitely, because for once the archaeological record is virtually a renewable resource. The excavation of Shiner's Trench was completed to sterile by the students and teachers during the 1996/97 school year. At the end of last summer, the artifacts were quantified by volume and returned for reburial. In liters, the estimated quantities of artifacts by material was: glass, 210; metal, 130 (including several gun parts that were overlooked in 1964); ceramics, 70 ; brick and stone fragments, 50; flint fragments (including several whole and partial gunflints), 8; oyster shell, bone, and wood, 6; and 5 liters of pipestems. The artifacts were evenly distributed vertically and horizontally in the trench for the next round of excavations. There are also additional pseudo-archaeological features that were created this summer for the benefit of future excavators, perhaps "advanced" students in upper grades who have worked on the trench and who possess a special interest in

archaeology. Not far from Shiner's Trench Noelle Conrad and I constructed and buried a circular brick "well" that we created from salvaged eighteenth century bricks, and a rectangular brick "privy," with each containing appropriate 18th and 19th century artifacts, respectively. Vertical PVC pipes mark the exact location of each feature, ensuring that they will not be lost in the future, and an artifact inventory for both is on file in the Park Visitor Center.

The Cost-Benefit Ratio of Shiner's Trench

The success of this unique educational effort is not without its costs. The most obvious is that the artifacts in the trench are not indestructible. Fragile items of glass and bone will become more fragmented with every trench excavation and reburial, and oxidation of metal items is also obviously accelerated. Thus, a portion of the artifact assemblage is in a very real sense being sacrificed for this program. Even unprovenanced artifacts could have scientific value in the future as historic archaeologists develop improved analytical methods and techniques that cannot even be envisioned now. Another serious drawback is imbedded in an otherwise positive characteristic of the artifact assemblage: its huge size. Although permanent storage of the entire collection is feasible with the completion of a new artifact storage facility at the Park, the Park Service does not possess sufficient resources to identify, inventory, and conserve, let alone analyze the over 400 jumbo-size bags of artifacts from this site. Archaeologists at Armstrong Atlantic have been working on the identification of a substantial sample excavated from the Shiner's Trench three years ago, but they are in the same situation as everyone else when it comes to resources that could be dedicated to the analysis of huge numbers of artifacts: there aren't any, and the work is being slowly completed as student projects. Even the artifacts from SEAC's own 1994 testing remain unwashed and unanalyzed. Hence, the same factors that led to the creation of Shiner's Trench over three decades ago are still in place. The cold hard reality of this situation is that there is no effective inventory control of what is being excavated. The original proposal for the Parks as Classrooms Program emphasized the creation of an artifact inventory as an added benefit of this project. But the proposal did not specify who would generate the inventory, nor did it designate any funds toward such an effort. That benefit has not been realized, and there is little reason to expect that it will be realized in the near or far future.

These drawbacks must be weighed against the undeniable benefits of this program. Literally thousands of primary school children are receiving training in archaeology, science, and history, and they are directly participating in a search for their very own roots. They are also being inoculated against the looting virus that has grown to epidemic proportions on the coast of Georgia and elsewhere. The future of historic archaeology in this country is directly dependent on the effective education of the generations that will follow. In my opinion, the benefits of Shiner's trench outweigh the drawbacks.

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