Community-Based Mortuary Archaeology On Sapelo Island, Georgia

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Abstract: “We can’t swing a shovel without waking someone up.” This quote from a Geechee resident of Sapelo Island, Georgia expresses her distress about an ongoing problem at Sapelo’s Behavior Cemetery: the presence of unmarked graves and disturbances to them from recently dug graves. It also provided the impetus for a community-driven program of mortuary archaeological research focusing on (1) discovering the spatial and temporal parameters of a 19th century slave site within the Cemetery parcel; (2) recording all extant grave markers in the cemetery and making this information accessible; and (3) identifying the presence of unmarked graves through the application of GPR in order to clear areas for future burials.

This paper highlights the mutually beneficial nature of a public partnership with archaeologists that directly addresses social and religious priorities of contemporary Gullah-Geechee peoples while simultaneously answering basic questions concerning antebellum Gullah-Geechee life.

Introduction

In May 2010 the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga archaeological field methods course undertook a project designed to unveil some of the mystery clouding Gullah- Geechee mortuary practices at Behavior Cemetery. This unique study dealt with both historic and contemporary problems felt by the Hog Hammock Community of Sapelo Island, Georgia: the unnervingly common discovery of unmarked graves during funerals. A saltwater Geechee woman succinctly expressed her duress about this problem when she stated that “We can’t swing a shovel without waking someone up.” This dilemma provided the impetus for the 2010 research, which incorporated an archaeological exploration of a tabby wall fall with the documentation of extant headstones, as well as a GPR survey of areas within the Behavior Cemetery property with a high probability of unmarked burials.

We begin with a brief historical background of Behavior Cemetery, and then we describe the methods taken and results achieved each of the project objectives: (1) discovering the spatial and temporal parameters of a 19th century slave site within the Cemetery parcel; (2) recording all extant grave markers in the cemetery and making this information accessible; and (3) identifying the presence of unmarked graves through the application of GPR in order to clear areas for future burials. Finally, the advantages of a community-based research between the residents of Sapelo Island and the archaeologists are discussed. The present paper relies heavily on Honerkamp and Crook’s recent (2010) final report on the Behavior project.

Historical Background

Research at Behavior Cemetery has allowed a unique glimpse into the under-studied and ill understood historic burial practices of Sapelo Island’s Saltwater Geechee community. Sapelo has recently been a hotspot for archaeological research that has investigated numerous aspects of the Island’s history – but not mortuary practices [(Crook 2008; Harris 2008; Honerkamp 2008b; Jeffries and Moore 2008; Worth 2008). Our study seeks to address this dearth, while illuminating the importance of cemeteries and mortuary practices in Geechee culture. The location of the cemetery is shown in Figure 1.
Despite the lack of archaeological attention, this is not the first time Behavior Cemetery has been studied. Its rich history has attracted many, leading to a feature in a 1934 issue of *The National Geographic Magazine* (see figure 2), and a nomination to the National Register of Historic Places in 1996 (Moore 1934; Thomas 1996). Unlike the condescending magazine article, the National Register Nomination Form emphasizes the importance of the traditions practiced within the Cemetery, stating that Behavior Cemetery has the

…potential to yield an enormous amount of information about the burial customs of the African-American communities on a coastal barrier island. The African-American burial customs include the laying of objects on the graves, as evidenced by recent burials. This practice has continued for some time. The cemetery's bearing the same name as the c.1865 and thus antebellum slave community also links it to the antebellum slave quarters of the Thomas Spalding Plantation which were in this area.” (Thomas 1966:6-7)
“Behavior” is a place-name that originally served as the first residential area for Geechee slaves who worked for Thomas Spalding, one of Georgia’s most influential planters. It was formed shortly after his acquisition of the South End tract of Sapelo in 1802 and held between 50 and 80 slaves in 13 domiciles over 28 ha (Crook 2008: 7). The inhabitants of Behavior were primarily responsible for the construction and operation of Spalding’s early sugar works operation at Long Tabby (Crook 2008: 7). An adjacent community called New Barn Creek was probably part of the original Behavior settlement. Contrary to the majority of slave domiciles found on the Georgia coast, these settlements appear to be self-styled wattle and tabby daub huts, reflecting both creolization and a certain amount of social and economic autonomy. A georeferenced 1868 map (Figure 3) shows the location of the Behavior and New Barn Creek settlements, and of modern Behavior Cemetery (from U.S. Coast Survey of Doboy Sound and Vicinity, surveyed by W.H. Dennis).
These, as well as the other antebellum Geechee slave communities on Sapelo disbanded with the start of the Civil War in 1861, at which time the Island’s Geechee population diminished (Crook et al. 2003: 21; Sullivan 1991: 137). After the Civil War, Sapelo Island was selected as an area for the emancipated slaves to resettle. In 1865 William Sherman’s Special Field Order No. 15 dictated that emancipated slaves could claim up to 40 acres on Sapelo and other coastal areas, but by 1866 President Andrew Johnson returned the land to its pre-emancipation owners, and the immigrant Freedmen were evicted from the Island (Crook et al. 2003: 22). The remaining Geechee residents were given little choice but to participate in sharecropping. Only ten years after emancipation, Sapelo’s former slaves had saved enough money to purchase and establish new communities on the island (Crook et al. 2003: 24).

Archibald McKinley’s journal (Humphries 1991) documents some Geechee inhabitants, especially the old and frail, as living and dying at the New Barn Creek and Behavior Settlements well into the 1870s, so the migration to new communities was gradual. However, there is no mention of a cemetery at Behavior during this period (June 1869- April 1877). The original slave cemetery on Sapelo was called New Orleans, and has not yet been found. Many early Geechee residents would have been buried here.

Gullah–Geechee beliefs and customs affect where and how bodies are buried. After death, the spirit remains very active, hence cemeteries are far from homes – usually in unoccupied wooded areas. To satisfy these sometimes mischievous spirits, and to keep them close to the
cemetery, the living place favorite personal items on top of their loved one's grave, probably as a continuation of what was originally an African custom. Despite these efforts to keep spirits happy and quiet, there have been reports of shadows and black dogs near Behavior Cemetery, and most Geechee residents choose to stay away from the cemetery as much as possible (Bailey 2000:295-297).

Among many poor communities there is at least initially modest social investment in children, and this includes burial practices. This investment grows as the child matures and learns how to be a part of the Gullah-Geechee network. Once a child knows the social rules and obligations of the culture, as defined by the Gullah-Geechee, they are said to “Catch Sense.” Mutual social obligation is the central principal of “Catching Sense.” This occurrence marks the entry of the child into the community, usually around ten to twelve years old. Burial is a significant social event to mark the disappearance of someone important within a large social network – it mends the link that is broken with the death of one person within the network. Children, unless part of a system of inherited social status, have a more limited social network of relatives. Among the Geechee-Gullah, as with other groups, funeral ceremonies are much less elaborate compared to those of adults. Children’s funerals on Sapelo are rather small simple affairs, but do involve ritual and ceremony, including grave markers that may be perishable. An 1882 manuscript regarding Behavior Cemetery reports, “The epitaphs which everywhere meet your eye...are written on boards and nailed up about as high as a man's head on the trees, the others are written on ordinary headboards and driven in the ground” (Thomas 1996: 23). Many of these no doubt refer to children.

Today, Behavior Cemetery has been subject to a slew of unwelcome visitors. Although the property if bounded by a fence, visitors to the island have been known to break in and explore. Some of these outsiders have gone so far as to steal some of the spirit offerings such as dishes and pitchers as a souvenir of their visit to Sapelo Island. Hopefully the spirits will remain attached to the stolen souvenirs and will make their presence known.

The degradation of wooden grave markers and the removal of the majority of spirit offerings make locating graves a difficult enterprise. Steered by the wishes of Hog Hammock Community, our project sought to define the temporal and spatial limits of Behavior Cemetery. A GPR survey and documentation of all extant headstones unraveled some of the mystery surrounding the Cemetery.

**Goal 1: Slave Cabin Survey, Methods, and Results**

An initial focus of this project was to explore a small tabby fall in the Cemetery, about 2x3 meters and 20 cm high, first identified by Geechee resident Cornelia Bailey and Dr. Ray Crook. In a direct response to this interest, the archaeologists created a modified systematic survey that focused on three things: (1) defining the presumed slave occupation area directly adjacent to the tabby fall; (2) determining the structure and function of the tabby fall; and (3) identifying the overall boundaries of the archaeologically sensitive area to facilitate appropriate locations of future burials.

A grid oriented to magnetic north was established with a total station, with the 500N 500E point approximately 10 m south of center of the tabby fall. The grid extended 120 m south to the fence at the edge of the property, 30 m north, and at its widest point spanned 100 m E-W on the 440 N line. Figure 4 illustrates the 53 survey units that were excavated, indicated in yellow.
Survey units measuring 50 cm² were initially placed every 20 m on the northern portion of the grid, but was shortened to 10 m and eventually tightened to a 5 m interval once cultural materials were discovered near the exposed tabby fall. All survey units were screened using 1/4” mesh and were usually taken to 50 cm below surface. Twenty-nine (55%) of the units were sterile.

The tabby pile, was excavated with a 1m x 50 cm unit, with the long axis oriented east-west to provide a cross section of the tabby remains; this eventually assisted in the identification of a spread footing foundation (see Figure 6). Excavation resulted in few dateable artifacts, but a large amount of tabby plaster (246 g), oyster shell (268 g), and several brick fragments were recovered. Five fragments of tabby show a white painted surface, indicating that at least one side of the structure was whitewashed. The spread footing was made of loose oyster shell and tabby plaster, while the straight-sided wall foundation was composed of more compact tabby plaster, shell, and brick. This composition is similar to supports for upright posts found during
excavations of slave cabins at New Barn Creek and Behavior (Crook 2008). Figure 6 shows fragments of the only dateable artifact found in conjunction with this structure--a highly patinated dark green glass bottle dating to the 1790s (Noel Hume 1974:68). The size of this structure is unknown, but was probably less than four meters square. The function of the structure remains illusive, but the lack of temporally diagnostic artifacts and a midden indicate a short occupation or the building could have a specialized function. Table 1 provides a comparative analysis between midden densities of four slave settlements on Sapelo: Chocolate, High Point, the South End, and Behavior. The artifact frequencies per unit are far lower at Behavior, indicating a much shorter occupation than at the other settlements.

Table 1. Comparative Midden Densities On Sapelo Island.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Settlement</th>
<th>Ceramics</th>
<th>Glass</th>
<th>Square Nails</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chocolate</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Point</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South End</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>4.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>0.47</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A second structure, probably in the form of a frame cabin supported by stone piers, has tentatively been identified as a slave cabin. Low artifact frequencies indicate that this structure was either occupied briefly or had multiple occupations of very brief duration. Reused ballast stones that were imported from one of the many ballast stone islands that occur in nearby Doboy Sound functioned as corner piers for a frame structure. Surprisingly, only seven cut square nails were found at the site. More nails were expected for a frame structure. Associated artifacts from the vicinity of this structure include refined ceramics, container glass—including a recycled wine bottle fragment used as a scraper—a small amount of faunal remains, pipe stems (and one bowl fragment), a brass button, a red bead, a flint strike-a-light, and evidence for the manufacture of lead shot. The survey was only able to verify the presence of this structure; its extent, date, and function remain enigmatic.

The temporal and functional relationships between the two structures could not be
determined from the survey data. The light frequencies of all classes of artifacts (based on South’s 1977 classification format) indicate an occupation or occupations of brief duration. Some 18th century artifacts were found, including possible delftware, pearlware, and the partial wine bottle. The majority of dateable ceramics indicate an occupation dating to the second quarter of the 19th century, and the 1847.8 MCD for 23 dateable sherds supports this observation.

Based on these field results, an archaeologically sensitive area was designated within the Cemetery parcel that included all the survey units containing historic materials and the two features. This area was clearly marked on the ground by the placement of 4 x 4 inch upright posts to indicate the maximum spatial extent of artifact distributions. A map of this area (Figure 8) was recently presented to Hog Hammock residents. It was recommended then that future use of the cemetery exclude this sensitive and significant area. A consensus was reached at this meeting concerning the desirability of avoiding impacts to the “archaeology zone” described above. Since this area is clearly marked by prominent corner posts, future impacts can be minimized.

Figure 8. Behavior Cemetery, with indications of the Old Behavior Cemetery, the areas for future graves, and the Archaeologically Sensitive Area.
Headstone Documentation

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga conducted the third survey of extant gravestones at Behavior Cemetery. The other two were conducted by the Lower Altamaha Historical Society (LAHS) in 1997 and 2008. Table 1 summarizes the various inventory results. The survey took the entire four weeks of the UTC field school to complete, occurring in three stages. First, the southwest corner of each headstone was recorded using a total station and data collector. A geospatially referenced map was created using these points and a variety of other critical points (including the Cemetery corners and gates) obtained using a Trimble GPS. An identification number generated by SurveyPro was assigned to each headstone, which was recorded on a flag that was placed near the corresponding headstone. The second stage of the inventory was hand recording all applicable information relating to each headstone. This included: the ID number, type of stone, first and last name, dates, inscription, dimension, direction of writing, and a sketch of the headstone (as well as the body slab, footstone, and grave goods, if present) on standardized forms. This information was later translated into a digital form. Finally, each headstone was photographed.

Three hundred seventy five gravemarkers were recorded using this method, along with a few other features such as footstones, an iron artesian well pipe, and two upright wooden planks. A total of 9.2% (n= 32) headstones or metal funeral home markers were illegible but still noted. To benefit the Hog Hammock community and those with relatives or acquaintances in Behavior Cemetery, a website has been created. A digitized map shows each gravestone as a red dot, and each one can be clicked to see all the information that was recorded about that individual. The site can be found at: http://zog.utc.edu/~vislab/Behavior%20Cemetery/. This resource is useful because it incorporates the location and information of specific graves while maintaining accurate geospatial data.

Table 2. Behavior Cemetery Burial Inventory Summaries, 1997-2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Marked Graves</th>
<th>Unmarked/UID</th>
<th>Earliest Date</th>
<th>Latest Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LAHS 1997</td>
<td>412</td>
<td>137 (33%)</td>
<td>1889</td>
<td>1997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LAHS 2008</td>
<td>499</td>
<td>133 (27%)</td>
<td>1889</td>
<td>2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UTC 2010</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>38 (11%)</td>
<td>1889</td>
<td>2010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 The 2008 inventory reportedly higher total marked graves is higher than the other studies because it included both physical headstones as well as burials derived from the documentary record.
2 Thomas (1996:6) states that the earliest headstone at Behavior is 1890, rather than the otherwise agreed upon 1889. Also, Lulam (or Lula M) Wilson’s headstone shows a birth date of September 18, 1820 and a death date of September 8, 1852. This is thought to be a memorial marker, as concrete was not used in 1852.
GPR: Methods and Results

The majority of historic and some modern Geechee burial practices are not conducive to preservation. Because of this, the search for unmarked graves relied on ground penetrating radar. Unfortunately, due to time constraints, no ground truthing was undertaken. Two noncontiguous areas of the Cemetery were investigated. Block A was bounded by extant gravestones to the west, to the east by a north-south drainage ditch that was probably dug during the first quarter of the 20th century to drain the cemetery of standing water. The area between these arbitrary boundaries has seen the most pressure for gravesite expansion. Block D of the GPR survey explored the area east of the ditch that contained relatively high artifact and feature densities, as generated from the archaeological survey. Above ground anomalies characterized by linear depressions with even spacing and consistent orientations may depict unmarked burials. As shown in Figure 9, remote sensing confirmed this attribution.

Figure 9. Left, Dan Elliot lays a GPR grid next to differential grass growth marking possible grave locations. Right, the GPR results for the same four graves.

A conservative estimate of 185 unmarked burials was discovered in the 5,567.75 m of radargrams collected from the GPR samples. Many more anomalies exist, but the imprint of infants and small children appear almost identical to that of tree roots or other non-burial features, and these were not in the total. Clusters of graves also lead to troublesome identification, as their signature is not conducive to straightforward quantification of buried individuals. Given the nature of the site, and the prevalence of Geechee burial practices that leave no trace, it is very likely that most of these anomalies are the location of unmarked burials. It is likely that unmarked graves extend west, beyond the arbitrary drainage ditch to an unknown distance. The full extent of graves can be determined only with additional remote sensing and/or trenching. Finally, no obvious burials appeared in Block D, the area closest to the archaeologically sensitive area around the slave cabins.

Figures 10 and 1 depict the GPR results of Behavior Cemetery, Block A. The image on the left of Figure 10 shows the overlay plan map. This map was used to approximate the number of
unmarked human burials. The right side of Figure 10 depicts the previous map overlain with a layer outlining graves with blue boxes. The red plus signs are datum points. Figure 11 combines layers of unmarked and extant graves: the extant headstones are marked with a red dot; the unmarked burials maintain the blue box symbol.

These maps have been presented to and discussed with Hog Hammock Community leaders. Although the survey was limited, and the full extent of the unmarked graves is unknown, enough has been learned to recommend that the entire area immediately east of the marked graves up to the North-south drainage ditch be excluded from any future grave excavations. To this end, the UTC archaeologists concentrated a significant part of the fieldwork on creating a viewscape into the eastern half of the Cemetery property. It was hoped that the enhanced landscape would aid in bringing about a transition in how Behavior is used in the future by the Gullah-Geechee community: future burials could be located in an area that might be called “New Behavior.” This gradual transition will undoubtedly be a difficult one, as it requires family plots to be spatially divided between extant and future internments. Such a transition will also require regular maintenance of the underbrush to make the eastern half of the property suitable for burials. If the eastern parcel becomes overgrown, it simply will not be used, and unmarked graves will continue to be disturbed in Old Behavior. However, Sapelo’s Geechee community is aware that a transition to burial within the New Behavior section of the cemetery is essential.

**Archaeology Day**

Since the genesis of the Behavior Cemetery Project was predicated on a partnership between the Hog Hammock community and the UTC and UWG archaeologists, it was important to present the results of this work to the Geechee residents. Accordingly, an artifact display table was put up, Feature 3 was uncovered, and preliminary GPR maps were presented as part of an Archaeology Day program. As she has done over the last five years, Michele Johnson scheduled and publicized the Archaeology Day activities on Memorial Day by highlighted the results of the project. By any measure, this event was a success, as over 40 local residents visited the site to view and discuss the recovered artifacts, wall foundation, GPR results, and gravestone recording with the archaeologists (Figure 10).

*Figure 10. Archaeology Day at Behavior Cemetery, May 31, 2010.*
Summary

As revealed through systematic survey, the archaeological record at Behavior Cemetery contains the remains of at least two structures: a possible frame-on-post cabin and a continuous tabby foundation of unknown function. The temporal and functional relationships between these components could not be determined from discovery-level survey data. While there are indications of a late 18th century occupation, the majority of artifacts from the site date to a mid-19th century occupation, as indicated by the 1847.8 MCD for 23 dateable sherds. Regardless of the time period, all classes of artifacts indicate a brief occupation or occupations of short duration. Future testing could better determine the temporal and structural characteristics of the suspected cabin and the unknown tabby foundation building. As indicated by positive GPR sweeps of the area, any testing should be preceded by remote sensing to provide specific testing targets to maximize results.

While the possibility of continued research is acknowledged above, precedence should be given to the preservation and management of the archaeology zone. This area is, by its nature within an active cemetery, fortunately in a protected environment. The archaeological remains in this zone contain information significant to the Geechee heritage on Sapelo and may represent some of the few surviving remains of the early Behavior slave settlement. They deserve to be protected. It is likely that additional unmarked graves are present to the south and west of the existing cemetery fence lines; however this can only be determined by additional archaeological testing. To avoid future disturbances to unmarked graves, it is necessary for future graves to be relocated to the eastern half of the property in the “New Behavior Cemetery” area.

The success of the Behavior Cemetery project serves as a positive example of community-oriented archaeology. Besides contributing to CRM and research goals, this effort has allowed for the simultaneous study of past and present Gullah-Geechee practices. The public partnership between the Hog Hammock Community and UTC has advanced a relationship that began with cooperative archaeological and ethnohistorical projects with the University of West Georgia in the 1970s. It has also set the stage for a continuing partnership that is responsive to community needs. This collaboration has created a mutually beneficial project that generated opportunities for both to garner a more complete understanding of contemporary Gullah-Geechee social and religious priorities as well as answering basic questions concerning Gullah-Geechee antebellum life.
Figure 10. Left, Overlay plan of Block A, Behavior Cemetery. Right, Suspected Graves, Block A, Behavior Cemetery. Each tick represents 5m.
Figure 11. Plan view showing marked graves (red dot) and probable unmarked graves (blue rectangle), Block A.
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