

An Archaeological Investigation of the Waters and Delegal Cemeteries on Skidaway Island, Georgia

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Digging Savannah
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Introduction

This project was commissioned by Skidaway Audubon as one of their identified projects to fulfill the requirements of Audubon International's Sustainable Communities program. The Sustainable Communities Program helps communities take steps to ensure that they are healthy and vibrant places in which to live, work, and play—both today and tomorrow. That vision is founded in the three pillars of sustainability—a healthy local environment, quality of life for citizens, and economic vitality.

The project was also an excellent opportunity for Armstrong State University students taking ANTH 4010, Field Methods in Archaeology and Forensics, to gain hands-on experience. Anthropology Instructor and Armstrong Archaeologist Laura Seifert led the excavation, acting as the Principal Investigator. A volunteer field crew of Armstrong students, The Landings residents, and SCAD students assisted Seifert. The fieldwork was completed over five days in late October and early November 2014.

The Landings Company on Skidaway Island, Georgia, has preserved several archaeological sites as their community has grown, including two historic graves or cemeteries. On the 13th hole of the Palmetto Golf Course is the grave of Philip Delegal, Jr. who died October 19, 1781. The second location is the Waters Cemetery, marked by the gravestones of Elcy Waters, who died March 17, 1808, and her son Thomas B. Waters, who died December 25, 1804. This cemetery is on the 15th hole of the Oakridge Golf Course. Tabby walls, believed to be approximately of the same age as the cemeteries, surround both cemeteries. See Figures 1 and 2 in Appendix A for maps of the area.

Researchers were interested in determining how many people are buried at each cemetery. Also can we tentatively or definitively identify who is buried at each cemetery? Without a more invasive excavation, this question will probably not be answered. Finally, are the tabby walls original or added later?

Archaeological and Historical Background

Before the project locations were developed into an expansion of The Landings community, an archaeological survey was conducted at the request of the US Army Corps of Engineers. Eight archaeological sites were located, six of which were considered potentially eligible for the National Register of Historic Places (Elliott 1985:1).

Archaeologists identified the Waters Cemetery as part of their Site 8. Importantly, it was noted that, “The grave of Elcy Waters has been robbed and totally vandalized, perhaps within the past five years. The grave of Thomas Waters lies undisturbed. A large tree fall adjacent to the grave of Thomas Waters may obscure [sic] other residents of this small family plot.” (Elliott 1985:55). Several other recent archaeological investigations have been conducted on The Landings, but none in the direct project location (Elliott and Holland 2006, Keene 2002 and 2004).

Skidaway Island

Colonial settlement of Skidaway Island began in 1734, the year after James Oglethorpe established Savannah. The purpose of settling the island was to guard the water passage to Savannah from Spanish incursion. A small fort was placed at the north end of the island. The early settlement consisted of five families and six single men, none of whom were farmers, but were expected to farm the island and do guard shifts. All left or died by 1740 (Piechocinski, Kelly).

The next decade brought changes to Georgia that resulted in more permanent settlement, such as the legalization of slavery. Between 1754 and 1771 approximately 22 people received Skidaway Island land grants. The plantation era continued on Skidaway Island until 1889, when a tidal wave ruined the fresh water sources. The antebellum inhabitants of Skidaway were primarily slaves and white overseers, and after the Civil War, many laborers remained as tenant farmers or sharecroppers. Some plantation owners did live on Skidaway part-time, and Philip Delegal is cited as one of them (Piechocinski, Kelly, Elliott 1985: 41).

Philip Delegal Jr.

Philip Delegal Jr. arrived in Georgia from South Carolina in 1733 (Figure 3, Appendix A). Along with his father, Philip Delegal Sr., he went to St. Simons Island to serve with General James Oglethorpe. Their goal was protecting Georgia from Spanish Florida. Delegal Jr. became a lieutenant in Oglethorpe’s Rangers, eventually fighting in the 1742 Battle of Bloody Marsh when the Spanish invaded St. Simons Island (Piechocinski 111). This critical battle ended Spanish attempts to invade north and established the current line between Georgia and Florida.

On May 27, 1739, Delegal married Jane Daly, having seven children with her before Jane’s death in 1774. Delegal was granted 500 acres on the Little Ogeechee River in 1747 and lots two and four in Frederica in 1772. In 1767, Delegal bought land on Skidaway Island, and by 1775 he had a large plantation and was active in civics and politics. Delegal then married Margaret Curtis, who owned land on Little Wassaw and Skidaway

islands. By 1780, Delegal owned nearly 4,000 acres on Skidaway Island. When Philip Delegal died on October 19, 1781, he was buried on his Skidaway Island property (Figure 4, Appendix A). This property was supposedly confiscated because the Delegals were loyalists. However, this researcher has not found the historical documentation to confirm this. Margaret Delegal and her two children, Jane and Henry, moved to Florida where she eventually remarried (Piechocinski 111, GHS MS 2138).

Philip Delegal's daughter Catherine married Captain John Lightenstone (or Lichtenstein). Their only daughter was Elizabeth Lightenstone. John Lightenstone also purchased a Skidaway Island plantation, but fled Skidaway in 1776 before he could be arrested for being a loyalist. Philip Delegal petitioned to have Lightenstone's property given to Elizabeth; therefore the plantation was not confiscated (Piechocinski 114, Johnson 24-47). More detailed deed research is needed to exactly match on which plantation Philip Delegal Jr. was buried.

Waters Family

Alice (Elcy) Waters died March 17, 1808 at the age of 26 (Figures 5 through 8, Appendix A). She is buried next to her son, Thomas, who died on Christmas in 1804 at the age of 14 months. The cemetery site was part of the cotton plantation Elcy and her husband John probably received from Elcy's parents, John and Sarah Cropp. Elcy had a brother (Benjamin) and sister (Sarah). A Benjamin Cropp (1794-1870) and Sarah Cropp Huguenin (1790-1860) are buried in Linwood Cemetery in Columbus, Georgia (Ancestry.com). However, it is unknown whether these are Elcy's siblings.

Little is known about Elcy and Thomas, but more is known about Elcy's husband, John Waters, a prominent planter and landlord. Waters served on the Board of Health, completed seven terms on the Grand Jury, was elected Fire Marshall of Liberty Ward, and was a member of the Union Society and St. Andrews Society, but twice refused to be a candidate for city alderman when encouraged (Waters n.d.).

John Waters was born June 27, 1771 to Sinclair and Tamer (Oates) Waters. His father was a tailor, and John started as a shopkeeper in Savannah. In 1800, he had the advantage of being one of the few people in Savannah allowed to sell liquor. He began buying property and renting houses and retail space. It is unknown exactly when John married Elcy (Alice) Cropp. Her parents died in 1796 (John Cropp) and 1803 (Sarah Cropp), and John Waters presumably inherited their Skidaway Island cotton plantation that holds the Waters Cemetery. He also owned a rice plantation along the Savannah River and 200-300 acres in McIntosh County (Waters n.d.).

After Elcy's death, John Waters married Sarah Tiot, also widowed, on November 3, 1815 at the Independent Presbyterian Church. However, on December 23, 1819, a separation agreement was filed at the courthouse. For the rest of their lives they lived separately, essentially agreeing to have nothing to do with one another, but without the formality of a divorce. John Waters appears to be a colorful character, failing to file his property taxes at least three times and four times disregarding jury summons. He was sued in Superior

Court for failing or refusing to repay a \$1,000 note, but despite the court finding for the plaintiff, Waters only had to pay \$100 (Waters n.d.).

John Waters died September 17, 1835, of bilious fever and was initially buried in Colonial Cemetery, but in 1859 was moved into the Waters family vault at Laurel Grove Cemetery with his children and other descendants. Waters was survived by three daughters: Eliza Waters, Jane Bruen, and Harriet Bryan. Eliza Waters, Harriet, and her husband Alexander Bryan are buried in the Waters Vault in Laurel Grove Cemetery (Waters n.d., City of Savannah Cemeteries Database).

Methodology

Half of each cemetery was sampled. Both cemeteries are surrounded by a square (in planview) tabby wall that is oriented nearly north/south and east/west. For the Delegal grave, the eastern half was excavated because, if he were buried in a traditional, Christian east/west manner, we would bisect the grave. The Waters Cemetery was divided into quarters, approximately 10 feet by 10 feet and designated A, B, C, and D. Square A is in the northwest corner of the cemetery, Square B is the northeast corner, C is southeast, and D, southwest. Only Squares A and C were excavated to leave half of the site fully preserved for future researchers. Square A contains the two extant gravestones. This square was excavated to investigate how badly damaged Elcy's grave is and hopefully to see what an intact grave shaft looks like in these soil conditions. Square C was also excavated because it is opposite Square A, providing a good coverage of the entire cemetery. Square B contains recently removed saw palmetto, the roots of which are still decaying. Excavating this square would be very problematic for this reason. Also, those roots have likely heavily disturbed any archaeological evidence. Square D is at the entrance of the cemetery.

All areas were excavated in natural strata. A buffer of unexcavated soil was left around the Waters' tombstones to keep the tombstones in situ and prevent damage. A second unexcavated buffer was created along most of the Waters cemetery's tabby walls. These tabby walls are in poorer shape than at the Delegal Cemetery, so care was taken to preserve them. Soil layers were excavated only until grave shafts or subsoil were encountered. The goal was to be as non-invasive as possible while providing more information for the Skidaway Audubon Committee. This was not a bioarchaeological project, and no attempt was made to excavate grave shafts.

All soil was screened for artifacts. In several layers, large volumes of tabby, brick, and shell were found. When this was encountered, a sample was kept for analysis. Weights and/or volumes of the material were recorded. The material was discarded and eventually reburied in place with the rest of the backdirt. All other artifacts were kept, unless where noted. The Landings Club is curating the artifacts.

Results

Philip Delegal Jr. grave

After removing weeds and other vegetation, excavation started with Level 1. Level 1 was 10-16 cm deep and contained large amounts of brickbats (40 lbs.), tabby (15 lbs.), and

oyster shell (3 lbs.), which appeared to be debris from the tabby wall surrounding the grave. The soil was brown sand, typical of topsoil in the area. This and every layer had many plant roots. Additional artifacts recovered include blue plastic from a hardhat, salt-glazed stoneware, pearlware, a white clay pipe stem, a shotgun shell, and colorless and amber bottle glass.

Level 2 had loose, light sandy brown soil along the tabby walls and a more compact, darker gray sand mottled with light gray sand towards the center of the walled grave. Level 2 was fairly thin, between 3 and 7 cm thick. Level 2 also contained debris from the tabby wall. One pound of brick and 10 pounds of tabby and shell were weighed, recorded, and discarded. These amounts do not include the sample kept.

Level 3 was tan sand with some gray mottling at the center and was thick, 34 cm deep at the center and 23 cm thick at the southern end. Artifacts found include colorless, dark olive green, and amber bottle glass, lead-glazed earthenware, iron fragments, animal bones, two chert flakes, and seven Native American ceramic sherds. Six heavily rusted cut nails were found approximately halfway through the layer. While artifacts were mixed throughout the layer, fewer artifacts were found deeper and there seemed to be more Native American artifacts at the base of the layer.

The base of Level 3 coincided with the approximate base of the tabby wall. Therefore Level 4 was dug in “bath tub” fashion, leaving an unexcavated border along the wall so we did not undermine the wall (Figure 9, Appendix A). Level 4 had tan, loose sand with some lighter mottled sand appearing at the very base of the layer. Few artifacts were found (oyster shell, brick, tabby, an animal bone, one chert flake, and four Native American ceramic sherds). All artifacts were found in the upper part of the layer, and none were found at the bottom.

Waters Cemetery

Square A, Level 1 is medium brownish gray sand ranging in depth from 8 to 14 cm deep. Ten pounds of tabby and shell were weighed, recorded, and discarded. Colorless bottle glass, white refined earthenware, and a white clay pipestem were also recovered.

Below Level 1, in the northeast corner of Square A, a darker gray area thick with roots was noted. This was suspected to be the looted area noted in Elliott’s 1985 report. This area was excavated separately, and the only artifacts found were extremely modern, small plastic fragments. These were not kept for curation.

The rest of Square A was excavated as Level 2, which was the same grayish brown sand with some iron and charcoal fragments as Square C, Level 2. This layer ranged in depth from 6 to 19 cm. Tabby, oyster shell, iron concretion, and one heavily oxidized iron object were found. Six pounds of oyster shell and tabby were weighed, recorded, and discarded.

Below Level 2, Square A had much more complicated strata than Square C. Level 3 was light brown to brown sand located in the western half and along the north wall of the unit.

Level 3 ranged in depth from 11 to 17 cm and contained wood, charcoal, and two creamware sherds that crossmend.

Level 4 was a thin lens of mottled gray, tan, and orange-brown sand with iron inclusions. This layer turned out to be on top of Level 3. The only artifact found in Level 4 was a very small piece of tabby.

Square A, Level 5 appeared below Level 3 throughout most of the unit. The soil was medium brown sand except in the northeast corner, which contained very light mottled sand, and was not excavated with Level 5. Level 5 depths ranged from 4 to 15 cm. Level 5 did not contain any artifacts.

At the base of Level 5, the unit was clean troweled for final photographs and mapping. While the extreme northeast corner of Square A was unable to be excavated due to a thick root mass, soils in front of Elcy Water's gravestone indicate a feature. Unlike the medium brown sand throughout the rest of the unit, there is a dark brown strip, then very light, mottled soil north of the dark brown strip and south of the root mass (Figure 10, Appendix A). This feature was unexcavated to preserve it and respect the grave of Elcy Waters.

Square C, Level 1 is medium brownish gray sand ranging in depth from 10 to 16 cm below surface. Fifteen pounds of tabby and oyster shell were weighed, recorded, and discarded. Most of the tabby and shell were found adjacent to the tabby wall. Additionally, iron concretion, a 1991 U.S. quarter, a golf ball, golf tees, and a gray chert gunflint fragment were found. During this excavation, a passing visitor told one of the excavators that cremation ashes had been recently, illegally scattered in this cemetery. Approximately 30 minutes later, a Fox & Weeks funeral home tag was found in Level 1.

Square C, Level 2 was a uniform layer 15 to 20 cm deep of grayish brown sand with some iron and charcoal fragments. Only oyster and clam shell, tabby, and iron concretion were found in Level 2. Approximately one pound of tabby and shell was weighed and discarded.

Square C, Level 3 had three slightly different areas that were not differentiated enough to dig separately, nor were they evidence of features. The soil along the northern edge of the unit was medium brown sand, most of the center was orange-brown sand, and the southeast corner had some lighter gray mottling with the brown sand. Tabby, oyster shell, iron concretion, and piece of wood were removed from this layer. The layer was 8 to 10 cm deep across the unit.

Below Level 3 in Square C, some new soil layers were noted. The square was clean troweled, revealing areas of decayed wood (Figure 11, Appendix A). One of these areas contained a heavily oxidized iron object. As this was evidence of potential coffins, no more excavation took place, and the square was mapped and photographed.

Conclusions

Philip Delegal Jr.

No soil layers or artifacts were found to indicate that Philip Delegal Jr. is buried within the tabby wall on the 13th hole of the Palmetto Golf Course. The soil layers within the Delegal grave were mottled in color at the center. More importantly, artifacts from very different time periods combined within one soil layer indicate the grave was disturbed. Levels 1, 2, and 3 all contained colorless glass fragments that cross-mend together into a small molded juice glass, indicating these layers are all contemporary and date to the early to mid-twentieth century. Finding Native American artifacts at the base of the excavation in Level 4 followed by no artifacts at the very bottom suggests we dug below where the grave was initially excavated and then disinterred. The variety of ages represented by the artifacts in Levels 1-3 also suggest that the layers were physically mixed, quite possibly by the act of disinterment in the early to mid nineteenth century.

The presence of the tabby wall and eighteenth century artifacts seem to indicate that Philip Delegal Jr. was buried here at one time. The enclosure seems too small to be a livable building, and there are no windows or doors, indicating this is a walled enclosure, not a building. While Philip Delegal Jr. may have been buried here at one point in time, he appears to have since been removed. The soils and artifacts give little indication as to whether the grave was looted or Delegal was removed to be reburied in another cemetery. Since no human bones were found, reburial seems the more likely option.

Waters Cemetery

While many fewer artifacts were found at the Waters Cemetery, the strata were intact. Evidence was found of three graves. First is the feature in front of Elcy Waters' gravestone, which is a dark brown strip of sand next to very light, mottled soil south of the root mass in the very northeast corner of Square A. This feature was unexcavated both to preserve it and respect the grave of Elcy Waters. However, this means it cannot be determined if this is Elcy's graveshaft or a looters' hole. The modern feature directly above, which was interpreted as the looter's hole, and the intact, compact nature of the soil in the still-present feature, suggests that Elcy's graveshaft is indeed intact.

The other two possible graves are located in Square C. The base of the excavation showed two long, thin areas of decayed wood that could be the edges of coffins. These strips of decayed wood are oriented east/west, the same as the tombstones, and as predicted for typical Christian burials. These features are approximately one foot apart, too close to be opposite sides of the same adult-size coffin. It is more likely they represent coffins laid side-by-side. Additionally, a piece of wood oriented east/west was removed from the southern edge of Square C, approximately two feet from the southernmost decayed wood feature. This could be the opposite side of one coffin. Unfortunately, the wood was removed before it could be mapped in situ, but it was kept and processed with the rest of the artifacts. Why would some of the wood preserve and other portions of the coffin entirely decay? The strip of wood removed was near the tabby wall. One could speculate that the presence of oyster shell raised the pH of the soil, allowing for better wood preservation.

Who could be buried in these graves? According to the historical record, Elcy Waters' husband and surviving children are currently buried in the Waters crypt in Laurel Grove Cemetery. Given that the plantation was given to Elcy and John Waters by Elcy's parents, Sarah and John Cropp, it is likely these unmarked graves are Cropp family graves. If Elcy's siblings are indeed buried in Columbus, Georgia, these graves may be their parents. Also, Elcy died in her home on Broughton Street while giving birth. Her husband buried her on Skidaway Island, rather than in Colonial Cemetery. This suggests she already had family members buried on Skidaway Island. Very little information was found on the Cropp family during the historical research for this project. More detailed deed research may shed some light on how long the Cropp family owned this land and who might be buried in the cemetery.

Recommendations

It is recommended that a historic preservationist with expertise in eighteenth and nineteenth century masonry review the tabby walls surrounding both cemeteries. Information is needed on the age of the walls. A historic preservationist could also recommend a long-term preservation plan for the walls. The Waters Cemetery walls are likely in need of stabilization.

The best way to preserve the rest of the cemetery is continuing the current landscape maintenance. By keeping weeds and grass to a minimum by mowing and not allowing trees and shrubs to grow, the soils, graves, and any evidence of graves will be best preserved. Roots are very destructive to archaeological evidence, especially in the sandy coastal soils.

Finally, future interpretive signs should incorporate these new findings along with the historical accounts of the area.

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Appendix A



Figure 1. Georgia with the Savannah area highlighted



Figure 2. The Savannah area, including Skidaway Island

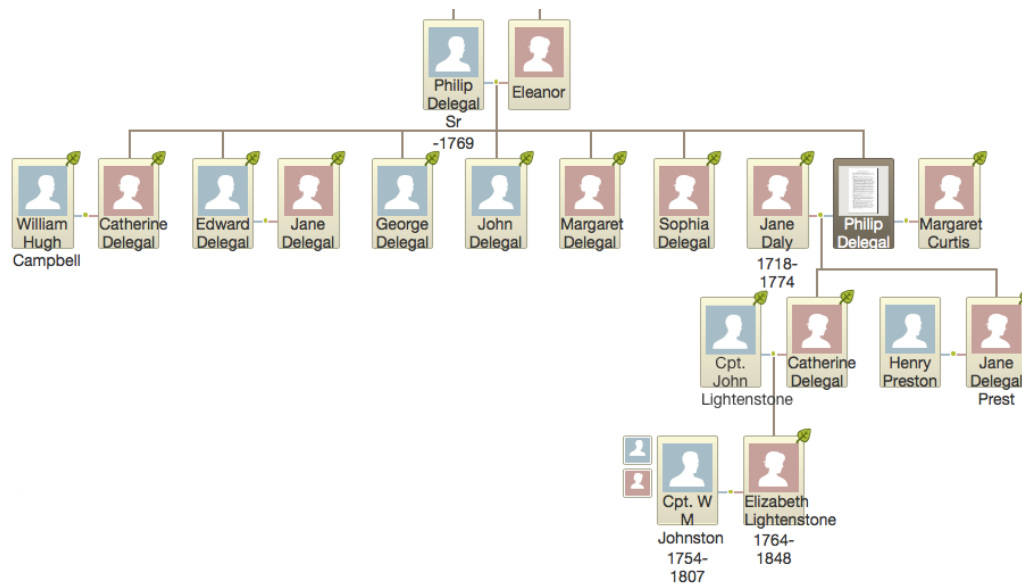


Figure 3. Delegal Family Tree



Figure 4. Philip Delegal's grave

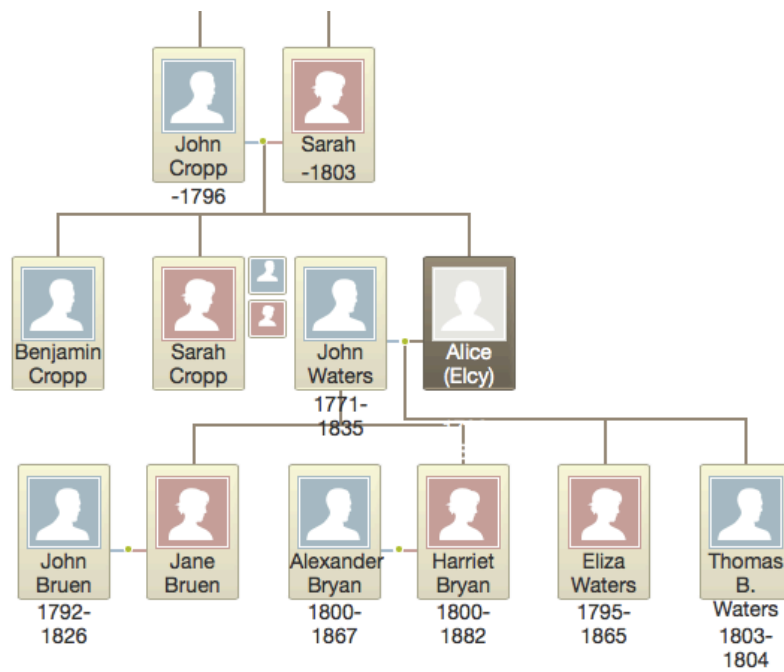


Figure 5. Waters Family Tree



Figure 6. Waters Family Cemetery



Figure 7. Elcy Waters gravestone in the Waters Family Cemetery



Figure 8. Thomas Waters gravestone in the Waters Family Cemetery



Figure 9. Completed excavation of the Delegal Cemetery, facing east



Figure 10. Feature in front of Elcy Waters' gravestone, facing west



Figure 11. In situ rotted wood stains, Waters Cemetery