

An Archaeological Investigation of the Benedictine Monastery and Freedmen's School on Skidaway Island, Georgia

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Digging Savannah
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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

The Benedictine Monastery and Freedmen School site location has always been known (Figures 1 and 2). When The Landings community was initially developed, a 0.62-acre lot was set aside to preserve this important archaeological site. However, this lot is a small fraction of the whole archaeological site. Residents and staff became concerned when an adjacent lot was sold, and the landowner intended to develop the lot, likely destroying archaeological resources in the process. Fortunately, the landowner, Andy Dyer, approached The Landings staff and was eager to preserve or mitigate where possible.

Seifert wrote a proposal in the fall of 2015, suggesting a Phase I shovel test survey in conjunction with teaching Introduction to Archaeology at Armstrong State University. The proposal was accepted, and fieldwork was conducted on February 12 and 13, 2016. Additional mapping was conducted on February 26, 2016. Seifert's students and research assistant conducted laboratory work at Armstrong's Anthropology Laboratory.

Archaeological and Historical Background

The Benedictines in Savannah by Jerome Oetgen gives an extensive, excellent site history. A summary is provided here for context. Information for this summary draws heavily from Oetgen's work and V.E. Kelly's *A Short History of Skidaway Island*, which also relies heavily on Oetgen.

After the Civil War, Savannah's Catholic diocese invited European Benedictines to start schools for African-American children. In 1874, St. Benedict's Parish was created, and the monks built a successful school on Perry Street in Savannah. In 1876, they expanded to a school on Isle of Hope. Unfortunately, most of the monks and students succumbed to a yellow fever outbreak.

The Benedictines turned to Hampton Place, a plantation on Skidaway Island originally purchased by the Catholic diocese to start an orphanage. Those plans were halted when the plantation's main house was lost to fire. The property was turned over to the Benedictines for a manual labor school, meaning that the students would spend part of their day in school and the rest working in the fields. The students would not pay tuition, but instead the crops produced would be sold to support the school. In September 1878 when classes began, there are 500 people, mostly African-American, living on Skidaway Island, none Catholic.

There were many challenges facing the monks. First, the concept of a manual school was incompatible with many ex-slaves desires for their children. They wanted students to get an

education so they could leave the fields for better jobs and opportunities. Also, all of the families were Protestant, and their Protestant preachers were not supportive of the Catholic school. Lobbying from white Protestants on the mainland encouraged Chatham County to open a public school soon after, and many students attended that public school. The Benedictines' school also never made enough money on agriculture and always relied on the local diocese's support. In 1881 there were 8 teachers and 12 students. By 1883 there were still only 20 students. An 1889 tidal wave ruined Skidaway Island's fresh water sources and ended the school.

Methodology

The project began with historical and archaeological research into Benedictine monasteries and freedmen schools. The literature search has found no other similar sites that have been investigated, which makes this site even more important. The literature search was widened to all schools. Much of the historical and archaeological literature does not directly apply to this site because of the unique circumstances here: a Freedmen school, run by European Benedictines, which is also a church and a home for the monks. However, this research is important comparative data and will be discussed further below.

The spring 2016 school semester was devoted to a Phase I survey. Our research questions included:

- Is this definitely the site of the Benedictine monastery and freedman school?
- How would we identify the site of the Benedictine monastery and freedman school?
- How much of the site is preserved? Which portions of the site have been preserved?
- What is the layout of the buildings and other living spaces?
- Can we identify outbuildings?
- Is there evidence of earlier or later occupations on the site?

Students taking Seifert's *Introduction to Archaeology* at Armstrong State University were the field crew for this project. The fieldwork consisted of one-foot diameter shovel test pits, dug in a 40-foot grid pattern over the site. Actual grid locations were found using a compass and pulling tapes (Figure 3). We added judgmental locations as necessary to investigate aboveground architectural ruins and other potential features. Each shovel test was described and mapped (Figure 4).

Lab work and analysis was conducted in the Armstrong State University Anthropology Lab. *Introduction to Archaeology* students washed artifacts. After the artifacts dried, they were placed in archival plastic bags. Artifacts were cataloged in Excel.

Results

Artifacts were found in every shovel test. Many shovel tests contained many plant roots, especially in the first 30 to 40 cm. Refer to Appendix B for a complete artifact catalog. Shovel test 1 was along Breckenridge Lane and was only dug 30 cm deep. ST 1 was stopped when an ant colony was encountered. Shovel test 2 was also excavated along Breckenridge Lane, but was excavated to 80 cm and stopped when subsoil was found. Shovel test 3 was dug at the corner of Priest Landing Drive and Breckenridge Lane. Shortly after beginning, a water main was found,

and the shovel test was terminated. No artifacts were kept. Shovel test 4 was excavated to 72 cm. Several metal straps, potentially cask hoops, were excavated from and recorded in the area near ST 4 (Figure 5). Shovel test 5 was excavated to 48 cm and contained a complete Coke bottle.

Shovel test 6 was laid out but was not excavated, because it was on The Landings property, rather than the Dyer property. Shovel test 7 was excavated to 100 cm and stopped due to the difficulty of digging further, although the strata continued deeper. Shovel test 8 was 58 cm deep. Shovel test 9 was 51 cm deep. The strata looked similar to plowzone and subsoil. Shovel test 10 was 70 cm deep and had layers similar to ST 12. A large, heavy iron object lay on the surface next to ST 10. Photographs were taken, and the artifact was left in situ. The iron object appears to be fairly recent.

Shovel test 11 was 83 cm deep. Shovel test 12 was 74 cm deep. Shovel test 13 was 45 cm deep, but the top 5 cm were A horizon. No plowzone was present. Shovel test 14 was 40 cm deep and the soil was extremely compacted. Observations of the landscape suggest a road extended from the circular “driveway” feature on The Landings property towards the brick and tabby rubble at the southern extent of the Dyer property. Shovel test 15 was excavated to 30 cm and was discontinued because of the extreme density of tree roots and close location to a tree.

Shovel test 16 was 58 cm deep and contained 15 brickbats, four whole bricks, and many smaller brick chunks (Figures 6 and 7). This was typical of the shovel tests located around the rubble at the southern end of the property (STs 16, 21, 25). Shovel test 17 was 51 cm deep, and the soil was compacted like ST 14. Shovel test 18 was 38 cm deep. Shovel test 19 was 60 cm deep.

Shovel test 20 was 47 cm deep. Shovel test 21 was 60 cm deep and contained a large amount of brick and mortar, not all of which was collected. Shovel test 22 was 58 cm deep. This shovel test was judgmentally placed at the edge of the site’s only grassy area. Shovel test 23 was excavated to 50 cm. This was a judgmental shovel test, placed next to a brick pier on the northern end of the property (Figure 8). Shovel test 24 was 75 cm deep and was judgmentally placed to explore an intact, but not in situ, section of brick wall. Two whole bricks, 16 brickbats, and many smaller chunks of brick were encountered. Students observed that the bricks appeared to differ in age, as the bricks had different colors and textures. Shovel test 25 was 110 cm deep and judgmentally placed to further explore the rubble at the southern end of the property. This shovel test was particularly rich in artifacts, including a shell button, a .22 caliber shell casing, and Native American pottery. Shovel test 26 was 58 cm deep. ST 26 was judgmentally placed at the center of the grassy area (near ST 22). ST 26 proved to be very similar to ST 22, and no features or archaeological evidence explaining the grassy area were found.

Conclusions

While artifacts were found in every shovel test, no subsurface features were found. Several aboveground, architectural features are obvious on the landscape: Three brick piers at the northern end of the property near STs 4 and 23 (Feature 1), an intact portion of brick wall on the western edge of the property near ST 24 (Feature 2), and the brick and tabby rubble pile at the

southern end of the property near STs 16, 21, and 25 (Feature 3). Architectural artifact clustering and distance between the features suggest each architectural feature is a distinct building.

There is extensive evidence of many different occupations on the site. Native American ceramic sherds were found across the property in Shovel tests 2, 12, 13, and 25. While this is not evidence of an extensive occupation, future archaeologists must be aware of the possibility of finding more evidence. A large number of datable artifacts from the island's plantation era (1733-1865) were also found distributed widely across the site (Figure 9). Artifacts from this period include a wrought nail, cut nails, olive green bottle glass, and ceramics such as creamware, pearlware, mochoware, transferprinted wares, and Rhenish blue and gray stoneware. Very little evidence of burning was found. The site histories indicate the earlier Hampton Plantation house burned during the Civil War, which is odd considering that Skidaway Island saw very little action during the Civil War. Much plantation archaeology has been accomplished since the pioneering studies in the 1960s and 1970s. While all evidence of the plantation era should be recorded, it does not make sense for the plantation era to be this site's research focus.

Few artifacts could be definitively dated to the monastery era, but those that could, such as Ironstone ceramics, were concentrated in the southern half of the property (Figure 10). Possible cask hoops around Shovel test 4 also suggest the potential for a Prohibition-era distilling site (Kelly). Wire nails and twentieth century Coke bottles point to the property's use until the present day.

A Short History of Skidaway Island by V.E. Kelly has two unattributed photographs, one of the church and monastery and another of the school. The church and monastery is clearly built on large brick piers and is a substantial building. The school picture is much less clear. Large pillars, which may be brick, support the oddly shaped porch, but the rest of the foundation is obscured. Feature 1 had too few non-architectural artifacts to create a large enough sample size for identification. However, the large amount of architectural debris and large piers indicate a building of substantial size sat here. Shovel test 23 contained two different types of mortar, and some fragments had both types fused together along with mold outlines of bricks. This suggests the brickwork was repointed and indicates a long-term habitation.

Feature 2 also hints at building placement. Much brick and mortar was recovered from ST 24, as well as bottle glass potentially ranging from the 1700s to 1900s. Due to different elevations, it is unlikely this feature relates to Feature 3. However, it is possible that this feature relates to the intact tabby basement on The Landings' property. In the Kelly photograph, the church and monastery has two different building materials: clapboard and (possibly) tabby. Potentially, the tabby basement could represent the far end of the building (from that photograph's perspective), and Feature 2's brick "wall" could be piers or steps seen in the photograph's foreground. The second building in the photograph, seen behind the church, is presumably the school. This would place the school near Feature 3.

Feature 3 holds great potential. Most of the artifacts datable to the monastery-era were found here. Additionally, the only potential school items, four tiny slate fragments, were clustered here in Shovel tests 18, 19, and 25. Slate could also be an architectural element, such as slate roofing tiles. Window glass strongly clusters around the rubble pile. The window glass

sample size is not large enough to measure and get a date. Chimney lamp glass also clusters in the southern half of the property. Properly lighting a school was of concern to nineteenth century teachers (Gibb and Beisaw 2000:122, Rotman 2009:72). If future research finds more evidence to support these tentative hypotheses, it begs the question of what building is represented by Feature 1.

The historical and archaeological literature review revealed the paucity of information available on schoolhouses, despite their importance and ubiquity in the American experience. The few sites excavated make for valuable comparisons, not just for similarities, but also for the differences to this site. By the 1860s, free public education was fairly standard for white students, although the Civil War would disrupt schooling. Schoolhouses were also often the community focal point, hosting religious and social activities. Most schoolhouses investigated had a low artifact density. Most artifacts were architectural, and very few educational artifacts were present: slate pencils, writing slates, and toys such as marbles were found. Domestic artifacts recovered are often from the site's use as a social center (Rotman 2009:71-73). These findings are relatively consistent with the monastery site. Mostly architectural materials were recovered with a few late nineteenth century domestic artifacts. However, this site was not likely used as a social center. Additionally, no religious artifacts were found. Further excavation may uncover religious artifacts.

Previous archaeological investigations of schools have focused on identifying the schoolhouses and associated outbuildings, understanding their construction and remodeling, and exploring issues of lighting, heating, furnishing, and sanitary facilities (Gibb and Beisaw 2000:122-126). Feature 2 is tentatively hypothesized to be the church and monastery, and Feature 3 is hypothesized to be the schoolhouse. Outbuildings such as privies or storage sheds have yet to be found. Gibb and Beisaw's (2000) article focused on sites in the northeastern United States, so stove pieces and heating-related artifacts were discussed. At the monastery site, we should also question how the building was cooled. The concentration of window glass around Feature 3 may answer some questions of both building cooling and lighting.

Recommendations

This is a highly significant site. Archaeological research on schoolhouses is scarce, and African-American schoolhouses are even more rare. To date, no archaeological research on American Benedictine monasteries has been found. Non-architectural artifacts were sparse, which follows with other excavated school sites. In lamenting the lack of scholarship on schoolhouse sites, Gibb and Beisaw suggest several approaches for further, rigorous study. First, archaeologists should look closer at the architecture and outbuildings to see how the landscape was used. All extant ruins should be thoroughly documented. Archaeologists should look for evidence of the initial construction, modification, repair, and expansion. What upgrades were made to the lighting, heating, and sanitary facilities over time? While it initially seems this suggestion would not apply to our very short-lived monastery site, we need to look at how buildings or building materials from the plantation era may have been modified or reused by the Benedictines. Gibb and Beisaw suggest we can look at gender by identifying male and female privies. Again, this will probably not be relevant at a boy's school run by monks. However, evidence of women on site should not be dismissed. Artifacts may lead us to understanding the

type of education the boys received. Few education-related artifacts will indicate a primarily book-based education focused on reading, writing, and mathematics. However, tools, waste materials, hardware, pins and needles, science equipment, measuring devices, and musical instruments can indicate a technical education as well (Gibb and Beisaw 2000:125-126). Finally, Gibb and Beisaw state that a large excavation sample size will be needed to get enough information to draw conclusions. These sites “certainly require a more intensive sampling than a few systematically excavated shovel tests and a handful of judgmentally placed excavation units” (Gibb and Beisaw 2000:126).

Contemporary educational theory stated that the goals of universal education were to create better citizen voters, both for political and economic reasons. Only an educated citizenship could be expected to make competent decisions (Gibb and Beisaw 2000:126). But did these European Benedictine monks subscribe to these values? Were they more concerned with religious education or conversion? Were they motivated to educate those disadvantaged in society?

To answer any of these questions, the next step in archaeological research should be excavating a number of 1x2 meter units at each architectural feature. The larger, Phase II excavation units have two goals: one is to recover a larger sample of artifacts, and the second is to recover architectural evidence for building construction, maintenance, and destruction. The greatest focus of efforts should be Feature 3 in order to confirm or reject the hypothesis that this is the schoolhouse location. Feature 2 should receive some attention, however, since this is on the property line and on high ground, this will be the most protected from future development. Consultation with the landowner and architect will help determine whether and how much this feature should be excavated. Feature 1 is the most mysterious, and therefore also very deserving excavation.

This research could be accomplished with Armstrong students taking Seifert’s fall 2016 *Field Methods in Public Archaeology* class. Likely starting in September and working weekends, students would hand excavate with shovels and trowels, recording and mapping soil layers and artifacts as we excavate. After consultation with the landowner and The Landings staff, a more detailed proposal for Phase II can be written.

Bibliography

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Appendix A



Figure 1. Georgia with the Savannah area highlighted

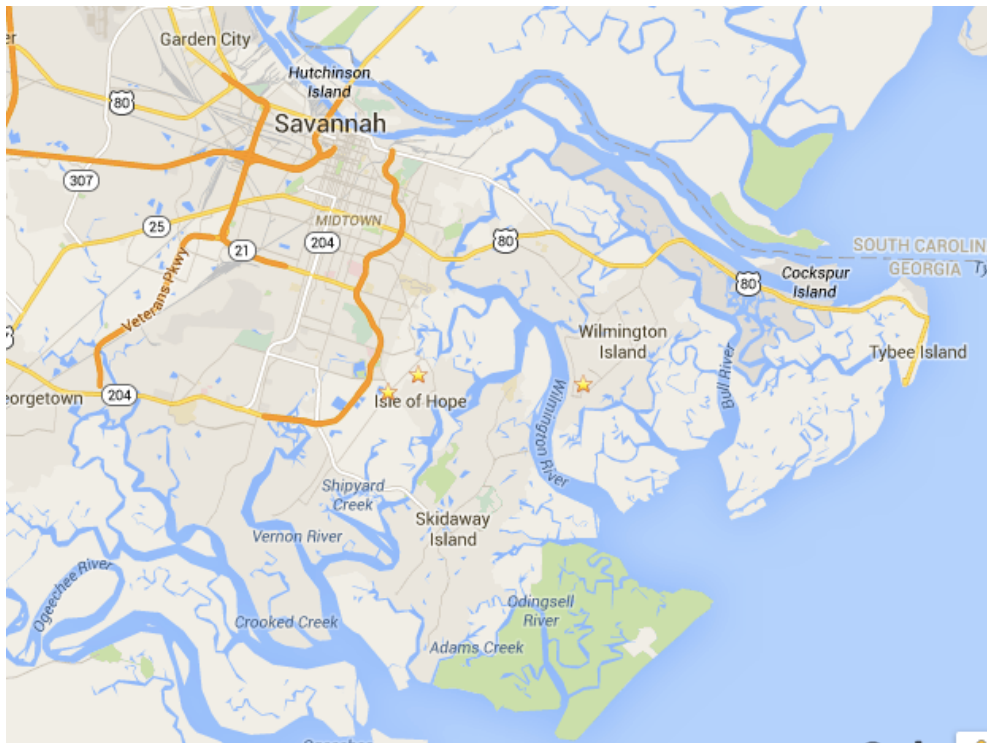


Figure 2. The Savannah area, including Skidaway Island



Figure 3. Setting up shovel test pit locations.

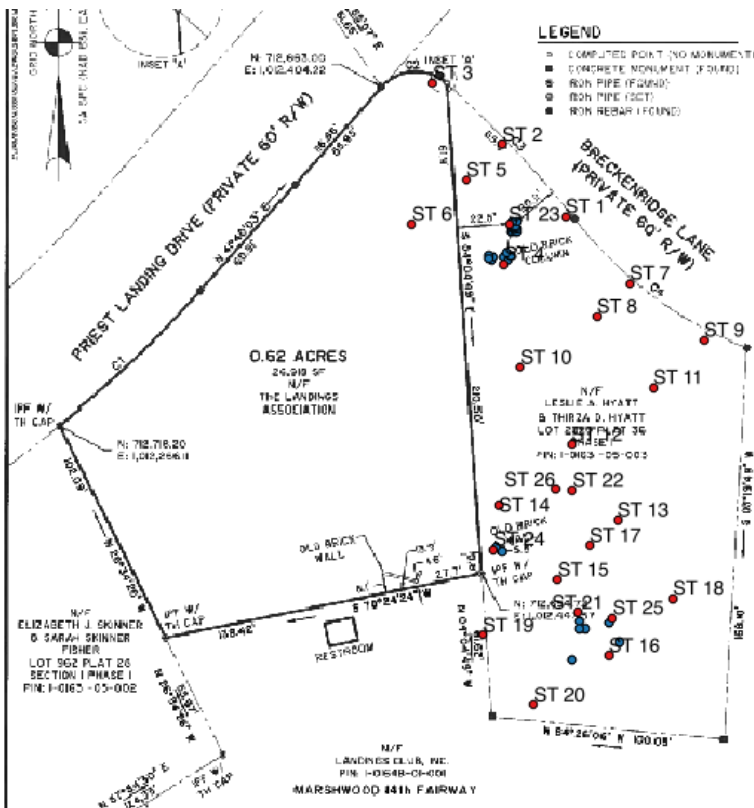


Figure 4. Locations of shovel test pits in GIS overlaid on survey of both properties. Blue dots are points on architectural features.



Figure 5. Iron straps that may be cask hoops on the surface near Shovel test 4.



Figure 6. Shovel test 16 in progress



Figure 7. Close-up of Shovel test 16 showing brick excavated.



Figure 8. Excavating Shovel test 23 near Feature 1.

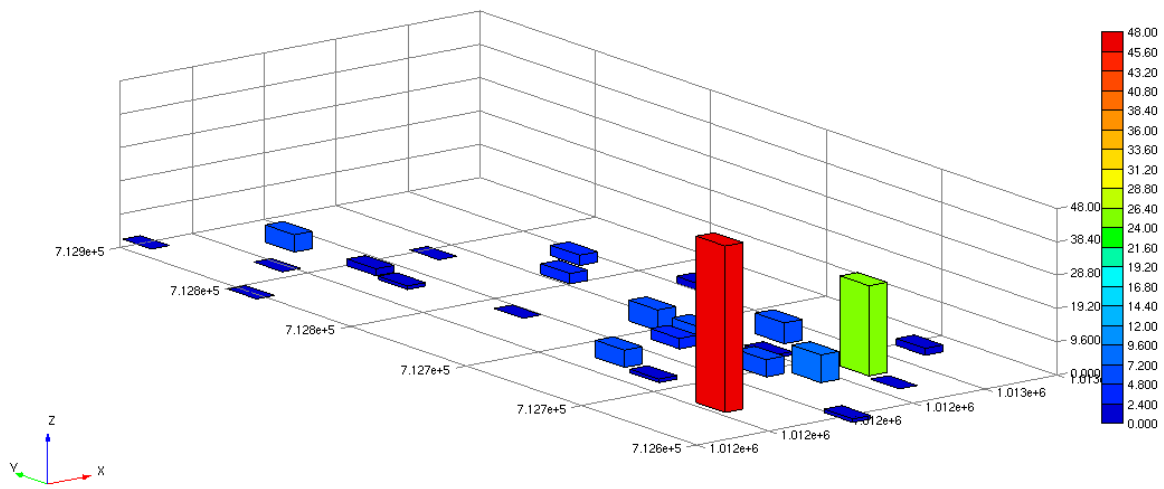


Figure 9. Distribution of 18th and early 19th century artifacts across the site. The blue arrow points grid north.

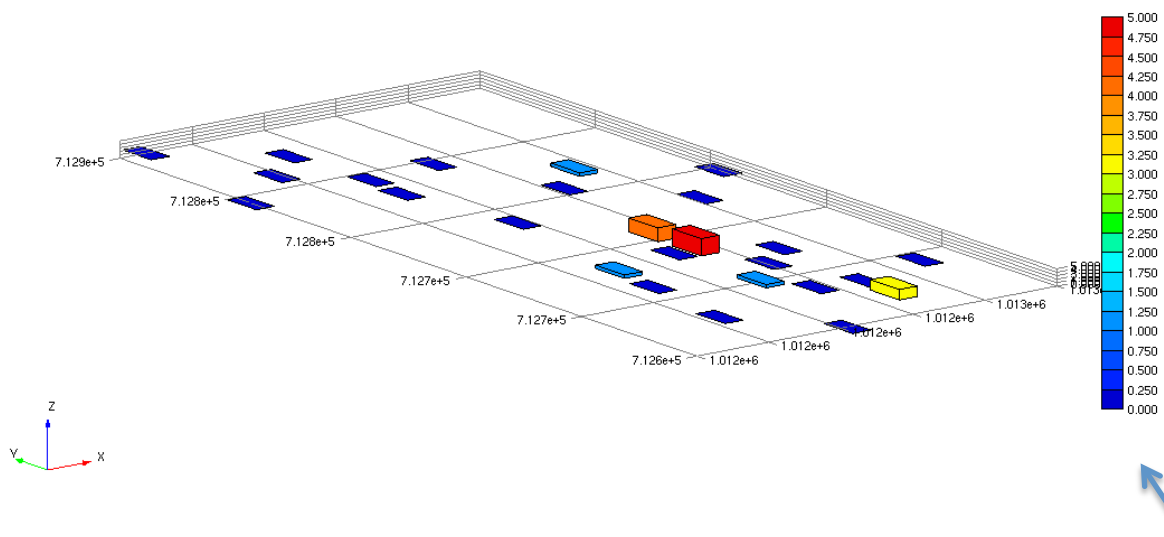


Figure 10. Distribution of monastery-era artifacts across the site. The blue arrow points grid north.