

Phase II Research Design

Benedictine Monastery and Freedmen School, Skidaway Island, 9Ch78

Laura Seifert

Armstrong State University

Fall 2016

Introduction

The Benedictine Monastery and Freedmen School site location has long been known (1974 site form). When The Landings community was initially developed, a 0.62-acre lot was set aside to preserve the core of this important archaeological site. However, this lot is a small fraction of the whole archaeological site. Recently, 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. The Phase I shovel test survey was conducted on February 12 and 13, 2016. Additional mapping was conducted on February 26, 2016. This research design will address research questions and fieldwork to be completed in the fall of 2016.

This is a highly significant site. Archaeological research on schoolhouses is scarce, and African-American schoolhouses are even more rare. To date, little research on American Benedictine monasteries has been found and none in Georgia.

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 crops also never made enough money, and the school 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.

The Phase I 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. During Phase I excavations, mostly architectural materials were recovered with 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).

Research Questions

Our basic Phase I survey research questions will continue to apply:

- Is this definitely the site of the Benedictine monastery and freedman school?
- How can 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?

Phase II research questions fall under several categories: lives of Freedmen, the architecture and institutions of schools, the lives of the Benedictines, and the architecture and institutions of monasteries and churches. The research questions discussed below are wide-ranging and ambitious. Several field seasons will probably be necessary to answer a majority of the questions, if it is possible to answer all of the questions.

What was the quality of education? Were the students learning reading, writing, and mathematics? Or were they learning technical trades? Both? 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). Were the students given a religious education?

Education was important for more than simply obtaining a better job. Literacy meant the possibility of voting. Competence in mathematics meant the ability to fight economic exploitation. Education was empowerment (Agbe-Davies and Martin 2013:108). 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 concerned with religious education or conversion? Were they motivated to educate those disadvantaged in society?

How are the Benedictine values and concepts represented on this site? Can we see Benedictine concepts in the architecture, spatial arrangements, or diet? Do we find any religious objects? Finding religious objects is unlikely as they would be highly valued and curated. How much personal property is present, and can we see evidence of monastic life? Are there market products present? How much contact did the site's inhabitants have with Savannah and the larger region?

Non-architectural artifacts were sparse in the Phase I excavations, 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 (Gibb and Beisaw 2000:125-126). 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.

Methodology

The literature search will be expanded to more archives including the Catholic diocese and St. Vincent's Abbey in Pennsylvania. Finding the two original school photographs is a priority in hopes of deciphering more details and analyzing the photos for building measurements. Census records will be examined to attempt to find names of students and residents. If the island was depopulated after the tidal waves, where did everyone go in 1889? Nearby Pin Point? Are we able to identify a direct descendant community?

Further comparative archaeology sites will be sought including more school sites (such as the contemporary Skidaway Island public school and any Rosenwald schools), contemporary domestic sites, and contemporary public buildings. Additionally, more general background

information on Georgia education laws and school taxes, the history of education in Georgia, and the history of the Benedictines in America will be researched.

Students taking Seifert's *Field Methods in Public Archaeology* and Anthropology Club members at Armstrong State University will be the field crew for this project. Lab work and analysis will be conducted in the Armstrong State University Anthropology Lab. The larger, Phase II excavation units have two main goals: one is to recover a larger sample of artifacts, and the second is to recover architectural evidence for building construction, maintenance, and destruction.

Several aboveground, architectural features are obvious on the landscape: Three brick piers at the northern end of the property (Feature 1), an intact portion of brick wall (or pier?) on the western edge of the property (Feature 2), and the brick and tabby rubble pile at the southern end of the property (Feature 3). Architectural artifact clustering and distance between the features suggest each architectural feature is a distinct building, so Phase II work will focus on discovering more about each structure. 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 and therefore our lowest priority. 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 deserving excavation. Outbuildings such as privies or storage sheds have yet to be found. These structures are important avenues of research for future field seasons.

Feature 1 had few non-architectural artifacts but a large amount of architectural debris and large piers, which indicate that a building of substantial size sat here. We found 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. While the three visible brick piers suggest a building's corner, probing should be done to test this hypothesis. This will be a simple exercise of pulling tapes to estimate the approximate location of the next pier based on the measurements between the three visible piers. Next, rectangular units will likely be placed between each set of piers, but the locations will be determined in the field based on probing results, the large tree fall, and current vegetation growth.

Feature 2, tentatively hypothesized to be the church and monastery, also hints at building placement. It is possible that this feature relates to the intact tabby basement on The Landings' property. The 1974 site form states, "The site consists of a large collapsed structure with a tabby foundation and brick walls. It was roofed with what looks like tin." Units will be placed into the hillside using the tabby basement foundation as a guide to excavate along the building's foundation.

Feature 3, hypothesized to be the schoolhouse, 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. 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). Gibb and Beisaw's 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. Rectangular units will be placed on all four sides of the brick and rubble pile to better ascertain how the building was situated on the landscape.

Each rectangular unit will be 1x2 meters and placed to span the building's walls. Ideally, units will be partially inside the building and partially outside the building to better understand the building's construction. Each unit will be judgmentally placed based on the aboveground architectural debris, as no subsurface features were found to guide unit placement. One unit will be placed at each feature to start, and units will be added as time and the availability of labor permits. New units will also be placed judgmentally, using the new information from the first units. Each unit will be excavated in arbitrary 10 cm levels. Shovel testing revealed artifacts from many different eras, but few distinct soil layers. Maintaining arbitrary stratigraphic levels will be important in understanding the development of the site over time. Additionally, since the site will be developed, each unit will be excavated to subsoil.

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 2000:125-126).

Bibliography

1974 Site form 9Ch78

Agbe-Davies, Anna S. and Claire Fuller Martin

2013 “Demanding a Share of Public Regard”: African-American Education at New Philadelphia, Illinois. *Transforming Anthropology: the Journal of the Association of Black Anthropologists* 21(2):103-121

Gibb, James G. and April M. Beisaw

2000 Learning Cast up from the Mire: Archaeological Investigations of Schoolhouses in the Northeast United States. *Northeast Historical Archaeology* 29:107-129.

Kelly, V.E.

1980 *A Short History of Skidaway Island*. Branigar Organization

Oetgen, Jerome

n.d. *The Benedictines in Savannah*

Rotman, Deborah L.

2009 Rural Education and Community Social Relations: Historical Archaeology of the Wea View Schoolhouse No. 8, Wabash Township, Tippecanoe County, Indiana. In *The Archaeology of Institutional Life*, April M. Beisaw and James G. Gibb, editors, pp. 69-85. University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa.