December 2010 Newsletter

Okra Soup and Earthenware Pots: The Archaeology of Gullah Communities

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The archaeology of the South Carolina Lowcountry has been pivotal in the archaeology of the African diaspora, particularly the archaeology of slavery and plantation life (e.g., Drucker et al. 1984; Ferguson 1992; Joseph 1989; Lees 1980; Lewis 1978; Lewis and Hardesty 1979; Orser 1984, 1988; Otto 1980; Singleton 1980, 1985; Wheaton et al. 1983; Zierden et al. 1986). Yet few archaeologists have considered the archaeology of Gullah peoples (see Crook 2001, 2008, as an exception), despite the prolific scholarship on the Gullah (e.g., Bascom 1941; Crum 1940; Dabbs 1983; Pollitzer 1999; Rosengarten 1986; Turner 1949; Twining and Baird 1990; Woofter 1930; for a more comprehensive bibliography see National Park Service 2005: Appendix E). Here we consider what archaeology can tell us about how Gullah communities and identities were created and maintained over time (Figure 1).

Community, like the concept of "place," tends to be a taken for granted term (Rodman 1992:640). It is usually, although not always, used to designate a small-scale and spatially bounded area inhabited by a population, or part of it, that has certain characteristics in common that tie it together (McDowell 1999:100). Archaeologists have contributed to our understanding of households (e.g., Barile and Brandon 2004); yet community studies have tended to focus on the functions that a community serves within a social structure (e.g., Brown and Cooper 1990; Kolb and Snead 1997). From this perspective, "the community is a co-residential collection of individuals or households characterized by day-to-day interaction, shared experiences, and common cultures" (Murdock 1949, as cited in Yaeger and Canuto 2000:2). This definition depicts community as natural and synonymous with the site or the settlement system, since common culture is often considered a shared architecture or artifact assemblage. Communities, places of lived experience, are often depicted as consisting of a list of traits -- of values, languages, material practices, ecological adaptations, marriage patterns, and the like -- rather

than places created through day-to-day interaction and shared experiences (Barnes in press; Yaeger and Canuto 2000).

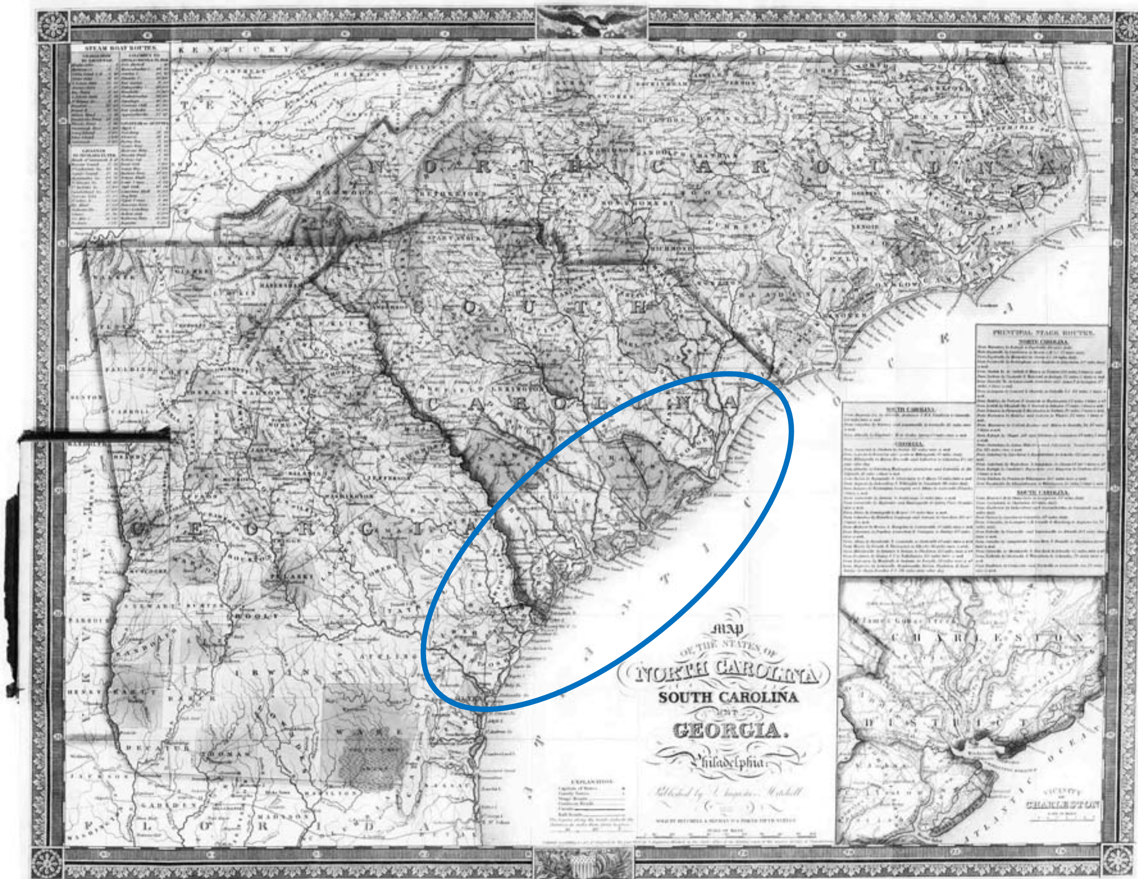

Figure 1. Area of the Lowcountry and Sea Islands of South Carolina, location of many Gullah communities, outlined on Mitchell 1835 map of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia (archival image courtesy Hargrett Library Digital Collections, University of Georgia, http://www.libs.uga.edu/).

Studies of Gullah peoples have repeatedly emphasized the importance of community and place (e.g., Dabbs 1983; Guthrie 1977; Woofter 1930). St. Helena Island is a good example because of the ample documentary record. In 1861, the Federal government regained control of Beaufort, South Carolina and the surrounding Sea Islands. The white families evacuated, leaving the plantations and their inhabitants behind. Those who remained wanted to own land and direct their own operations, and notably, they did not want to leave their communities (Figure 2). The plantation names became community names, and indeed, it is only within the last 20 years that the “plantation” appellation has been replaced by “community” (Guthrie 1996).

Figure 2. Image accompanying T. Addison Richards, "The Rice Lands of the South," *Harper's Monthly Magazine* 19: 724 (1859) (copy in Special Collections Department, University of Virginia Library). Image Reference 'NW0099' as shown on www.slaveryimages.org, sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library.

Because freedom came early there, St. Helena was the site of what was called the "Port Royal Experiment" (Rose 1964). Free African Americans were able to buy small tracts of land -- 10-15 acres usually -- and many have remained in the hands of the original families or sold to others in the community (Figure 3). The heirs of the original purchaser own many parcels jointly. There is a tendency for these to become, essentially, family compounds, with multiple houses and families living on the tract. Thus, an archaeological consideration of this phenomenon would be very informative. The tendency in the most prevalent form of archaeology conducted in the Sea Islands, however, has been to consider "sites" as delimited scatters of artifacts and to evaluate them individually in terms of "integrity" and eligibility to the

National Register of Historic Places. With a better understanding of the Gullah people and their residential patterning perhaps this tendency can be reversed and the interaction of site occupants can be assessed.

Figure 3. Direct Tax Sales map, 1866, St Helena Island, SC. Penn Center is in the lower left quadrant (see Rose 1964).

We emphasize the importance of context to understand how communities are built and maintained in specific historical moments. By looking at pottery production and distribution, we consider the processes of creolization that led to the formation of Gullah communities in the Lowcountry. And we question whether it is problematic to refer to Lowcountry enslaved populations as strictly "African American communities" since there was in fact considerable diversity in the origins of the individuals comprising the community. However, common usage lumps all people of color together and we will continue to do so for simplicity's sake, bearing in mind the underlying diversity.

Contextualizing Archaeological Studies of the Lowcountry

To understand how communities were created in the South Carolina Lowcountry, it is necessary to utilize a diversity of methods and sources, since the documentary, oral history, and archaeological data are not comprehensive on their own. Context is created through the use of spatial, cultural, historical, and geographical data. More than any other analytical tool, context enables information about artifacts to become information about past human behavior. As Carol McDavid (1997:1) points out, context is important in this archaeological sense and in a social sense. If archaeology is going to present a different view of the past, and challenge popular conceptions of how African Americans dealt with the oppression of slavery and its aftermath, archaeologists have to recognize that "the descendants of the people being studied archaeologically live in the same community in which their ancestors were enslaved, in which descendants of their enslavers still live, and in which both groups of descendants continue to negotiate issues of power and control." Therefore, archaeology should be community-based and involve communities "in the planning and carrying out of research projects" (McDavid 1997:2).

In addition, archaeological interpretations are enhanced by building upon the work of scholars in history and African and African American Studies. As Maria Franklin (1997:44) notes, African American archaeology "must be seen as not only an extension of the disciplines of archaeology and anthropology but also of the vast body of scholarship on Black American history and culture, much of it conducted by blacks themselves." The work of Eugene Genovese, H. G. Gutman, Peter Wood and others brought new viewpoints to the field as well as new techniques of analysis to studies of the Black American experience in the United States. Today, the work of W.E.B. DuBois, Zora Neale Hurston, Frederick Douglass and other African

diaspora scholars compliments and expands our understandings of African American life. For purposes of this article, it is important to build upon the work of Gullah scholars such as Lorenzo Turner, Mason Crum, Edith Dabbs and others to understand Gullah culture and history.

Reflexive local research is valuable also, and we wish that more people like Eugene Frazier (2006, 2010) and Vennie Deas Moore (1986, 2006) were writing about their communities and their histories. This is data that has traditionally been passed along through story telling that is being lost as the older generations die without passing on the stories. An important factor to consider in the Gullah community is that, as with African American communities across the South, with the coming of the modern era agriculture based lifestyles were coming to an end. To participate in the modern economy, people were forced to attend public schools and learn mainstream English. More importantly, from a community perspective, these newly educated people faced segregation and prejudice and many reacted by moving to nearby cities and the North, fracturing the important ties that allow culture to be passed along. By the 1960s, people were decrying the loss of Gullah culture and it is only through the efforts of community activists and scholars that the traditions and language are being preserved today (National Park Service 2005).

The Gullah are part of South Carolina's unique history. All places have unique histories, and to broadly generalize about the human condition can be very misleading. For instance, until recently at least, archaeologists, historians, geographers and virtually anyone studying the state's history seemed to believe that all slaves were of African origin. Many failed to differentiate between Africans, people imported from Barbados and the Caribbean, and native born African Americans. Those who recognized that early in the colony's history about 25% of the enslaved were Native Americans nonetheless downplayed their cultural influence (Ferguson 1977:70; Wheaton et al. 1982:248). After about 1730, the government stopped differentiating; rather all people of color were eligible for enslavement if they could not prove their free status. Tales of slave catchers and "Patty Rollers" capturing and enslaving Lowcountry "Settlement Indians" survive today (Frazier 2006: 46) and many people identified as African Americans in South Carolina, such as the late actress Eartha Kitt, are proud of their Native American heritage.

Thus, lumping the enslaved and other people of color together masks the heterogeneous nature of the Lowcountry's population. Interpretations that do not take this into account will make little progress toward a comprehensive knowledge of South Carolina's past. We would

argue that the time has come for less generalization about broad patterns of culture and more attention to what Stanley South and others would have called "particularism" (South 1978).

Lowcountry Colonowares

At plantation sites in the area around Charleston, we find unglazed handmade, low fired earthenwares that consist of what Noel Hume (1964) would have called "Colono-Indian" wares and wares thought to have been made by slaves on the plantations. Leland Ferguson (1977) later conflated these wares as "colonoware." We say "thought to have been made," because no one has ever proven it to be the case. The evidence commonly cited such as spalling (Ferguson 1977; Wheaton et al. 1982) can be caused by numerous factors.

The best argument in favor of Africa American production of colonoware is "there's just so much of it." In excavations at Middleburg Plantation, University of South Carolina field schools excavated a small area of the slave settlement and recovered over 21,000 sherds (see Table 1). For sites in the Cooper River drainage, and Berkeley County in general, this is not unusual (Figure 4). Recently, a CRM firm recovered over 59,000 sherds of colonoware at Dean

Table 1: "Colonoware" counts at Chesapeake and Lowcountry Sites

Site	# Colonoware Sherds	# Native American Sherds
Governors Land 44JC298	18	
Utopia II	65	7
Utopia III	152	6
Utopia IV	45	0
Stratford Hall ST116	0	135
Richneck Quarter	176	3
Ashcombs	0	523
Middleburg	21494	16
Dean Hall	59020	
Pine Grove	22253	

Hall. At Pine Grove plantation, we recovered over 22,000 sherds. Using data from the DAACS database for comparison (Thomas Jefferson Foundation 2004; thanks guys!) we find that on sites producing "Colonoware" in the Chesapeake the site that yielded the most (Richneck Quarter) produced only 176 sherds. All three Utopia site contexts in Virginia yielded only 262 sherds combined. This tendency is mirrored in North Carolina (Steen 2003), while colonoware is not reported in Coastal Georgia (e.g., Singleton 1980).

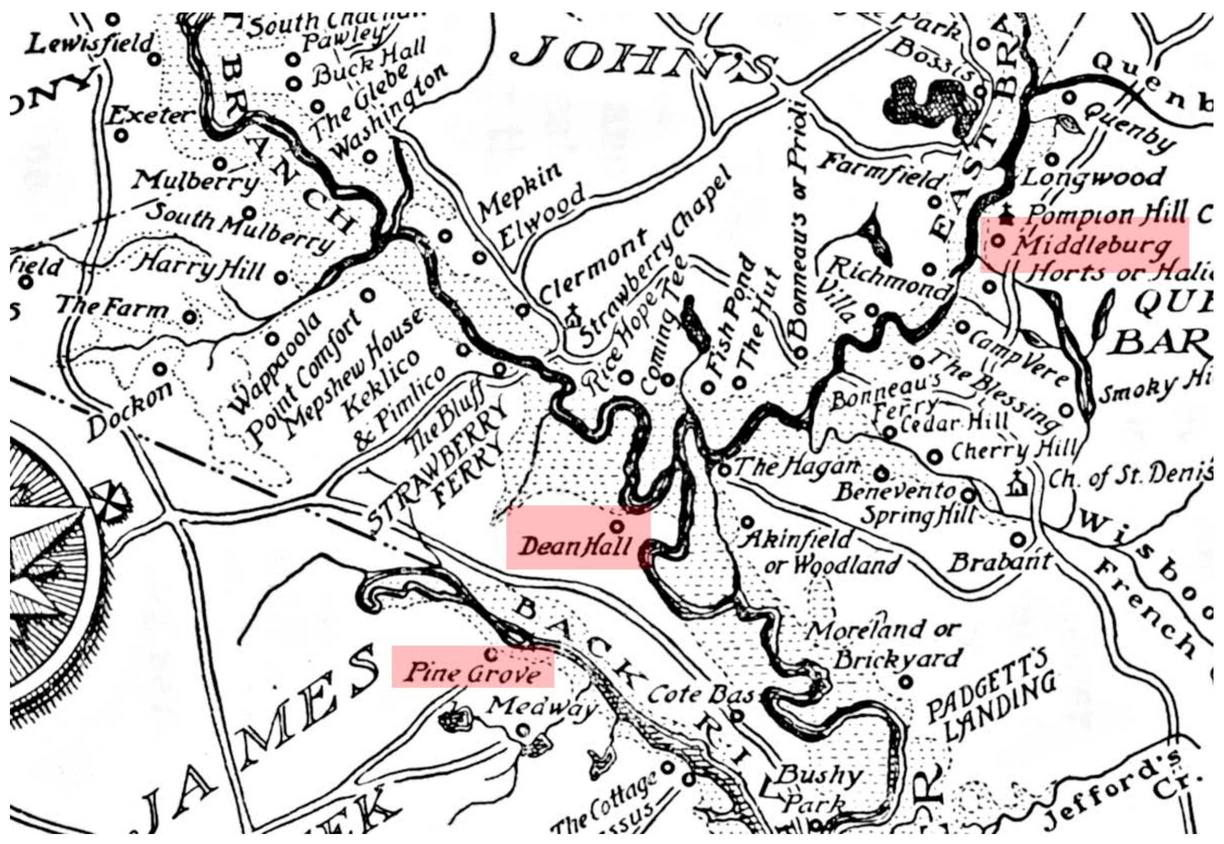

Figure 4. Plantations at "The Tee" of the Cooper River as they existed in 1842 (image from Stoney 1932).

Clearly, we are seeing a unique phenomenon in the South Carolina Lowcountry that is being overlooked by researchers who lump all unglazed, low fired, hand formed pottery together without fully appreciating the context. Pottery production in other regions, regardless of how superficially similar the wares and use contexts might seem, has little in common with Lowcountry colonoware. It is widely interpreted as a phenomenon with its roots in African traditions (e.g., Ferguson 1992) but what if the potters were not slaves at all, but free "Settlement Indians"? A colleague working at a plantation site on the Cooper River recently asked "If that's the case, where were all of these Indians in the Lowcountry during the 18th and 19th centuries?" The documentary record on Native Americans in South Carolina is even more impoverished than that of African Americans. Yet Steen pointed out to him that a historical marker for the extant Native American Varnertown community had recently been erected just a few miles from his site (Petersen 2009). They were there when the state was settled in 1670, and stayed behind as "Settlement Indians." Like African Americans, Native Americans have had to fight prejudice and institutional racism in South Carolina. As a result they were, at best, ignored.

Many Lowcountry Native Americans joined the Catawba Nation, which has had a reservation near Rock Hill since the 18th century (Merrell 1989). But others stayed behind, living on the fringes of plantation society (Hicks and Taukchiray 1999). In the historical record, there are numerous mentions of relationships between the scattered Settlement Indian families and the Catawba. Since we know that Catawba potters traded with slaves on the Lowcountry plantations (Deas 1910; Simms 1841), how far-fetched is it to argue that a few families of Settlement Indians produced pottery assiduously for a few generations, accounting for the huge burst of colonoware in this small area? Every historical reference that mentions something that can be construed as Colonoware is associated with Indians. For example, a famed quote on cooking okra soup, a clear “Africanism,” says you have to use an “Indian” pot (Baker 1975; Ferguson 1977; Simms 1841).

So when we stress the importance of considering context this is why. The core of South Carolina’s Lowcountry was the first settled and most ethnically diverse area in the state. It is an area that was home to French Huguenots, Germans, Irish, English and British settlers from Barbados and other colonies as well as local Native Americans, free Native Americans like the Natchez who refugeed to the state when they were persecuted elsewhere, others such as the Chickasaw who came to trade, and the enslaved Indians from tribes all across the Southeast.

Despite being settled later than the Chesapeake and Mid-Atlantic colonies, Carolina was established in 1670, at about the time that plantation slavery was taking off in the mainland colonies (Morgan 1998). Demand was high everywhere, so Africans from many diverse groups were imported and diverse cultural traditions, languages, and religions were mixed and fused in new combinations. This resulted in a unique ethnic stew that was the core of the Lowcountry variant of Carolinian society. It is different from “Backcountry” Carolinian society, which consisted more of European whites from Britain, Germany, Switzerland, France, and notably, Ireland in the form of Protestant Scotch-Irish (Fischer 1989; Meriwether 1940). The broad patterns of culture are not to be forgotten, but the unique variations seen at the local level should be emphasized by archaeologists, as our data is about as “local” as you can get.

Creating Gullah Communities: Okra Soup and Earthenware Pots

In the South Carolina Lowcountry, Gullah culture developed from the interactions between African, African American and Native American slaves as well as their free Native and

Euroamerican neighbors. The enslaved here and elsewhere shared much, but every region has a unique history. This history must be considered in a local context before moving on to regional considerations.

The archaeology of Lowcountry plantation slaves and their descendants is Gullah archaeology. Gullah culture is composed of diverse peoples with varying social and historical experiences who inhabit a particular geographic region and share linguistic and cultural traits (National Park Service 2005: E1). The history of the slave trade, plantation life, emancipation, reconstruction and Jim Crow is experienced differently across plantations and Sea Islands, yet shared by Gullah peoples; therefore, it should be taken into consideration in the interpretation of Lowcountry sites.

Gullah communities were created through day-to-day interaction and shared experiences (Dabbs 1983; Woofter 1930). The production and distribution of pottery was one of the ways in which people interacted on plantations and between plantations (Isenbarger 2006). Additional research on pottery production and distribution networks as well as foodways can provide insight into the ways in which people created a Gullah culture in the Low Country, but such research should consider as fully as possible the historical and cultural context of the Gullah people. Much research has been conducted on Africanisms and African heritage, but less emphasis has been placed on the diverse people who were brought together in the Lowcountry and created what became known as Gullah culture. T Archaeology considered at the local level can help us to better understand and appreciate these contributions.

Note

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