

University of North Georgia Archaeological Field School Continues Study of

ENSLAVED LIFEWAYS IN THE SANTEE DELTA

By Dr. Kendy Altizer

In May 2025, thanks to support from the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) Cultural Heritage Trust Program (Archaeology team) and the Santee Coastal Reserve, archaeological field school students conducted a shovel test survey between the North and South Santee Rivers in Georgetown County (Figure 1 - Figure 3). Under the direction of Dr. Kendy Altizer and Tom Vallrugo, with logistical support from SCDNR Heritage Trust Archaeologist Dr. Jodi Barnes and Santee Coastal Reserve Manager Achi Treptow, students learned how to scientifically collect archaeological data.

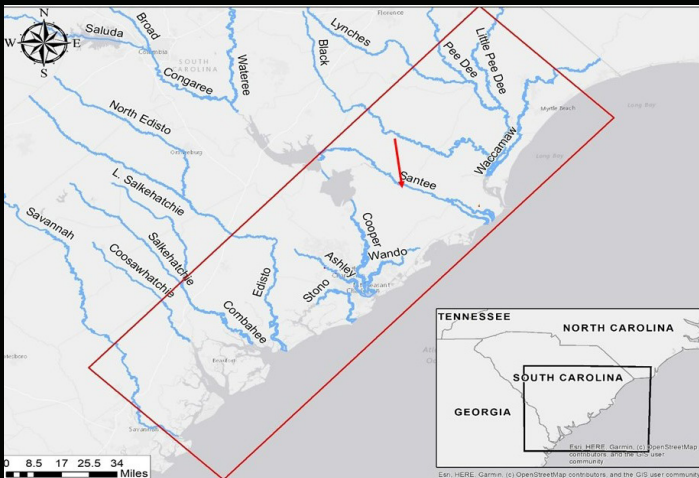


Figure 1. Santee River locator map.



Figure 3. University of North Georgia archaeology field school students.



Figure 2. University of North Georgia archaeology field school students.

Last year's work was exploratory, focused on a small settlement with known boundaries to understand not only the site but also project logistics such as navigating small waterways, working with the tides, and accessing the site safely (Altizer 2024). This year the University of North Georgia (UNG) field school focused on a larger site on the Santee Coastal Reserve, along the Intracoastal Waterway between the North and South Santee Rivers. The site is known historically to have included a small settlement for enslaved field workers, a rice processing facility, and a storm tower. Our field crew was small yet mighty and was the first ever to shovel test a storm tower (Figure 4). Storm towers were built in the Santee Delta after the Great Storm of 1822 swept away almost half of the enslaved work force (Bull 1980). The towers



Figure 4. University of North Georgia archaeology field school students shovel testing a storm tower.



Figure 5. University of North Georgia archaeology field school students shovel testing.

are round one-story structures with a small central fire pit, and were built for the labor force to escape large weather events such as tropical storms and hurricanes. Bull suggests five of these towers were constructed in the Santee Delta, and of these, three have been positively identified.

In their time between the rivers, students learned how to dig a shovel test in 25 cm levels and record the results using ArcGIS Field Maps and Survey123 using SCDNR Cultural Heritage Trust Program's archaeology equipment and protocols (Figure 5 and Figure 6). Dr. Barnes trained the students to record their results on handheld data collectors in the field. SCDNR archaeologist Dr. Karen Smith set up the project grid and provided GIS support to allow field supervisors to track the data effectively. The field crew also spent time processing artifacts at the University of South Carolina's Baruch Marine Lab on Hobcaw Barony. The Marine Lab was very gracious to allow us the use of their facilities to clean and process artifacts on lab days (Figure 7).



Figure 6. University of North Georgia archaeology field school student shovel testing.

This year, we had very special guests on site. Santee Coastal Reserve employees took time out of their busy schedules to assist with a pedestrian survey to systematically look for additional above ground structures that might still be present in the area. Marcus Doiley, Jennifer Cahill, and Gunnar Kloth were of great help in surveying the area as well as water screening soil recovered from shovel testing by students (Figure 8).



Figure 7. University of North Georgia archaeology field school students and Dr. Jodi Barnes cleaning and processing artifacts.



Figure 8. Water screening soil recovered from shovel testing by students.



Figure 9. A ceramic sherd is recovered during water screening.



Figure 10. A gun flint is recovered during water screening.



Figure 11. A blue bead is recovered during water screening.



Figure 12. A bead is recovered during water screening.

Artifacts recovered from our work include European ceramics, pipe bowls and stems and gun flints. Items related to personal adornment such as buttons, beads, and Chinaberry seeds were also recovered (Figure 9-Figure 12). Historically, Chinaberry seeds were often used to make necklaces, bracelets, and other such items of personal adornment (Martha Zierden personal communication). Other organic remains related to what people ate at this site were also recovered, including peach pits, gourd seeds, peanut shells, turtle shells, and cow and fish bones (Figure 13). Architectural remains including nails, brick, mortar, and cypress planks confirmed the presence of houses in archaeological contexts.



Figure 13. A gourd seed recovered during water screening.

These finds were all very exciting for the students because the work was difficult. Shovel tests were inundated, and students had to dig through muddy water and pluff mud to complete them (Figure 14). The soil and water were shoveled into buckets and brought to a central water screen where a team of two students, supervised by archaeologist Martha Zierden, sprayed off the marsh grasses and pluff mud to recover the material remains of the people who once lived in this remote region (Figure 15 and Figure 16).



Figure 14. A shovel test pit inundated with water.



Figure 15. Archaeologist Martha Zierden (right) supervises water screening.

Because of the amount of material related to foodways recovered from last years' shovel testing, our team adjusted our methodology to include the collection of flotation samples for each shovel test. Through the collection of flotation samples, we may better understand micro-botanicals, and thus foodways, in this area. Those samples are currently being processed, and we are hopeful to learn more about the everyday diets and nutrition of people living between the rivers during the Antebellum period.



Figure 16. Archaeologist Martha Zierden (center with white hat) supervises water screening.

In addition to field work, students also learn from visiting scholars and prepared lectures. Dr. Sam Livingston, Associate Professor of Africana Studies at Morehouse College visited with the students and gave an introductory lesson on Africana Studies. This lecture provided helpful background in Gullah Geechee culture and lifeways. We hope to collaborate with Dr. Livingston and his students in the coming years. Dr. Richard Porcher also visited and gave a lecture on rice culture to help students better understand the remnant structure related to rice culture they are seeing in the Santee Delta as part of their work.

This shovel testing survey, and UNG's archaeological field school, contributes to the larger multi-disciplinary Santee Delta Project under the direction of Dr. Richard Porcher. The goal of the Santee Delta Project is to systematically record the cultural resources of the Santee Delta, with emphasis on the African and African-descendant experience, before they are lost to rising waters. The first phase of this project is centered on African American lifeways and begins with the advent of non-indigenous habitation of the Delta in the late 1600s through the end of slavery in 1861. The project area includes approximately 55,000 acres of public and private lands beginning at the Santee River split at Chicken Creek, continuing east to the Atlantic Ocean, and loosely bounded north and south by the River Roads. UNG's Archaeological Field School between the rivers directly contributes to this larger body of work.

The Santee Delta Project is funded by private donors and local private foundations including the Gullah Geechee Heritage Corridor and Bunnelle Foundation. These funds have helped us to do this work by providing transportation costs, including a project boat and fuel, as well as research costs. For more information on the Santee Delta Project, and how you can help, scan the QR code below or visit <https://www.thesanteedeltaproject.org/>.



References cited

Bull, Elias (1980). Storm towers of the Santee Delta. South Carolina Historical Magazine 81(2): 95-101.