

Excavating a Gullah Geechee Homesite on **BELLE ISLE PLANTATION**

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This summer, SCDNR Heritage Trust archaeologists excavated a Gullah Geechee homesite on Belle Isle Plantation with students from the University of North Georgia (UNG). Belle Isle is one of seven former plantations on the Yawkey Wildlife Center, a 24,000-acre Heritage Preserve in Georgetown County. The former rice plantation is made up of a rice processing facility, dwellings where enslaved and later emancipated people lived, outbuildings, and associated rice fields. The rice processing facilities contributes to the Georgetown County Rice Culture, c. 1750 - c. 1910 historic district, as it is the only one left standing in the Santee Delta. The rice mill chimney and fields serve as a visual reminder of the labor and knowledge enslaved rice growers brought from West Africa. (Figure 1). The excavations uncovered a Gullah Geechee homesite – the house foundation and associated material culture, where enslaved and later Gullah Geechee families lived.



Figure 1. Aerial photograph of rice mill chimney and former rice fields. Photo by Kendy Altizer.

Belle Isle Plantation was once part of the original land grants on Cat Island owned by Richard Smith. By 1832, Thomas Lowndes acquired a large portion of Cat Island. He divided the property into two plantations for his two sons, Thomas and Richard, but the operation of both Cat Isle and Belle Isle Plantations was closely connected.



Figure 2. An 1848 plat shows ten dwellings where enslaved Gullah Geechee people lived on Belle Isle.

An 1848 plat shows ten dwellings where enslaved Gullah Geechee people lived on Belle Isle (Figure 2). In 1850, 103 enslaved rice growers produced 360,000 pounds of rice, according to the Census of Agriculture. By 1860, the population increased, and 147 enslaved people produced 800,000 pounds of rice. The 1860 census indicates that there were 35 dwellings on the two plantations. The homesite the team excavated is likely one of those.

The American Civil War devastated most rice plantations, and the loss of the enslaved labor force was the death knell for rice in South Carolina. But an 1866 Freedmen's Bureau contract indicates that 25 freedmen and women with the surnames Green, Heyward, Singleton, Smalls, and Smith continued to labor on the plantation. The land passed down in the Lowndes family and then changed hands several times as owners tried to grow rice or used the fields to attract wildlife for hunting. In 1927, Caroline Gouverneur Ramsay, from Delaware, acquired the property and her family built a winter hunt camp. The



Figure 3. "Under the Live Oaks" by Andrew Wyeth, 1937. Courtesy of Greenville Museum of Art.

Gullah Geechee settlement was still a part of the Belle Isle landscape in 1937, when Andrew Wyeth painted *Under the Live Oaks* (Figure 3). The painter noted in a letter that about 50 Gullah Geechee people continued to live on the property. His painting depicts their houses on the plantation landscape.

To prepare for fieldwork, University of South Carolina geography intern, Nick Virga, georeferenced a plat of the plantation, which shows ten houses extending east/west on the landscape (Figure 2). SCDNR Heritage Trust archaeologist Dr. Karen Smith uploaded that plat into FieldMaps and the archaeology team dug shovel test pits (STP) in the area to confirm the location of houses. In one STP, they found several different earthenware clay pipe stems and pipe bowls and creamware pottery sherds near a chimney fall and associated house piers.



Figure 4. Excavation grid over the homesite. Photo courtesy of Dr. Kendy Altizer.

The team cleared the vegetation from around the former homesite and set up a grid of 1x1 meter excavation units over the chimney (Figure 4). Dr. Kendy Altizer of UNG brought six students from her anthropology classes to learn about archaeological field techniques. The students spent three weeks digging shovel tests between the North and South Santee Rivers and two weeks working at Belle Isle Plantation. With the help of SCDNR Heritage Trust archaeologist Tamara Wilson, the students excavated five of the 1x1 meter test units around the chimney. They learned excavation techniques and artifact identification as well as public archaeology skills as they told visitors about their work. Dr. Altizer flew a drone over the excavations several times documenting the fieldwork process (Figure 5) and Heritage Trust intern, India Manigault, operated the field lab, where students and interns washed and sorted artifacts.



Figure 5. Excavations in progress at the Belle Isle homesite. Photo courtesy of Dr. Kendy Altizer.



Figure 6. SCDNR Director Dr. Tom Mullikin (right) talks with Dr. Jodi A. Barnes (left) and Tamara Wilson (center). Photo courtesy of Jamie Dozier.

Several people visited during the short field season. SCDNR Director Dr. Tom Mullikin stopped by during preparation for fieldwork (Figure 6). We held two public days and people of all ages came out to visit (Figures 7 and 8). SCDNR Heritage Trust archaeologist Meg Gaillard brought the SCDNR Heritage Trust interns out to help too (Figure 9). These visitors got a tour of the property, with education and outreach coordinator, Molly McNeill. They learned about the archaeological research and got their hands dirty helping the team.



Figure 7. Visitors learning about the fieldwork at Belle Isle. Photo courtesy of Dr. Kendy Altizer.



Figure 8. Visitors learning how to screen for artifacts. Photo courtesy of Dr. Kendy Altizer.



Figure 9. SCDNR Heritage Trust interns (in light blue shirts) assist with fieldwork. Photo courtesy of Dr. Kendy Altizer.

Like most archaeological research, we ended up with more questions than answers. For example, how was the house oriented? Was it a single room or a double room house? Artifact analysis is ongoing, but the team found lots of brick and mortar associated with the chimney as well as nails and hinges showing the construction of the house. They also found factory slipped and blue shell edged pearlware, tobacco pipe stems and bowls, buttons, and other household items. A fragment of a slate pencil was found suggesting that the Gullah Geechee people who lived in the house knew how to write. The team also found peach pits and animal bones providing a little information about what people ate. Overall, the artifacts gave us a glimpse into the lives of the Gullah Geechee people who lived in this homesite, but more work is needed. The Heritage Trust Archaeology team plans to return this fall to learn more, so stay tuned.

Watch film footage of the excavations on the SCDNR Heritage Trust Program [Vimeo page](#).

