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Archaeologists dig it up on Lord Ashley Cooper's land

Collecting Colonial Clues

by Paul Bowers

Photos by Paul Bowers

Artifacts unearthed at the site include (from left) colonial earthenware, English flint, a tobacco pipe stem fragment, Chinese porcelain, a rusted nail, and a shell from an oyster or welk

For the last two weeks, somewhere along the Ashley River in Dorchester County, a team of archaeologists and College of Charleston students sifted through dirt to catch a glimpse of how European, African, and Native American cultures collided in the 17th century.

Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper, one of the wig-bedecked Lords Proprietor among whom Charles II divvied up the Carolina colony, once owned the land where the team was digging. The site, whose location remains secret for fear of looters, centers around the brick foundations of an early colonial outpost.

Based on contemporary accounts and artifacts found at the site, the building was probably inhabited from 1675 to 1685. It had a moat, a palisade, and some small cannons.

"They're probably defending against the Spanish more than anything," says Katherine Saunders, associate director of preservation at the Historic Charleston Foundation. Like many of the workers at the site, she has a tendency to slip into the present tense while talking about the distant past.

Saunders says the team has found thin pieces of slate, which may have been used in lieu of paper for tallying and trade calculations. Whatever paper records the inhabitants kept — like the skins they traded and the pewter camp instruments they likely brought — could not have survived as artifacts over the 325 years since the site was abandoned.

On Thursday morning, student Timothy Buero, 61, manned one of the sifting stations, shaking excavated soil through a fine grate. Early in the day, his most significant find was a piece of Italian-made glass bead of the sort used as currency in trade with Native Americans.

By all accounts, Lord Ashley Cooper used the site as an outpost to trade with Native Americans for pelts and skins, which fetched a pretty penny across the Atlantic. Henry Woodward, an early English settler who learned native languages and helped the Lords Proprietor establish trade relationships with tribes, may have done business with the Westo and Kusso tribes at the site.

Barbara Borg, an associate professor of anthropology at the College of Charleston, says she hopes to find pottery and other artifacts from the Westo tribe in particular. Not much is known about their way of life or material culture. She anticipates three to four hours of lab work for every hour spent in the field.

"It is like putting together a big puzzle where most of the pieces are missing," Borg says.

There were probably 15 to 20 enslaved Africans at the site, and field director Andrew Agha says there were likely European indentured servants and enslaved Native Americans as well.

"With Indian trade came the trade of people," Agha says. "It's kind of the unspoken part of the Indian trade."

Agha says the presence of cannons and moats may have been a precaution against Native American attacks as well as Spanish intrusion from the south. The Westo tribe was militarily powerful and was known to have raided Spanish settlements.

"Everyone was on edge out here on the frontier," Agha says.

The dig has yielded a number of gun flints and pieces of lead shot. Some of the lead pellets exhibit what Saunders calls "splatter:" the malleable musket fodder appears to have deformed on impact, whether with earth, an animal, or a human.

Zooarchaeologists have even taken an interest in the site, offering to do DNA testing if the team finds bone fragments from a particular hybridized cow breed that may have been raised at the site.

From the field, all of the artifacts will go to the Charleston Museum, where researchers and a team of interns will spend months washing, drying, cataloging, and analyzing every last nail, wine glass fragment, and tobacco pipe stem. MeadWestvaco Corporation is funding the research.

For historians, the site could prove to be a treasure trove of information. Histories of the state are often thinly sourced before 1680 and outside of Charleston, says Saunders.

"All that wealth that eventually gets channeled into Charleston originated on these plantations," she says.

For the 16 students enrolled in the Archaeological Field School program, the dig was valuable field experience but hardly glamorous. The two weeks at the site were part of a seven-week, eight-credit-hour, 400-level undergraduate course that included 25 readings, a midterm, and a final exam.

What's more, they braved tick-infested woods and the punishing Lowcountry sun. Borg, their professor, says most archaeologists in South Carolina stop doing field work in May because of the heat.

Take, for example, Miles Newbern. During our visit last Thursday, he is already sweating what he describes as a waterfall at 10 in the morning. Hunkered down in a meticulously shaped hole with a flat shovel, he scrapes along the surface of the dirt, careful to remove only a thin layer at a time. After heaving a load

over his shoulder into the wire-mesh sifter, he pauses to hydrate.

"If it leads to a career, I'm not gonna complain," he says.

He, like the other students, has his work cut out for him on Friday: taking a final exam, snapping pictures to document the holes, and then filling all the holes back in.

If they get the funding, the team will be back again, picking up where they left off. For now, some of Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper's bricks and pots and secrets are hidden again, swallowed whole in the mouth of history.

Tags: College of Charleston, Anthony Ashley Cooper, Charleston history, Historic Charleston Foundation