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When Summerville was the frontier

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SUMMERVILLE -- What did Carolina's frontier look like when it was only a dozen or so miles inland from the original English settlement?

What did its first slave quarters look like? And how were its indentured servants, enslaved Native Americans and their overseers housed?

At this point, archaeologists have more questions than answers.

But on some private property just a few miles north of Middleton Place, they're finding new hope that they might be able to answer such questions soon.

Photo Gallery

Lord Ashley



The Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper archaeological site is considered of national, even international, importance, though it's just being explored.

Several archaeologists, 18 students and other experts from the College of Charleston, the Charleston Museum and Historic Charleston Foundation recently finished a two-week-long dig on what's known as the Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper site.

This is where archaeologists unearthed an extensive brick foundation two years ago -- one thought to be the oldest surviving bricks from the English colony in the Carolinas.

The recent dig re-exposed those bricks but more importantly sampled other surrounding areas to collect evidence on a frontier compound thought to be a significant cattle ranch as well as an important British-Indian trading post that operated from about 1675 to 1685 -- just a few years after the Carolina colony began.

They didn't find anything particularly dramatic, but archaeologist Andrew Agha notes that each of the 18 or so shallow pits contained some soil stains where a post or wall once stood.

"Because we have posts in every hole, what we can say is there were buildings all over the place," he says. "We're seeing a pattern to an orderly layout here."

Other finds -- such as 17th century ceramics, materials for making lead shot and gun flints, small beads used in the Indian trade and bits of slate that could have been used to tally transactions -- also provide important clues.

"The small finds in the screens, as we add them up, that's the 'Aha' moment," he says. "The artifacts are small, but they're really informative."

Lord Ashley, one of the colony's original eight Lords Proprietors, obtained about 12,000 acres from the crown and the Cuscoe Indians, and records show he built a fort on his land and had hundreds of cattle and many slaves there. He died in 1683 and his outpost faded away -- a good thing for archaeologists because the land's 17th century activity hasn't been churned up by other development.

Dr. Barbara Borg, an associate professor with the college, says the 18 students have been put through the paces.

"Some units have gotten down and produced very little, but negative information is valuable, too," she says.

Students Eric Craig and Taylor Fort say they've learned just how demanding and mysterious archaeological work can be -- especially in the June heat.

Their plots produced several dozen shards of ceramics, including some likely made by Native Americans, but they know that the meaning of them all won't be known for several more months -- until later lab analysis wraps up.

"If you have any question, you just throw it in a bag," Craig says. "It's the lab people who will figure it out."

The archaeological work was made possible by a \$26,000 grant from MeadWestvaco Corp., which owns property nearby and was struck by the collaboration and instruction involved.

Katherine Saunders of the Historic Charleston Foundation says archaeologists could easily do another 10 years of work here to uncover its secrets.

"It's like a jigsaw puzzle you don't have all the pieces to," she says.

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