

INTRODUCTION

THE ROLE OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN TELLING CHARLESTON'S COMPLEX HISTORY

Jon Bernard Marcoux

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Charleston, South Carolina, perennially sits atop magazine and internet lists for “best cities” to visit and to live in (Figure 1). The city doubtless owes much of this standing to its deep and rich history. Unfortunately, for most of the public this history only begins in AD 1670 with the arrival of English colonists, leaving out millennia of Native American occupation. While limited to this relatively “recent” period of 350 years, one still cannot help but experience the past here, as material vestiges abound in the built environment. From the city’s narrow streets, colonial churches, Antebellum “single” houses, and post-Emancipation “freedman’s cottages,” down to the handmade bricks composing buildings and garden walls across the city, this immersive setting (virtually all the product of enslaved labor by thousands of Africans and African Americans) forms an incredible and unique setting for daily life (Figure 2). Charlestonians can be credited with recognizing the important relationship between their material heritage and economic prosperity early on. They are often lauded for passing the nation’s first zoning ordinance addressing historic preservation in 1931. Given this prescient move to protect the historic fabric of local buildings and landscapes, most folks are surprised to hear that Charleston has no such safeguards for the other major component of its material heritage—its archaeological resources. As in 1931, the city is currently in the midst of an unprecedented construction boom, and while historic buildings are largely protected, significant archaeological deposits are destroyed with each new swimming pool, apartment building, and hotel.

Charleston’s status as a “historical” city is certainly warranted. Indeed, it was a key setting for many events and processes that define American history during the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries. The initial decades after Charleston’s founding (at which point it was known as Charles Town) provide an archetypal example of English colonial interaction with and displacement of Native American communities, culminating in 1715 with the armed



Figure 1. The location of Charleston, South Carolina.

conflict known as the Yamasee War. Charleston was also a major setting for the development of American plantation economies based on enslaved labor. As one of the key markets of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, Charleston’s plantation owners forced thousands of enslaved African, African American, and Native American farmers to grow and harvest rice and cotton. The wealth generated by this economic system fueled



Figure 2. An aerial view of Charleston's skyline capturing its diverse architectural heritage. Photograph courtesy of Jon Bernard Marcoux.

Charleston's rise to become one of the richest cities in the Atlantic World. The materialization of this status can still be seen in the city's historical architecture and in the object collections housed in its museums. Charleston also was host to key battles during the American Revolution and the U.S. Civil War, with the initial shot of the latter conflict happening at Fort Sumter.

Charleston thus has much to contribute to any exploration of America's past. What is so often overlooked by the public and even by scholars, however, is the fact that Charleston's archaeological record is a crucial resource for constructing the narratives that convey this complex past. Perhaps this underappreciation is due to the existence of a robust historical record. Scholars of the past have been "spoiled" with relatively easy access to a corpus of government records,

maps, and correspondence through libraries and archives. Given the readership of this publication, it is "preaching to the choir" to also say that there are many narratives that could and should be constructed about who is *not* writing and who and what are *not* written about. Fortunately, archaeologists in Charleston have indeed been working in these historical gaps, using archaeological methods and data to address diverse topics like Native American battlefield tactics employed during the Yamasee War, the materialization of African diasporic identities through pottery-making and foodways, and the materiality of daily life in the eighteenth-century Atlantic World. The results of these projects, some of which are reported in the following articles, demonstrate the incredible potential of archaeology to enhance our interpretations. Those results also highlight the vital importance of preserving the archaeological record.

RECOVERING AND PRESERVING CHARLESTON'S MATERIAL HERITAGE THROUGH ARCHAEOLOGY

In this set of articles about the archaeology of historic Charleston, my colleagues and I share some of the recent research we have been conducting both through fieldwork and through analyses of legacy artifact collections. Katherine S. Pemberton begins by outlining the history of Charleston's archaeology ordinance, or rather the lack thereof, along with the recent surge in public interest associated with excavations of the seventeenth-century city wall. The remainder of the articles provide examples of the invaluable material heritage that is currently under threat. Carl P. Borick shares the results of recent archaeological projects aimed at identifying the remnants of features associated with the 1780 Siege of Charleston by the British navy during the American Revolution. Sarah E. Platt and Ronald W. Anthony ask new questions of legacy collections recovered from an iconic

Charleston site (the Heyward-Washington House) almost 50 years ago. Corey A. H. Sattes and Platt focus on locally made, hand-built, low-fired earthenware (called colonoware), reporting on the discovery of the first evidence of a surface treatment with clear connections to African potting traditions. Finally, Martha A. Zierden, Carla S. Hadden, Sarah E. Platt, Barnet Pavao-Zuckerman, Laurie J. Reitsema, Elizabeth J. Reitz, Hayden R. Smith, and Grant Snitker characterize their innovative project examining the role of cattle in Charleston's colonial economy through the synthesis of zooarchaeological, isotopic, archival, and soil core data. Collectively, these pieces underscore the important insights that can be gained through archaeological excavations in our nation's historic urban centers. They also suggest what can and will be lost if the public does not seek to put protective measures in place.

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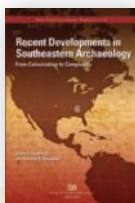
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