



## March 2008 Newsletter

### Gullah-Geechee Archaeology: The Living Space of Enslaved Geechee on Sapelo Island

By Ray Crook\*

#### Introduction

African American archaeology has, for 40 years now, contributed an impressive amount of new information about undocumented conditions and the day-to-day lives of chattel slaves. That same archaeological record provides a better understanding of the processes involved in the creation and maintenance of creole cultures spawned by the African diaspora.

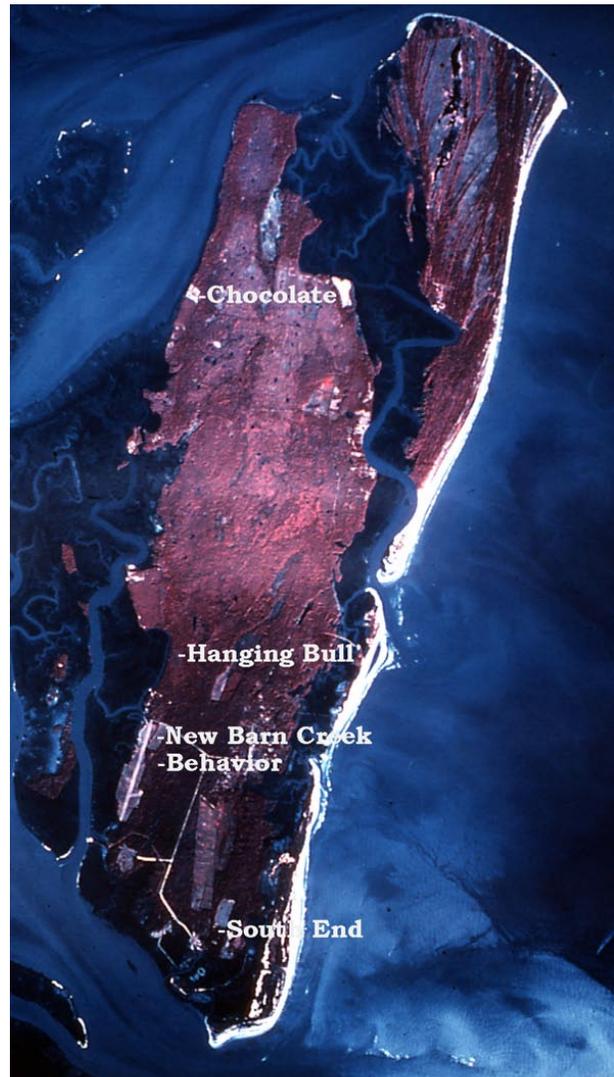
This essay is concerned with archaeological information about the creation and use of space at 19th century slave settlements on Sapelo Island, Georgia (Figure 1), with an emphasis on settlement layout and domestic architecture. From an anthropological perspective, it is more basically about an enslaved community who developed a creole culture known as Geechee. As a prelude to the following discussion, it is important to reiterate a fundamental point made in 1976 by Sidney Mintz and Richard Price (1992:14). “[T]he Africans in any New World colony in fact became a *community* and began to share a *culture* only insofar as, and as fast as, they themselves created them.”

A distinctive linguistic group defined by speakers of “Sea Island Creole English,” or simply “Gullah,” live today along the Atlantic coast between southern North Carolina and northeastern Florida. North of the Savannah River these people are known as the Gullah. Those living south of the Savannah River are identified as the Geechee (see Works Projects Administration 1940, Pollitzer 1999, National Park Service 2005). As slaves on rice and cotton plantations, their ancestors created a life that successfully merged and blended the linguistic and behavioral patterns of their native African homelands with those of the dominant Euro Americans. The task system was a central feature of life on the tidewater plantations. It provided the organizational structure for slave labor required for the maintenance of viable tidewater plantations and also allowed for the development of an internal economy for the slaves themselves. The benefits of the task system to the enslaved accrued from the many activities they were able to pursue “on their own time,” after work for the planter had been completed (see Morgan 1982 and Crook 2001). The result was a creole culture that satisfied not only the imposed demands of slavery, but also their own social, religious, and economic needs. Once thriving along the coast, their numbers have become thinned and widely spread, and survival of

their cultural traditions now is endangered. *African American Archaeology* throughout this tidewater region is *Gullah-Geechee Archaeology*.



**Figure 1. The Georgia Coast**



**Figure 2. Plantation Slave Settlements on Sapelo Island**

### **The Geechee of Sapelo Island**

Geechee people have lived on Sapelo Island for about 250 years. Their exceptionally strong sense of place is permanently connected to the island where they “catch sense” in their youth and are buried when they die. Here they tilled the fields and harvested gardens, fished the tidal creeks, hunted game and gathered plants along the marsh edges and in the forests, and engaged in a variety of work activities. Their world always has included the “other” as well, identified as “The Man” -- a politically and economically powerful individual or group who exerted much influence in their day-to-day lives. Only the name of “The Man” has changed since 1762. Perhaps the first was Patrick Mackay, and then there were the French Société *de Sapelo*, Lewis Harrington, Thomas Spalding and his heirs, Edward Swarbreck, Charles W.

Rogers, Howard Coffin, R. J. Reynolds, Jr., the University of Georgia Marine Institute, and the Georgia Department of Natural Resources.

The location and number of Geechee communities have changed over the years. When associated with Sea Island cotton and sugar plantations, they were relatively contained and located near work areas. Following the Civil War some Freedmen remained in these slave settlements for a time, while others moved to new locations to establish family homesteads or small communities. Some left the island and others came to make Sapelo their home for the first time. Several Geechee communities became well established and grew during the first half of the twentieth century. However, most of the homesteads and communities were vacated during the 1950s, when R. J. Reynolds, Jr. had all the black residents relocate into the single community of Hog Hammock. The former settlements soon were reclaimed by the island's vegetation and ravaged by the elements. The houses, outbuildings, and other features of the cultural landscape now survive only in memories and as archaeological remains.

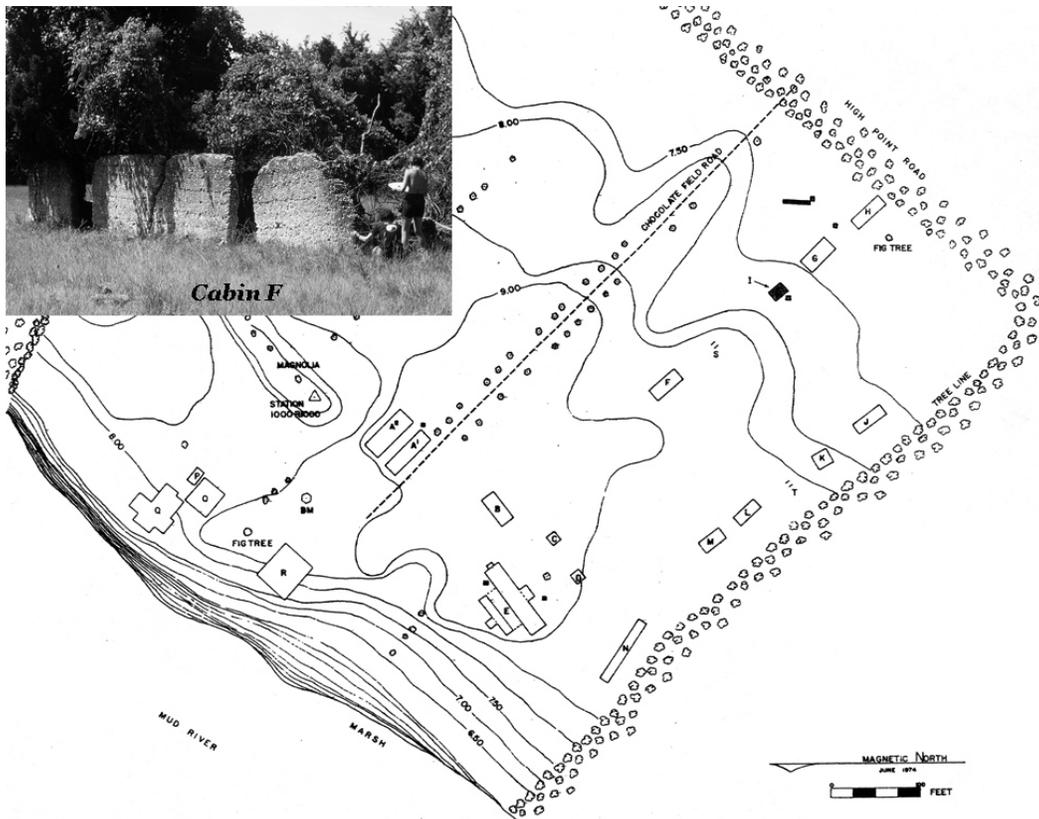
Against this backdrop, a long-term anthropological research project was initiated in 1992 to gather and record archaeological and ethnographic information about the Geechee communities of Sapelo Island (Crook, Bailey, Harris, and Smith 2003). Thus far historical research about the former settlements has been conducted, oral histories have been gathered, broad-scale survey to relocate settlements has been completed, and limited archaeological excavation has been undertaken. Much more remains to be done.

### **Early Geechee Settlement Forms**

Although enslaved Geechee were present earlier, their numbers increased substantially with the establishment of two large plantations around the turn of the 19th century. The Chocolate plantation was developed on the northern end of Sapelo Island and Thomas Spalding's plantation on the southern end (Figure 2).

During the late 1790s, the Chocolate tract was farmed by Lewis Harrington with the labor of 68 slaves. In 1802 that property became jointly owned by Edward Swarbreck and Thomas Spalding, who leased out at least a portion of the tract until 1808. Swarbreck, a Danish sea merchant with Caribbean connections who traded in cotton and other commodities, including slaves, then directed his attention to Chocolate. His plantation layout followed a familiar and very formal design (Figure 3). The Big House, built of tabby, overlooked the Mud River and expansive salt marshes. His residence was flanked by outbuildings and other support structures. Two parallel rows of slave quarters, spaced some 10m apart and separated by a broad open area 50m across, were constructed behind the Big House. Vast agricultural fields extended to the north and south. Evidence of at least nine slave quarters, typically tabby duplexes with central chimneys and finished tabby floors, each side measuring about 4.3m by 6.1m, survives today as ruins and archaeological features at Chocolate. These represent an enslaved population of some 70 to 100 people distributed among at least 18 households (for more information see Honerkamp, Crook, and Kroulek 2007).

A rare glimpse of the slave housing at Chocolate is presented in an 1821 publication that directly quotes Edward Swarbreck (Hopkins 1821:156). “[T]he walls are of tabby, which in a little while becomes like stone, requiring no repair : this causes a considerable saving to the negroes, for it is generally expected that they will make the repairs as they become requisite, unless they are so to much extent, and then the plantation mechanics are employed : these always build the negro houses.”

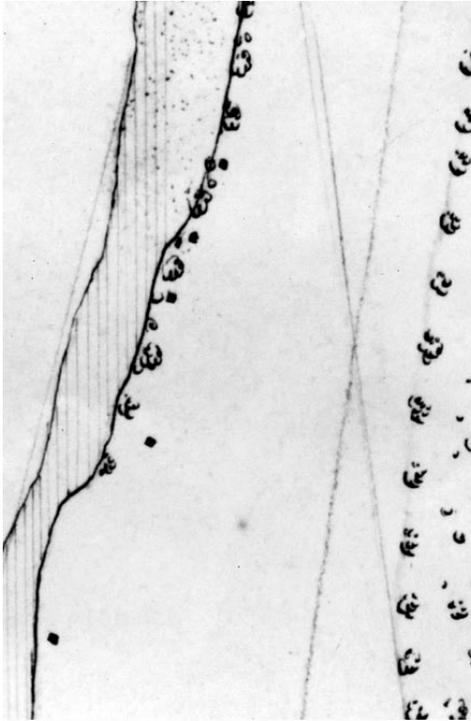


**Figure 3. Archeological Base Map of Chocolate Plantation**

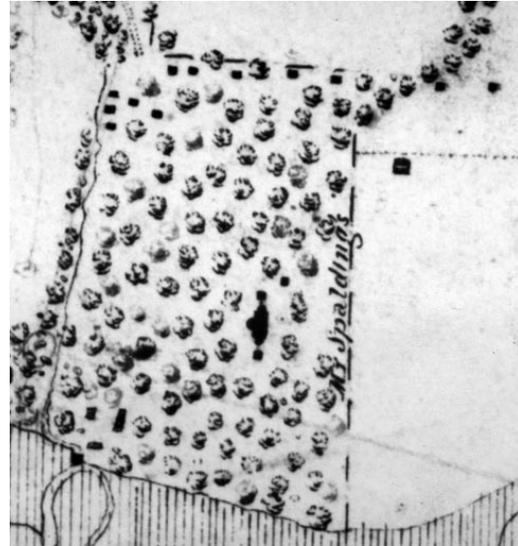
The layout of Chocolate is one variant of a formal plantation pattern found throughout the Gullah-Geechee area. As summarized by historian Mary Bullard (2003:167), “Antebellum plantation settlement . . . usually followed a pattern that ensured maximum slave surveillance, with the houses of the planter and the overseer located near the linearly arranged slave quarters.”

A *Topographical Reconnaissance of Sapelo Island, Georgia*, a large-scale (1:10,000) map completed in 1857 by H. S. DuVal for the U.S. Coastal Survey, provides detailed information about the island landscape and its cultural features. This map shows an orderly plan for Chocolate as well as the plantation structures and four slave settlements associated with Thomas Spalding on the southern half of the island. While the map otherwise seems to be accurate, the core layout of the Chocolate plantation clearly is incomplete and drawn at an exaggerated scale. The DuVal map also shows a linear arrangement of structures beginning

600m north of the core area of the plantation (Figure 4). These may represent a barn or some other support structure along with four slave cabins that extended some 500m along the marsh edge on the western side of a large field, suggesting that another group of 20 or more slaves may have been attached to the Chocolate plantation.



**Figure 4. Structures along Marsh Edge North of Chocolate in 1857**



**Figure 5. Structures at Spalding's South End Plantation in 1857**

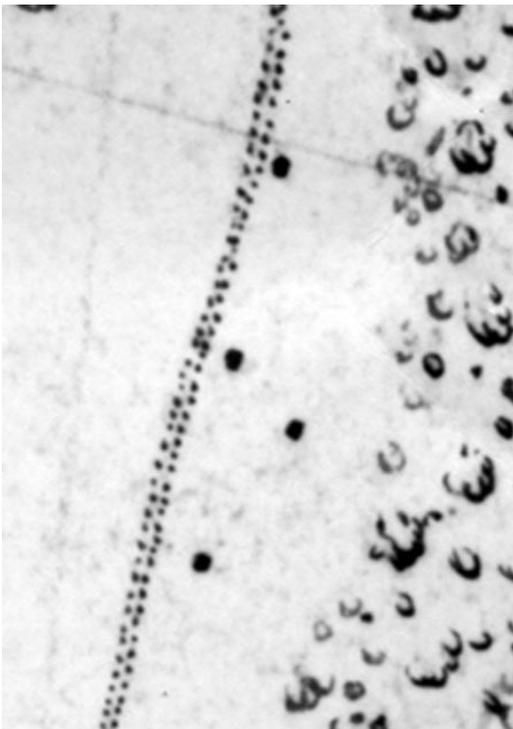
The enslaved Geechee settlements at Thomas Spalding's plantation exhibited a pattern very different than that shown at Chocolate. Spalding began to develop his plantation soon after he purchased a 4,000-acre tract in 1802. The slaves included some who perhaps accompanied his purchase of the property, others acquired through his father's estate, and some more from cargoes bound from the British West Indies and Africa (Crook 2007). Spalding's first operations on the island focused on sugar cane and the construction of his sugar works, built of tabby and consisting of a mill, boiling house, and warehouse (Crook and O'Grady 1977). Associated with these initial activities, a nearby slave settlement named Behavior was established. Over the next 10 years Spalding expanded his plantation to include construction of his residence and a complex of structures on the south end of the island. He also began planting a large agricultural field north of Behavior that became associated with a slave settlement known as Hanging Bull. Thomas Spalding continued to enlarge his land holdings and develop his plantation complex until his death in 1851. At that time, approximately 400 enslaved Geechee lived on Sapelo Island.

In 1916 an elderly Charles Spalding Wylly, who had been a frequent visitor on the island throughout his life, described the slave settlements he had observed as "styled" -- perhaps meaning that these exhibited certain special qualities. Wylly (1916:12) wrote: "Villages with

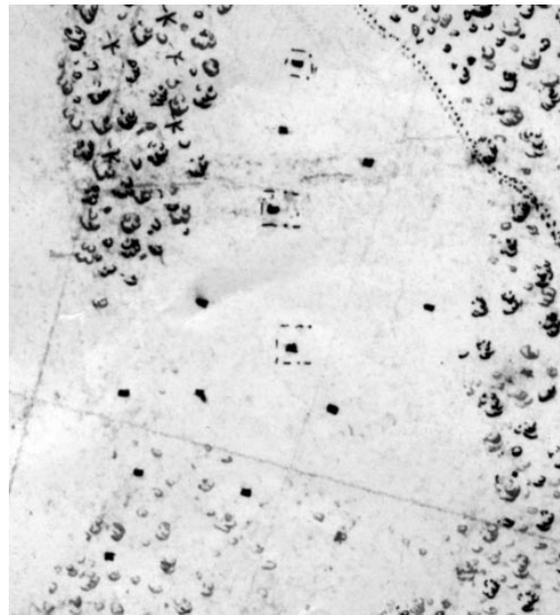
thatched roofs and walls plastered inside and out had sprung up in favorable spots; these were styled settlements, such as New Barn Creek, Behavior, Hanging Bull, and in each a head man; inappropriately called a driver, (for he seldom did) was placed in charge of probably one hundred souls. . . .”

Although this settlement was not mentioned by Wylly, the 1857 DuVal map shows apparent slave housing in three places just north of the Big House at Spalding’s south end plantation complex (Figure 5). These reflect the most formal arrangement of any slave settlement associated with Thomas Spalding. The cabins here suggest a Geechee population of perhaps 50 to 80 people divided among 13 households. A single cabin, probably the residence of a domestic slave, is located nearest the Big House. A cluster of five cabins is situated northwest of the Big House. East of these are seven cabins spaced some 50m to 60m apart in a line along the south end of a large field.

A small settlement defined by four slave cabins is shown in 1857 at New Barn Creek, which is considered a small extension of the larger Behavior settlement (Figure 6). The total resident Geechee group here may have numbered between 15 and 25 persons. Located east of Spalding’s Sugar Works in an open field known today as Bush Camp Field, three of these structures are spaced about 100m apart in a line along and just east of High Point Road. A fourth structure is located some 40m behind and southeast of the center cabin.



**Figure 6. Structures at New Barn Creek in 1857**



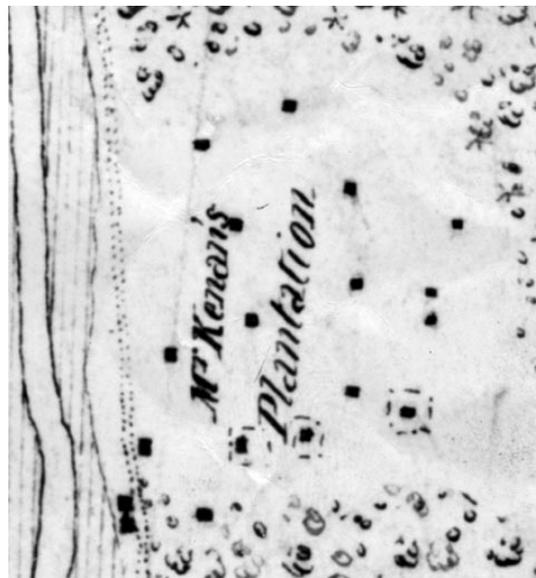
**Figure 7. Structures at Behavior in 1857**

The main settlement of Behavior is located south of New Barn Creek. The Geechee population here perhaps consisted of between 50 and 80 persons. This large settlement of 13

slave cabins spread over an area of 28ha exhibits a dispersed, but non-random pattern (Figure 7). Nearest neighbor analysis (NNI = 1.30) indicates that these are fairly regularly spaced an average of 95m apart within three very generalized rows. A gap in the pattern suggests that there were originally 14 cabins. Approximately 2ha of land surrounds each structure and three of the structures appear to be at least partially enclosed by some sort of fence.

The overall plan of Behavior is consistent with a residential strategy of broad dispersal within a predefined area, suggesting that the general boundaries for the slave settlement may have been prescribed by Spalding. Within this area, cabins were constructed in locations that provided the most contiguous acreage for each residence.

A very similar settlement layout is associated with the smaller Hanging Bull settlement, located a little more than 2km north of Behavior (Figure 8). While smaller in area its population size may have been comparable, defined by a community of between 65 and 95 enslaved Geechee. Labeled by DuVal as “Mr. Kenan’s Plantation,” Thomas Spalding had deeded this tract along with 86 slaves in 1842 to his daughter, Catherine, upon her marriage to Michael J. Kenan. The 16 cabins shown here in 1857 are dispersed over an area of approximately 12ha. Nearest neighbor analysis (NNI = 1.29) indicates that these are fairly regularly spaced an average of 56m apart, with two of the houses located very near (approximately 20m) to one another. A



**Figure 8. Structures at Hanging Bull in 1857**

gap in the overall pattern suggests that there were originally 15 cabins. Approximately .75ha of land surrounds each structure and three of the structures appear to be enclosed by some kind of fence. Like Behavior, the overall settlement plan at Hanging Bull reflects broad residential



**Figure 9. Tabby Warehouse at Hanging Bull in 1999 (view northwest)**



**Figure 10. Shell Feature #1 ; Southern End of Timbered Area at Hanging Bull.**

dispersal within a bounded area. The single structure (identified as a cabin in the nearest neighbor analysis) located along side the road could be a community building and possibly marks the location of an early Geechee church mentioned in later documents and in oral history accounts. Also shown on the 1857 map, and surviving today as a ruin, a tabby warehouse (Figure 9) associated with a dock is located along the marsh edge across High Point Road.

A brief archaeological survey at Hanging Bull was undertaken in 1993, shortly after timber had been harvested from that area. A surface collection was completed and a preliminary map of the area was drawn. Artifacts were recovered from the dirt roadbed and disturbed ground surfaces, several shell features were recorded (Figure 10), and the location of an old artesian well was mapped. The limited number of dateable artifacts suggests a broad 19th century association for the site, as well as a late prehistoric period occupation (Table 1). A few fragments of tabby mortar also were recovered that could be architectural evidence of slave cabins at the site. However, an overlay of the DuVal map fails to reveal any clear relationship between the 1857 cabins and the recorded surface remains (Figure 11).

**Table 1  
Hanging Bull – Materials Represented from Surface Collection**

Material	Roadbed	Surface	F-1	F-2	F-3	F-4	F-5	F-6	F-7	Totals
Oyster Shell			+	+	+	+	+	+	+	
Tabby Mortar		+	+							
Whiteware	4	8			1	1				14
Porcelain					1					1
Stoneware	1									1
Yellow Ware	1									1
Kaolin Pipe Bowl	1									1
Iron Spike						1				1
Flat Glass	2	2								4
Bottle Glass	2	2			4					8
Brick Fragment		1								1
V Cents Coin (1897)	1									1
Sherd (Irene)	2	4								6
Chert Flake			1							1

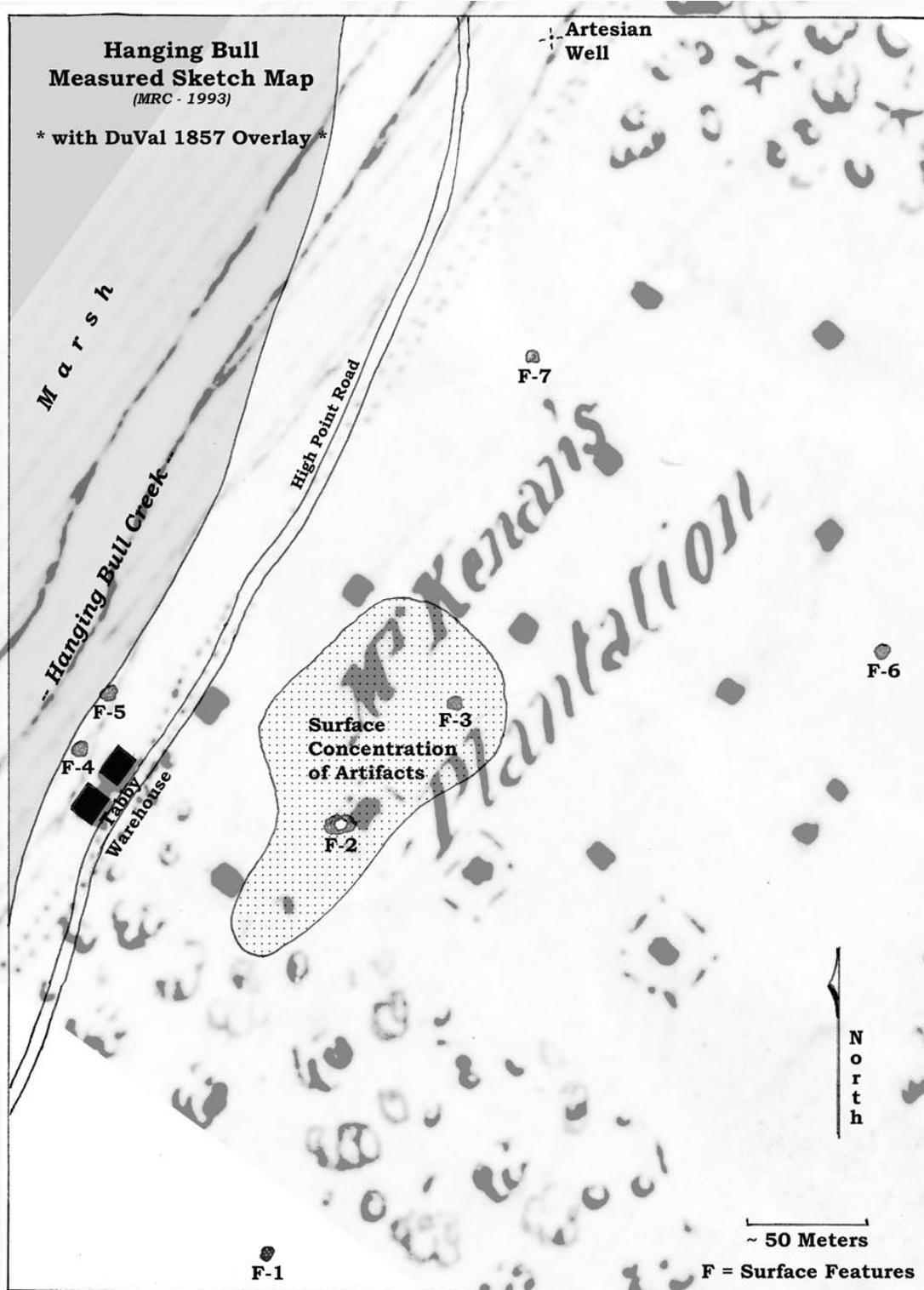


Figure 11. Archaeological Map of Hanging Bull with 1857 Overlay Map

## Early Geechee Domestic Architecture

The archaeological remains of two cabins, Cabin No. 1 at Behavior and Cabin No. 2 at New Barn Creek, were located and excavated as part of the Sapelo Island Geechee Project. Overlaying DuVal's map on a modern aerial photograph indicates a close relationship between the archaeological cabins and two of the structures recorded in 1857 (Figure 12). Cabin No. 1 is at or very near the location of a structure in the south-central section of Behavior and Cabin No. 2 is at or very near the southern-most structure at New Barn Creek. Figure 13 shows the Behavior and New Barn Creek settlements as depicted on the 1857 DuVal map, appended to indicate the excavated cabins, the possible location of a missing cabin, and support structures for the plantation.



**Figure 12. Cabins #1 and #2 in Relation to DuVal 1857 Map (Google Earth)**

The cabin at Behavior originally was detected through a systematic ground survey of the entire Behavior area. Ground-surface exposure was minimal and only one cabin site was recognized in the wooded area. It was marked by a low pile of oyster shells containing tabby mortar fragments and a few bricks (Figure 14).

Cabin No. 1 was excavated over a seven-day period in 1994 and 1997. The excavation exposed the wall-ruddle outline of a small structure and an area to the west and north of that structure (Figures 15 and 16). The architectural details revealed a cabin measuring approximately 2.3m long by 1.7m wide, with its long axis oriented from northwest to southeast. A narrow entrance to the cabin appears to have been located in the western corner of the structure; however, a doorway along the poorly defined northeastern wall of the structure cannot be ruled out. The floor of the cabin was distinguished by a layer of dense oyster shell within a

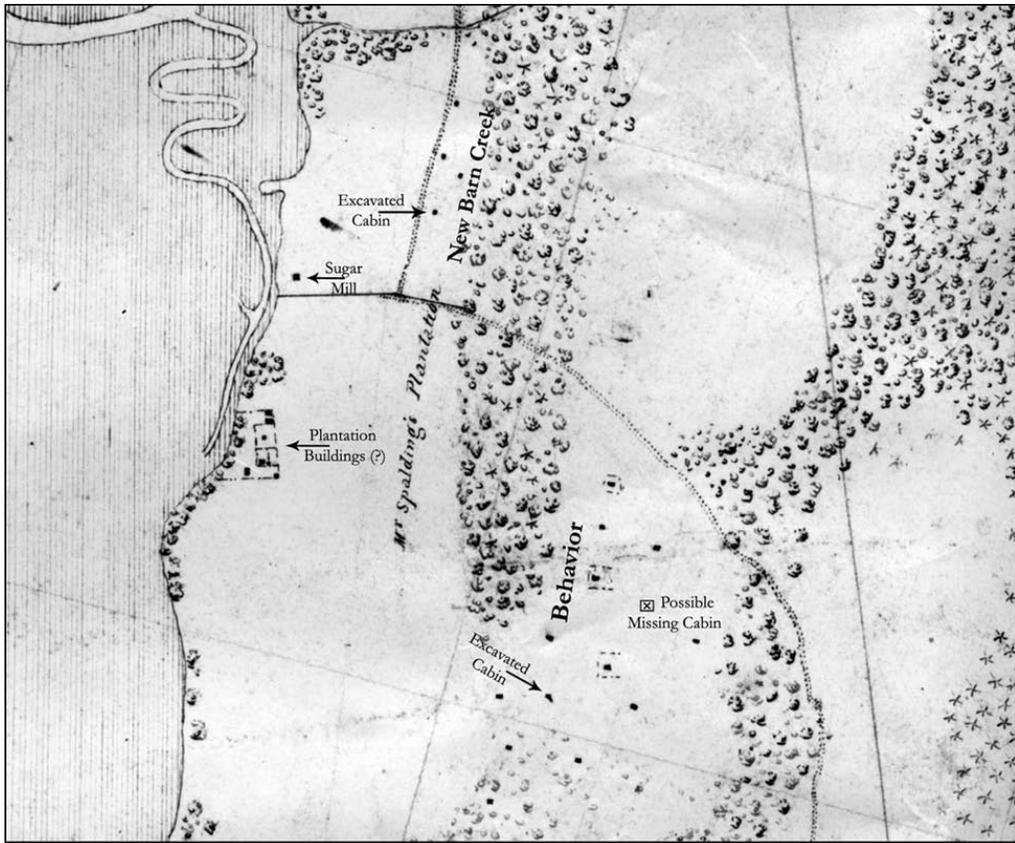
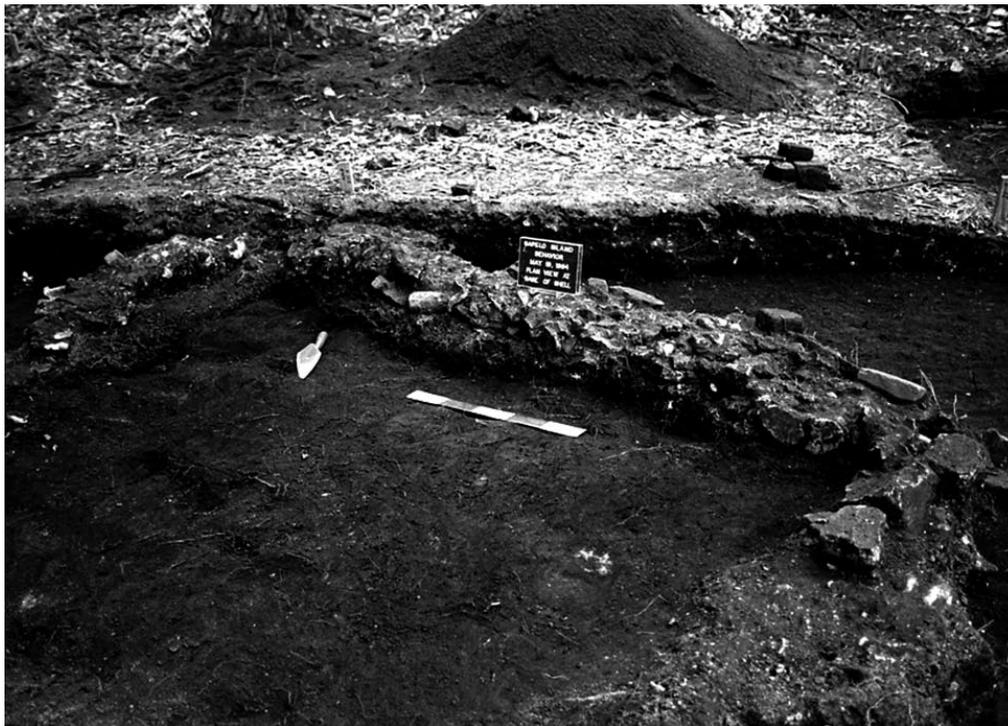


Figure 13. Behavior and New Barn Creek in 1857, Appended



Figure 14. Cabin #1 at Behavior Prior to Excavation

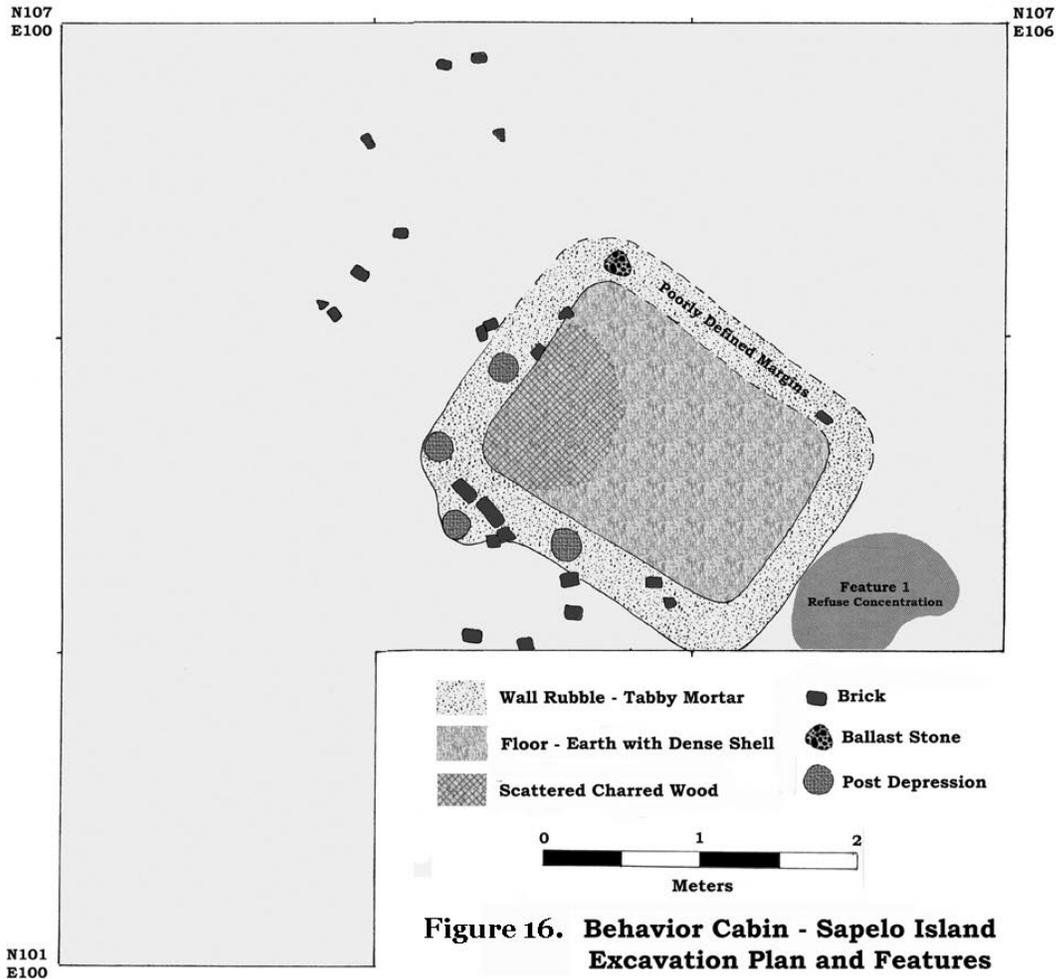
rich humic sand matrix. Scattered charred wood fragments littered the floor within the western corner of the cabin, just inside what may have been the corner doorway.



**Figure 15. Cabin #1 Excavation, showing Wall Rubble (view south)**

The wall rubble was distinctive. It was composed of broken pieces of tabby mortar, with occasional bricks and a ballast stone. The tabby mortar fragments exhibited smoothly finished sides and opposite sides bearing the deep impressions of grape vine (Figure 17). These are evidence that the walls of Cabin No. 1 were constructed using a wattle and daub technique. In this case the daub was made of tabby mortar -- a hard mixture of crushed oyster shell, lime (from burned shell), and sand. The walls were roughly 15cm thick, as suggested by the thickness of the daub and assuming that both interior and exterior wall surfaces were finished.

The wall foundation of the cabin was specially prepared. No post holes were evident. However, shallow depressions were observed at several points along the wall immediately beneath a poured tabby foundation. Possibly created within a form and securing into position the wall posts, this foundation was defined by a thin layer of oyster shells with occasional bricks and fragments that was covered with about 10cm of tabby mortar. The corners of the structure were rounded rather than squared. Grape vines, usually about 2cm in diameter, were interwoven around the wall posts, the lower-most course of vines leaving impressions within the top surface of the wall foundation. Tabby mortar then was applied to the vine framework and exposed surfaces were smoothly finished. The roof material probably was of thatch, although direct evidence of this is lacking.



The mean-ceramic date of material from the excavation is 1851.58 (Table 2). However, most of the pearlware was associated with the cabin itself and its mean-ceramic date would be some 20 years earlier. Much of the whiteware was associated with excavation units to the north of the cabin and that, along with numerous cut nails and sheet metal fragments, indicates that a later frame structure was located in the immediate vicinity.

Other artifacts (see Figure 18 for examples) from within and around Cabin No. 1 included kaolin pipe stems and bowl fragments, gun flints and lead shot, an axe, a hoe, a hammer head, a two-prong fork, buttons of shell, wood, glass, and brass, a small hair brooch (glass with a painted eight-point star), bottle-glass fragments, small blue faceted glass beads, and two Indian head pennies (dated 1861 and 1872).



**Figure 17. Tabby Daub from Cabin #1. Samples Showing Smoothly Finished Surface and Vine Impressions. Example of Local Grape Vine, Lower Right.**

Faunal remains were diverse and relatively well preserved. Identified species included rabbit (*Sylvilagus aquaticus* and *Sylvilagus floridanus*), raccoon (*Procyon lotor*), white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), pig (*Sus scrofa*), cow (*Bos taurus*), chicken (*Gallus gallus*), muscovy duck (*Cairina moschata*), diamondback terrapin (*Malaclemys terrapin*), hardhead catfish (*Arius felis*), and American oyster (*Crassostrea virginica*). A single specimen of *Phasianidae* (Pheasant, Quail, and Partridge) was identified.

Also worthy of note were the numerous small frog/toad (Anura) bones recovered exclusively from the cabin. Of the 149 bones identified (including 29 specimens more specifically identifiable as toads (*Buffo* sp.)), two exhibited clear signs of healing after being broken. These may be indirect, if somewhat novel, evidence of a thatched roof for the cabin. The plant materials used for thatching provide a rich haven for large numbers of insects, and these in turn offer an attractive food source for frogs and small reptiles.

Cabin No. 2 was detected at the nearby New Barn Creek settlement. Figure 19 is an aerial view of the site showing the excavation area, looking west towards Spalding's Sugar Works.

**Table 2**  
**Mean Ceramic Date – Excavation Data from Behavior**

Type Number	Ceramic Type	Date Range	Median Date	Sherd Count	Product
	<b>Stoneware</b>				
45	Salt Glazed, Grey (Westerwald)	1700-1775	1738	2	3476
*	Ginger Beer Bottle	1835-1900	1868	1	1868
	<b>Earthenware</b>				
2	Whiteware	1820-1900+	1860	75	139,500
20	Pearlware, Plain	1780-1830	1805	1	1805
13	Pearlware, Annular	1790-1820	1805	1	1805
19	Pearlware, Edged (Blue)	1780-1830	1805	2	3610
6	Pearlware, Hand Painted (Blue)	1780-1820	1800	2	3600
11	Pearlware, Transfer Printed	1795-1840	1818	5	9090
*	Yellow Ware	1840-1900+	1870	2	3740
	<b>Totals</b>			91	168,494

\* Data from Florida Museum of Natural History, *Historical Archaeology Digital Type Collection*  
Type Numbers refer to South (1977:Table 31)

**Mean Ceramic Date = 1851.58** (Product Total divided by Sherd Count Total)



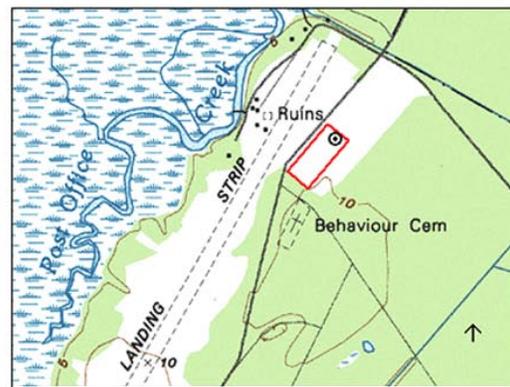
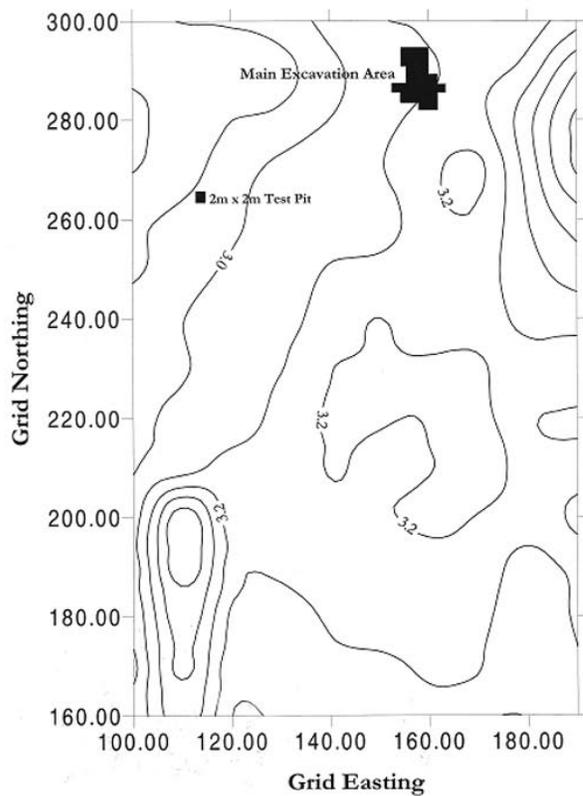
**Figure 18. Sample of Artifacts from Cabin #1 Excavation. Ceramics, Pipe Stems and Bowls, Gun Flints, Tools, Buttons, Blue Bead, and Brooch.**

Field work at New Barn Creek was carried out over a 14-day period during the summer of 1999. The southern end of the field, which had been tilled and planted as a feed-plot for wildlife, was mapped and a controlled surface collection was completed. Figure 20 shows the

completed topographic map with contours at 10cm intervals, as well as an aerial view and USGS topographic map of the site area.

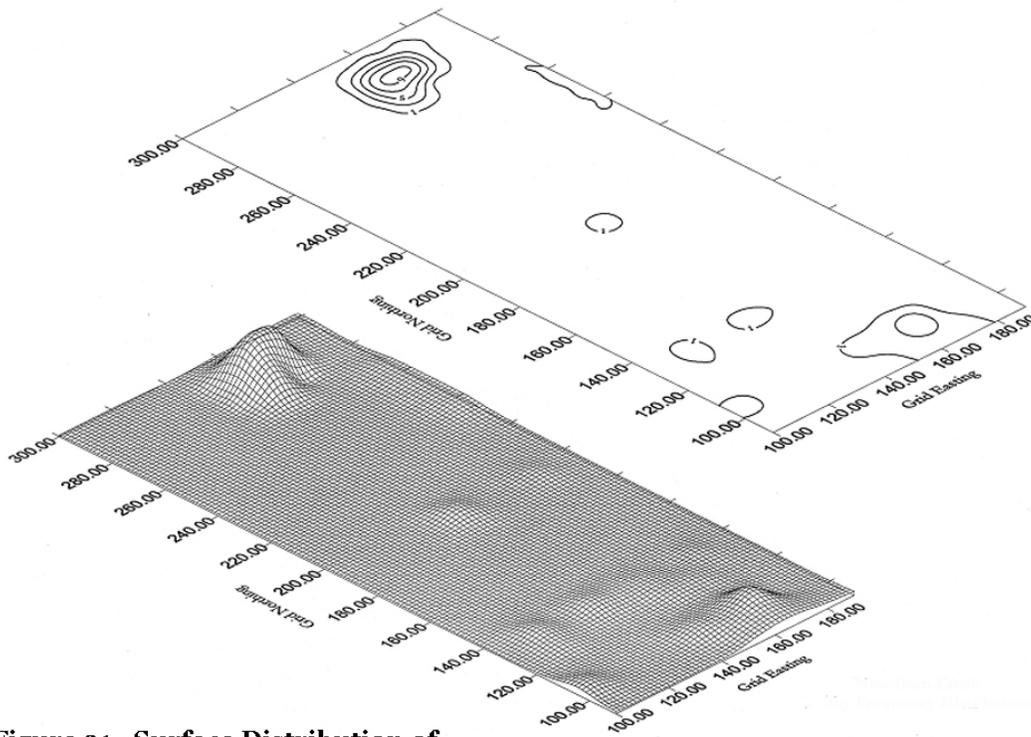


**Figure 19. New Barn Creek, Excavation Shown in Foreground. View West.**

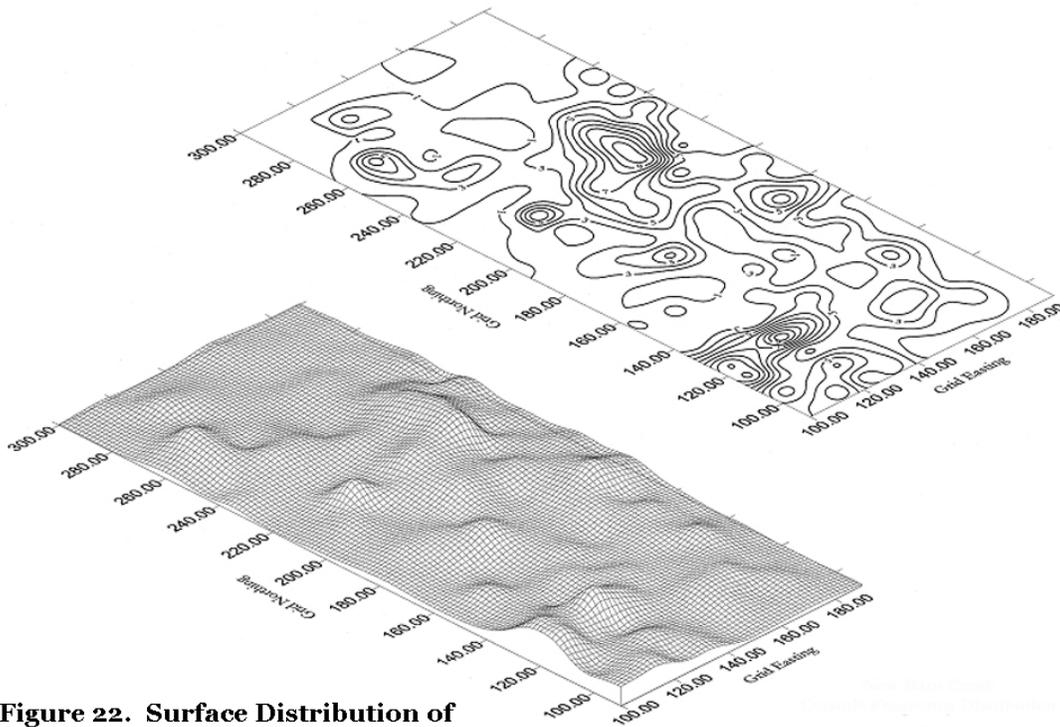


**Figure 20. Archaeological Base Map and Views of New Barn Creek**

Classes of artifacts from the surface collection were plotted, and both contour and three-dimensional relief maps were created to show surface trends. A prominent concentration of



**Figure 21. Surface Distribution of Tabby Mortar Fragments at New Barn Creek**



**Figure 22. Surface Distribution of Ceramic Sherds at New Barn Creek**

tabby mortar fragments was evident in the northern end of the mapped section of the field (Figure 21). Excavation focused on this area and Cabin No. 2 was discovered here. Figure 22 shows the distribution of all ceramics recovered during the controlled surface collection. It is interesting to note that while there are several surface concentrations of ceramic sherds, none occurs in the vicinity of the cabin. The Mean Ceramic Date (Table 3) derived from the surface collection is 1838.51, indicating a solid antebellum association.

**Table 3**  
**Mean Ceramic Date – Surface Collection Data from New Barn Creek**

Type Number	Ceramic Type	Date Range	Median Date	Sherd Count	Product
	<b>Porcelain</b>				
*	Plain (Bone China)	1830-1900*	1865	6	11,190
	<b>Stoneware</b>				
45	Salt Glazed, Grey (Westerwald)	1700-1775	1738	10	17,380
53	Salt Glazed, Brown	1690-1775	1733	6	10,398
	<b>Earthenware</b>				
2	Whiteware	1820-1900+	1860	297	552,420
20	Pearlware, Plain	1780-1830	1805	65	117,325
13	Pearlware, Annular	1790-1820	1805	17	30,685
19	Pearlware, Edged (Blue, Green)	1780-1830	1805	12	21,660
17	Pearlware, Hand Painted	1780-1820	1800	5	9,000
12	Pearlware, Underglaze Polychrome	1795-1815	1805	4	7,220
11	Pearlware, Transfer Printed	1795-1840	1818	14	25,452
*	Pearlware, Sponged (Blue)	1770-1830*	1800	1	1,800
15	Creamware, Plain (Lighter Yellow)	1775-1820	1798	20	35,960
25	Creamware, Plain (Deeper Yellow)	1762-1780	1771	3	5,313
45	Delft, Plain	1700-1800	1750	1	1,750
	<b>Totals</b>			461	847,553

\*Data from Florida Museum of Natural History, *Historical Archaeology Digital Type Collection*  
Type Numbers refer to South (1977:Table 31)

**Mean Ceramic Date = 1838.51** (Product Total divided by Sherd Count Total)

Cabin No. 2 at New Barn Creek was somewhat larger, but otherwise similar to Cabin No. 1 at Behavior. Figure 23 shows the outlined wall position of the cabin, viewed to the south. Note the dark-stained soil leading up to and through the doorway located midway along the northern wall of the cabin.

The excavation plan of the cabin, with grid north at the top, shows the general outline and doorway position (Figure 24). The cabin measured about 4.7m long and 2.5m wide, with a northeasterly facing doorway located midway along one of its long walls. Individual post holes are shown along the walls -- however, as will be explained below, these apparently were not entirely original to Cabin No. 2. A large section of tabby mortar, finished side down with prominent vine impressions evident on its upper exposed surface, was encountered just outside the cabin. Its placement suggests a fallen segment that originally was part of the outer wall near the corner of Cabin No. 2. Numerous other tabby daub fragments with grape-vine wattle



Figure 23. Wall Outline of Cabin #2 at New Barn Creek, View to the South

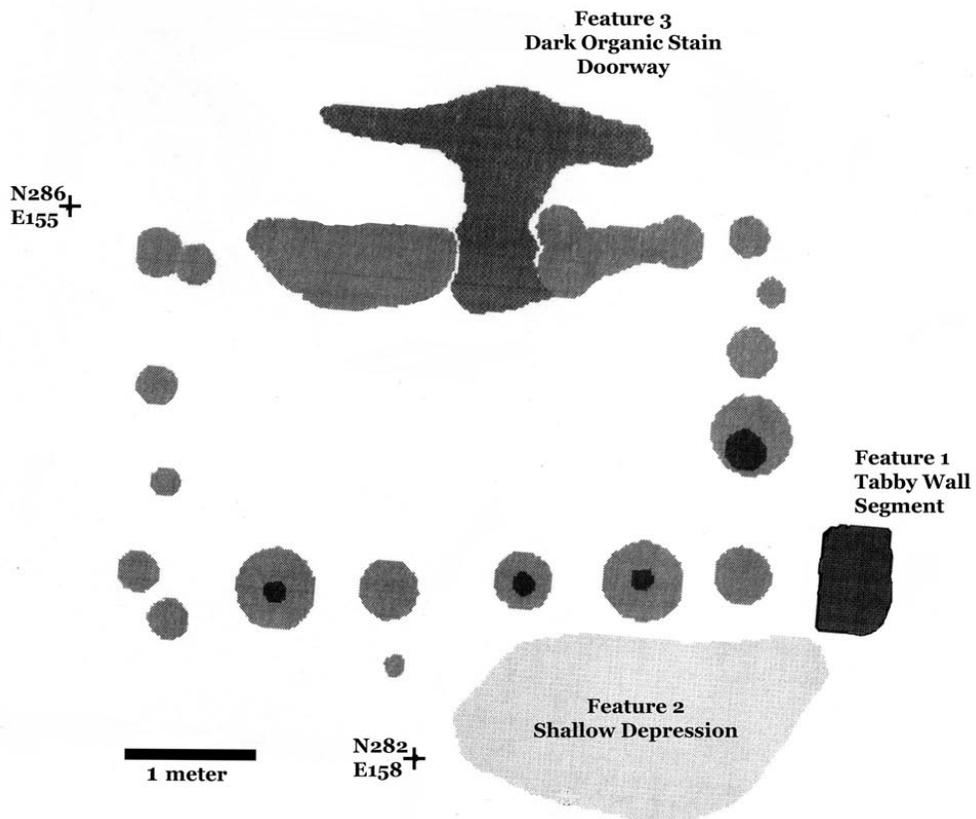


Figure 24. Excavated Plan of Cabin #2  
Showing Post Holes, Post Positions, Doorway Stain, and Features

impressions were present within and around the cabin (Figure 25). These were like those found at Cabin No. 1. The only remarkable difference was that a thick white-wash applied to the smoothly finished surface was preserved on some of the Cabin No. 2 fragments.

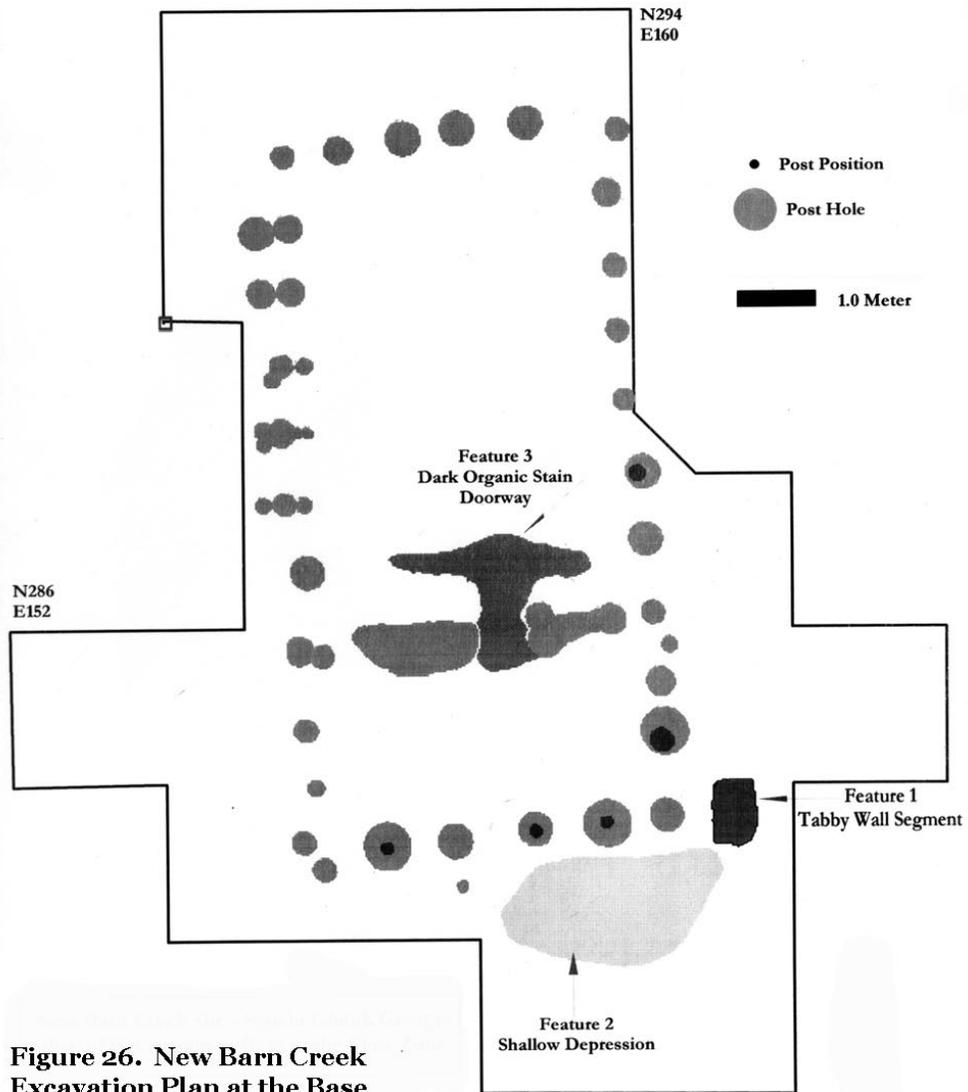
Figure 26 shows the outline of a second, larger structure detected in the excavation at New Barn Creek. The footprint of this building was marked by regularly spaced post holes that extended 25-50cm into the subsoil. This structure measured 4.7m wide by 9.5m long, and was oriented parallel to nearby High Point Road.

The southern end of this structure was constructed within the footprint of the earlier and smaller wattle and tabby daub cabin. The fill of the post holes in that part of the new structure contained numerous tabby daub fragments, indicating that the walls of the earlier cabin had deteriorated or were razed prior to the construction of the new building.

The new building appears to have been a frame structure erected on pilings. This construction technique elevated the structure above the remains of the previous cabin, preserving the doorway stain and some other essential features. An entrance to the new frame structure is indicated by a second, parallel set of postholes at the northern end of the western wall. These suggest the position of a step or narrow stoop leading to the front door of the house.



**Figure 25. Samples of Tabby Mortar from Cabin #2 at New Barn Creek**



**Figure 26. New Barn Creek  
Excavation Plan at the Base  
of the Plow Zone**

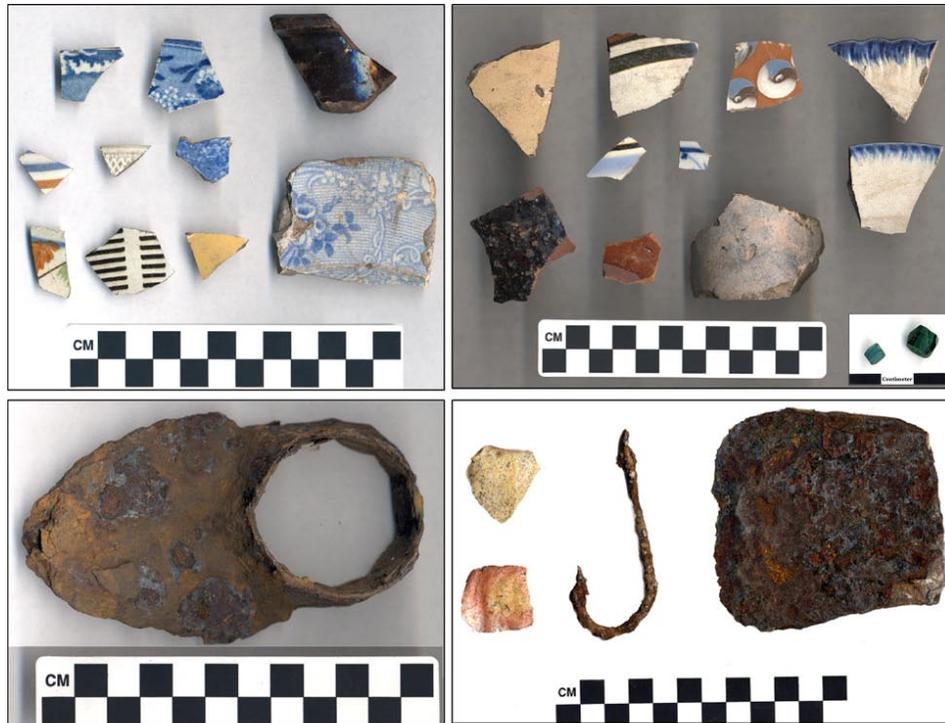


Figure 27. Sample of Artifacts from Cabin #2 Excavation. Ceramics, Blue and Green Beads, Chert Flakes, Fish Hook, Axe Bit, and Hoe.

**Table 4**  
**Mean Ceramic Date – Excavation Data from New Barn Creek**

Type Number	Ceramic Type	Date Range	Median Date	Sherd Count	Product
	<b>Stoneware</b>				
45	Salt Glazed, Grey (Westerwald)	1700-1775	1738	3	5,214
53	Salt Glazed, Brown	1690-1775	1733	8	13,864
	<b>Earthenware</b>				
2	Whiteware	1820-1900+	1860	87	161,820
20	Pearlware, Plain	1780-1830	1805	14	25,270
9	Pearlware, Embossed	1800-1820	1810	2	3,620
13	Pearlware, Annular	1790-1820	1805	3	5,415
19	Pearlware, Edged (Blue, Green)	1780-1830	1805	1	1,805
6	Pearlware, Hand Painted	1780-1820	1800	1	1,800
11	Pearlware, Transfer Printed	1795-1840	1818	4	7,272
*	Pearlware, Sponged (Blue)	1770-1830*	1800	4	7,200
15	Creamware, Plain (Lighter Yellow)	1775-1820	1798	14	25,172
14	Creamware, Annular (Orange, Brown)	1780-1815	1798	1	1,798
	<b>Totals</b>			142	260,250

\* Data from Florida Museum of Natural History, *Historical Archaeology Digital Type Collection*  
Type Numbers refer to South (1977:Table 31)

**Mean Ceramic Date = 1832.75** (Product Total divided by Sherd Count Total)

The Mean Ceramic Date (Table 4) derived from the excavated area at New Barn Creek is 1832.75, only a few years earlier than that calculated for the surface collection. Ceramics were dominated by whiteware, but significant amounts of pearlware along with some creamware and salt-glazed stoneware were present. Other artifacts encountered from the excavation (see Figure 27 for examples) included kaolin pipe stem and bowl fragments, small blue and green faceted glass beads, a large fish hook, axe and hoe fragments, cut nails and building hardware, cast iron and sheet metal fragments, bricks and fragments, glass and metal buttons, bottle glass, slate and chert flakes, and a few ballast stones. Faunal remains were poorly preserved and limited to a few bone fragments from white-tailed deer, an unidentified small mammal, rodent, and catfish.

## **Discussion**

The archaeological and cartographic evidence of slave settlements on Sapelo Island provides insights into the creation and development of Geechee as a creole culture. Their living space was organized in two basically different forms, one created by the plantation owners and the other by the slaves themselves. In both situations, labor expectations under the task system provided the early Geechee the time and opportunity to develop and maintain their own distinctive culture once their plantation tasks had been completed.

Formally organized settlements were associated with Chocolate and Spalding's south end plantation. Slave quarters here were laid out and built under the direction of the plantation owners. Their proximity to the Big House afforded the plantation owners a full opportunity, whether exercised or not, for surveillance and overt control. However, even with these constraints, the enslaved Geechee were able to construct an economic and social life of their own. While conditions would have varied from one plantation to another, a good example of early Geechee life within a formally organized settlement is provided in Frederick Law Olmsted's 1853 description (Olmsted 1904:68) of Richard James Arnold's plantation on the mainland along the Ogeechee River north of Sapelo Island. Duplex slave cabins here faced each side of a street, or common, that was 200 feet wide. The cabins in each row were spaced 200 feet apart. In the rear of each cabin were half-acre garden plots, one per family, and between adjacent cabins were penned areas containing fowl, nesting chickens, and sows with pigs. Fowl also ranged in the street and swine in the woods around the settlement, each swine bearing the distinctive markings of its owner.

An infrastructure even more favorable for creolization existed on Sapelo Island in those communities created by the slaves themselves, such as at Hanging Bull and Behavior. The organization and layout of these settlements, which perhaps should be more properly called early Geechee villages, provided each household ample space for an economic and social life out of sight and away from their labors as slaves. A very considerable, but by no means absolute, degree of autonomy is indicated by their settlement plan.

The food remains associated with the Behavior cabin indicate that a diverse range of resources were consumed by its residents beyond any provisions they may have been provided by Thomas Spalding. These remains point to hunting wild game (at least in part with firearms), fishing, collecting oysters, raising chickens and other fowl, pigs, and cattle. Without a doubt, their diet also included a variety of garden produce not preserved in the archaeological record.

The cabin architecture is clear archaeological evidence of, and an appropriate metaphor for, the creolization process that would have been occurring in language and all other aspects of a developing Geechee culture. The wattle and tabby daub construction technique was the creative blending of African and Euro American techniques. On a general level the technology existed in Geechee knowledge, in their individual and collective memories of African dwellings. However their understanding of tabby as a building material was acquired on Sapelo Island where Thomas Spalding used it widely, including at the nearby Sugar Works. Construction of these plantation structures would have been included among their tasks as slaves. Knowing how to make tabby transferred nicely to construction of their own small cabins, where the strong and durable material replaced mud or clay and was applied to a wattle framework made of locally available grape vines. Although not clearly evident, the roof likely was thatched -- either palmetto fronds or marsh grasses would have provided suitable materials. The finished cabins were essentially African huts creatively modified for life on a Georgia coastal plantation (Figure 28). Also probably consistent with common African usage, their small cabins would have served primarily as shelter, with cooking and many other household activities taking place in the yard.

The wattle and tabby daub cabins may have persisted at Behavior and New Barn Creek (and possibly also at Hanging Bull) well into the 19th century. Eventually they were replaced with frame houses elevated on wooden piers. This architectural form appears to have been uniformly common after emancipation and throughout much of the 20th century in Geechee communities on Sapelo Island.



**Figure 28. Artistic Rendering of Early Geechee Wattle and Tabby Daub Hut**

## Comments

To revisit a fundamental point (i.e., Mintz and Price), it may be said that the enslaved Geechee of Sapelo Island became a *community* and began to share a *culture* within the time and the space they themselves created. The task system provided time apart from their labors as slaves and their settlements, both formally organized and self-structured, provided the space. While restricted by constraints of the power differential imposed by their bondage, the slaves nevertheless were able to create and maintain a level of economic and social self sufficiency.

The material remains of enslaved Geechee have been investigated, but not culturally identified, since the earliest archaeological studies of slavery at plantation sites along the coast. Charles Fairbank's 1968 excavation in slave quarters at the Kingsley Plantation on Ft. George Island in northeast Florida (Fairbanks 1972) and at a slave cabin on Stafford's Rayfield Plantation on Cumberland Island, Georgia (Ascher and Fairbanks 1971) contributed very much to a better understanding of the conditions of slavery from the slaves' point of view. These slaves were early Geechee.

As Fairbanks noted (1984:10) in his defining review of Plantation Archaeology, discussing advances that had been made since his research at the Kingsley Plantation, "there is a strong and vigorous Afro-American tradition in America today. Of major interest is the question of when and how this cultural heritage developed." Most of the research considered by Fairbanks in 1984 had been undertaken by him and his students at sites along the Atlantic coast of the southeastern United States. His statement, which remains true, could be sharpened to bring its clear Gullah-Geechee relevance into focus.

Gullah-Geechee archaeology provides an opportunity to explore and understand the processes involved in the making of a new cultural system by enslaved Africans and their descendents at plantations along the southern Atlantic coast. Involuntarily moved from their homelands and placed into bondage with others of varying degrees of cultural similarity, the creole culture they created successfully coped with the material and organizational problems of their new lives. Guided by an ethnographic perspective, Gullah-Geechee archaeology can contribute to a framework that, as suggested by Theresa Singleton (1995:134), "draws on the critical factors that went into shaping African-American cultural identities in specific historical and social settings . . . including the creation of new cultural forms."

Major issues of ethnogenesis and creolization, as well as other contemporary themes in African American archaeology (such as domination and resistance, gender, agency, identity, and racism), can be approached within the specific framework of Gullah-Geechee archaeology. The archaeological significance of Gullah and Geechee in some measure has begun to be recognized, primarily for ethnographic analogy and the interpretation of certain classes of artifacts (Brown 2004; Ferguson 1992, 2007). However, archaeology also can provide the new information required to expand ethnographic particulars and general anthropological knowledge. It can effectively bridge past with present as well, contributing in informed ways to the current social and political actions of living Gullah and Geechee peoples -- including their efforts to protect and define their culture through an almost classic revitalization movement.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the deep interest expressed by the people of Hog Hammock in preserving their heritage and for their continuing support of my research efforts. Particular thanks go to Cornelia Bailey, Frank Bailey, and William Banks for their help on so many occasions. Appreciation also is extended to the staff of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources on Sapelo Island, particularly to Mike Sellers and Dorset Hurley, who helped facilitate Sapelo Island Geechee Project. Special thanks to David Freedman for the aerial photograph of New Barn Creek (Figure 19). A debt of gratitude is due as well to the many undergraduate students at the University of West Georgia who participated in the archaeological field schools and worked so diligently in the field and in the laboratory. A special thanks also to Matthew Compton (University of Georgia, under the guidance of Elizabeth Reitz) for his careful analysis of the faunal remains from the Behavior excavation.

## Notes

\* The author is Professor of Anthropology Emeritus at the University of West Georgia and now lives on St. Simons Island, Georgia ([rcrook@westga.edu](mailto:rcrook@westga.edu)). A brief version of this paper was presented in January 2008 at the annual meeting of the Society for Historical Archaeology in Albuquerque, New Mexico. The archaeological collections discussed here are curated (Accession Number 50) at the Antonio J. Waring, Jr. Archaeological Laboratory at the University of West Georgia.

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