

UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE AT CHATTANOOGA

Searching for Geechee Footprints: Plantation Research On Ossabaw Island, Georgia

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1/6/2012



A paper presented at the 2012 Annual Meetings of the Society for Historical
Archaeology Baltimore, Maryland

ABSTRACT: According to documentary records, the North End Plantation on Ossabaw Island, Georgia (9CH1062) has been occupied for over two and a half centuries. Archaeological testing and GPR survey in 2005 and 2007 demonstrated the substantial archaeological potential of the site's various plantation occupations. However, basic spatial, temporal, and functional parameters at the North End have not been fully established. By focusing on the Geechee components, a 2011 archaeological survey resulted in an overall model of the site's structure through time. Besides discussing the survey results, this paper examines the efficacy of the survey strategy used for identifying plantation occupations on Ossabaw and other coastal Georgia sites.

This paper is in two parts: I first give an overview of a recent survey of a plantation site on Ossabaw Island, Georgia, and then I make a methodological argument for identifying slave components at plantation sites in general.

Ossabaw Island is one of a series of Pleistocene/Holocene barrier islands on the Georgia coast (Figure 1). These islands all share similar soil and climate characteristics that, with the application of extensive slave labor, made them ideal for the production of long staple cotton and other crops (Stewart 1996:90-96); by the early 19th century they all had plantations. The first major planter on Ossabaw was John Morel, who bought the island in 1763 and soon established a successful plantation on the North End (Elliot 2007:17). Morel's slaves originally grew and processed mostly indigo, but also cotton, livestock, and timber, and engaged in maritime vessel construction. Although lucrative, indigo production was a complex, messy and labor-intensive affair. While Katz-Hyman and Rice (2010:287) contend that its production "promised to improve the working conditions of slaves" because it occurred on dry land instead of in marshes (where rice fields were constructed), such was not the case. The noxious fumes associated with indigo processing were in reality lethal to the laborers. An early 19th century account of the production process stated: "...and such is the effect of the indigo upon the lungs of the laborers, that they never live over seven years" (Roberts 2001:28). As successful indigo planters, Morel and his oldest son joined the Sons of Liberty during the Revolutionary War, which drew the unwanted attention of British forces who eventually raided the plantation in 1782. A "new vessel on the stocks, nearly finished," along with 30 slaves and 2000 pounds of indigo were lost (Martin 1917:335). Morel's main house may have been damaged or destroyed during this raid.

After the Morel senior's death in 1776, little specific information on the North End plantation appears in the documentary record. Presumably it rebounded under his son's management after the British attack, because an 1812 inventory listed 40 slaves at the North End, while the 1830, 1840, and 1850 US census lists 59, 58 and 63 enslaved persons at the plantation,

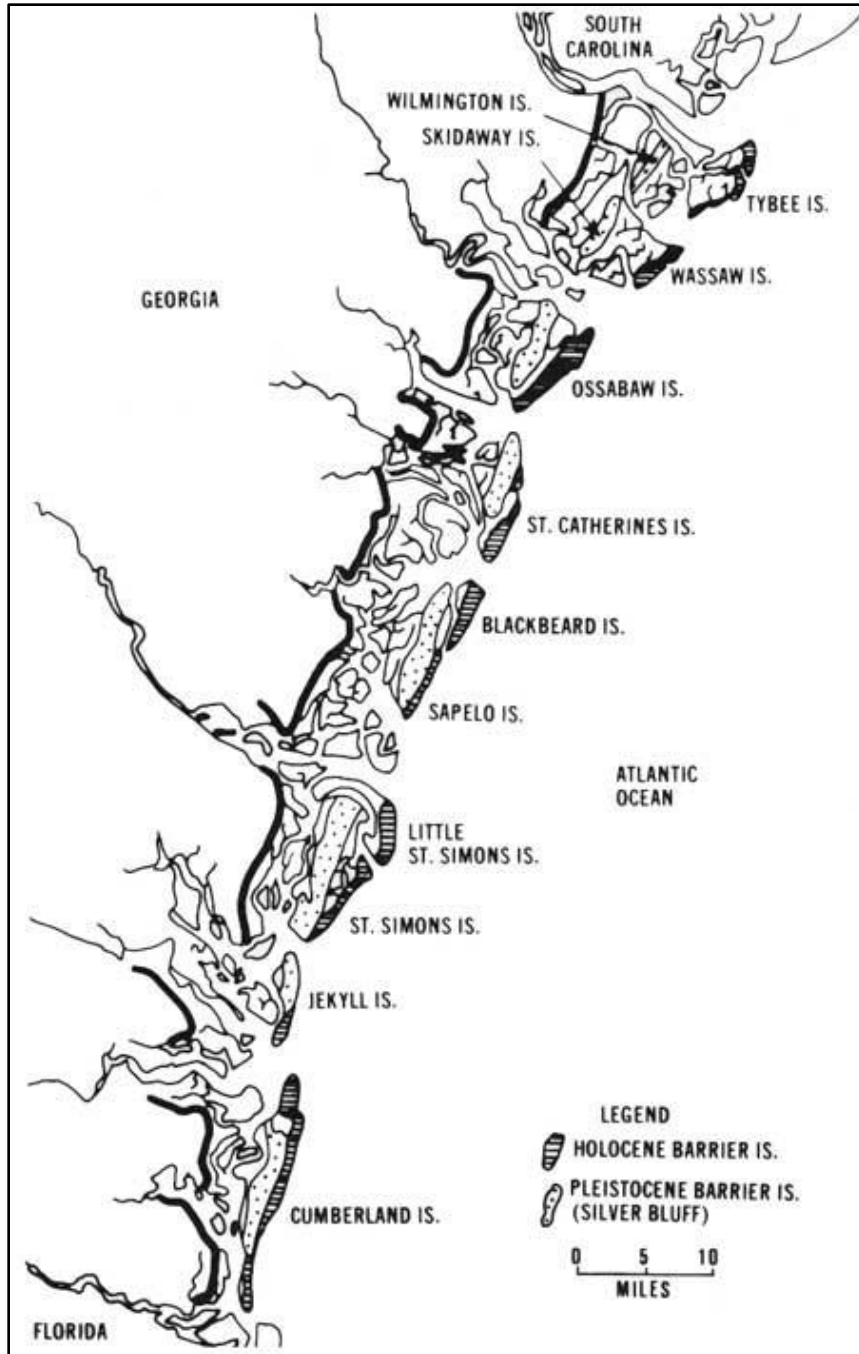


Figure 1. Coastal Georgia Barrier Islands.

respectively. A section of the 1910 nautical chart for Ossabaw Sound (Figure 2) presumably shows a row of nine former slave cabins northwest of the presumed main house, which is approached from the west by the main road. It is unknown if this main house was associated with either Morel. An earlier nautical chart from 1860 shows essentially the same layout.

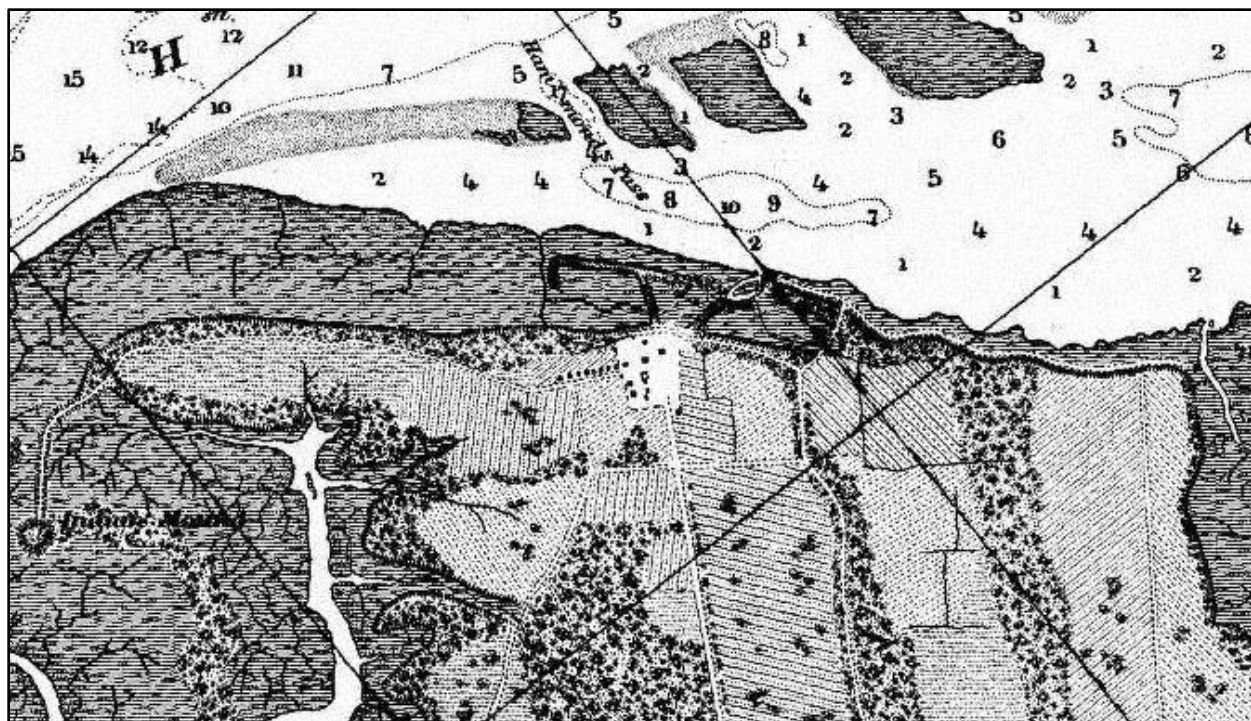


Figure 2. The North End Plantation in 1910. From a "Nautical Chart of Ossabaw Sound."

Unfortunately, very little is known about the Ossabaw Geechee in the post-Emancipation period. By December of 1865 an estimated 78 Freedmen were living on the island, with at least one family at the North End. However, when the Freedman's Bureau land grants were rescinded the next year, the property reverted back to the Morel family.

Many of the Freedmen who inhabited Ossabaw Island lived there for several decades following the Civil War as tenants or sometimes as squatters. The population of the island in the 1880 census numbered 180 persons and most, if not all, were of African-American descent. The scarcity of whites allowed the Geechee residents to live relatively unmolested lives, although their numbers declined through time. At least one Geechee church existed on Ossabaw by the 1870s. With a congregation of 68 souls, the Hinder Me Not Baptist Church was relocated to the mainland at Pin Point sometime before 1900. Its original location on Ossabaw is unknown. Between 1881 and 1898, when major hurricanes ravaged the coast, most inhabitants moved to the mainland. The few who remained were primarily in the employ of the Island's absentee landowners.

A succession of white landowners purchased the Island after the Civil War. Beginning in the 1890s the North End served as a hunting club for wealthy Northern owners. In 1924 the Torrey family purchased the island, and in 1978 it was sold to the state of Georgia as a heritage

preserve. Ossabaw Island now is owned and managed by the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, aided by the Ossabaw Foundation, a 501-c-3 organization that promotes island education and research. Both of these entities sponsored the UTC research reported here. Today less than a half dozen full-time residents live on the Island.

In 2005 and 2006 Dan Elliot of the LAMAR Institute carried out survey and testing at the North End Plantation. Concentrating largely on the excavation of one of three restored tabby slave cabins that date to the 1840s, Elliot (2005) also used GPR and limited survey excavations to locate other subsurface structures. However, he never bounded the historic component at the North End, and one of his main recommendations was to do just that.

Accordingly, a UTC archaeological field school was carried out under the direction of the author during the summer of 2011. A survey methodology using a modified systematic sample distribution was employed. Survey units measured 50 cm square, placed at 20-meter intervals, and dug to sterile soil. Two survey units were expanded to one-meter squares to chase features. Fill was screened with $\frac{1}{4}$ inch mesh. The survey grid was established using a total station, with grid north laid out parallel to the extant slave cabins. A total of 94 half meter survey units were completed during the project (Figure 3). Modifications to the 20-m-grid layout were necessary



Figure 3. Survey Unit Locations at the North End Plantation. Club House is on the right.

due to the presence of several modern structures, including the Club House, a dormitory used by the field school crew. According to oral history, this 1920s-era structure was supposedly built directly on top of the Morel main house foundations (Foskey 2001:13).

Although artifact analysis is not complete, preliminary totals for historic ceramics, container and window glass, and cut nails have been calculated. Based on these classes, some basic observations about the spatial and temporal parameters at the site can be made. A simple presence/absence artifact contour is indicated in Figure 4. Besides having utility for additional research, it serves as a CRM guide for any future development at the North End.



Figure 4. Preliminary Presence-Absence Artifact Contour at the North End Plantation.

The initial analysis was also used to test a spatial-temporal hypothesis: if the 18th century Morel main house was located under the Club House dormitory, as oral history would have it, 18th century ceramics would be expected to cluster near this location, marking the presence of early planter and slave assemblages. Over time, as later slave cabins (such as the extant tabbies) were built farther away from the planter's house, early ceramics should show reduced frequencies or be completely superseded by 19th century wares. Based on the presence of English delftware, faience, Astbury, slipware, creamware, Whieldon ware, white salt glazed stoneware, and Eller's ware shown in Figure 5, it is obvious that this hypothesis is, as the melancholy saying

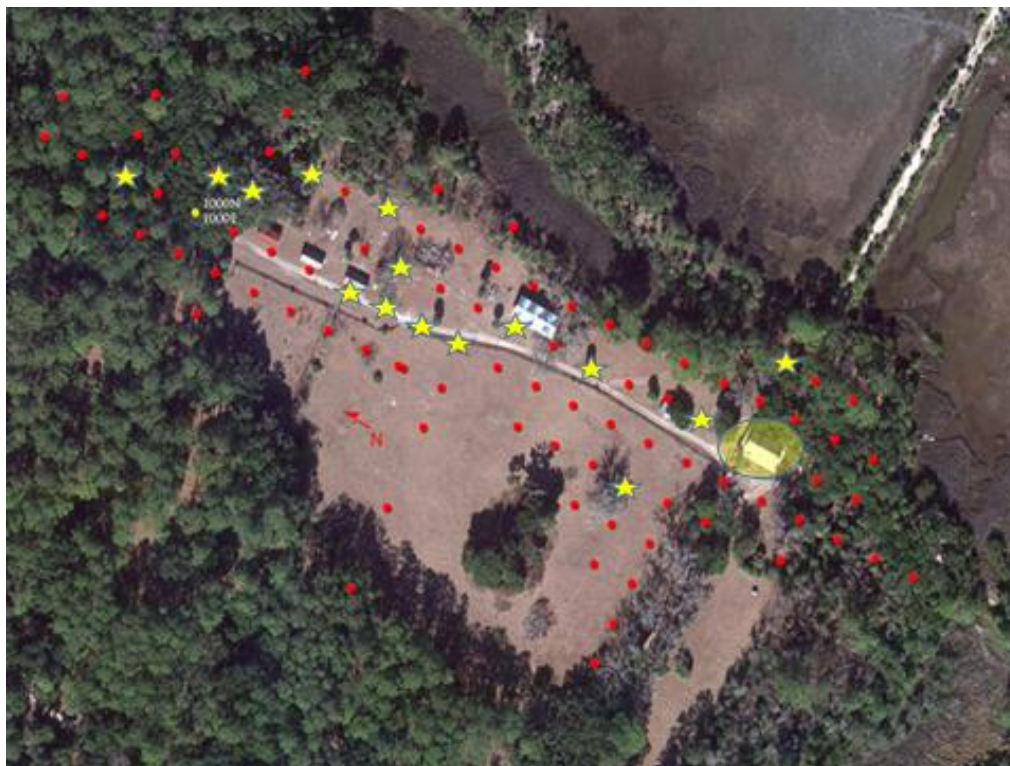


Figure 5. Location of 18th Century Ceramics (stars) and the Club House (circled).

goes, “in serious need of revision.” Perhaps oral tradition about the Morel house is wrong. Or it could be that early slave households had a more scattered settlement pattern than the 1910 map (and the linear artifact contour shown in Figure 4) suggests, and they instead followed a “live where you work” pattern that was predicated on access to cultivated fields rather than planter surveillance of slaves or sharecroppers that is characteristic of many Southern plantations (Orser 1988). The independent arrangement has been documented by Ray Crook for one of Thomas Spalding’s plantations on nearby Sapelo Island (Crook 2008). The implications for at least *some* slave autonomy associated with such a layout is obvious on Sapelo, especially when it is combined with Crook’s archaeological evidence for African-derived wattle-and-tabby-daub housing in two dispersed slave settlements (2008:24).

Sampling issues as applied to plantation sites are rarely discussed in the archaeological literature. This is unfortunate, as it allows much to be claimed about slaves, with precious little to support in the form of well-constructed archaeological sampling schemes. This is particularly true for delineating slave settlements that leave scant architectural remains marking the slave households. For Sapelo Island that means frame structures that were often built on brick or wood corner posts, and that apparently contained wood stoves instead of fireplaces. What this means

archaeologically is that nothing is evident above-ground, and features are nearly as rare below ground, as wood corner posts disintegrate, brick corners piers are inevitably robbed away, and chimney falls haven't fallen because they haven't been built. On Sapelo such frame cabins were the rule rather than the exception for slave housing in the late antebellum and postbellum periods, and this may also have been the case at Ossabaw.

Earlier on Sapelo, however, there was much architectural variety for slave cabins. In chronological order, plantation sites include:

- High Point, which had a brief existence in the late 18th century and contained tabby blocks for frame structures (Honerkamp 2008);
- Behavior and New Barn Creek (Crook 2008), already mentioned, dating to the first quarter of the 19th century and containing dispersed, slave-built wattle and tabby cabins without chimneys;
- Chocolate Plantation, (Honerkamp Kroulek, and Crook 2007) with two rows of substantial tabby duplexes in tightly prescribed locations that were constructed around 1815;
- and Spaulding's South End Plantation, with wood frame cabins from the 1850s that show up on historic maps but that lack *any* above-ground traces and few if any buried features (Honerkamp and Bean 2009).

From research at these sites on Sapelo and now Ossabaw, three things have become apparent: (1) half meter tests on systematic 20 m intervals are a fairly cost-effective way to discover and delineate the general presence of slave cabin components in the sandy soils of the Georgia coast; (2) conversely, if those cabins were frame-on-corner-post construction, it is extremely difficult to pinpoint their locations, and this is considered to be a fairly major drawback for understanding the lives of the folks who lived in these types of structures; and (3) it is very easy to focus research on tabby slave cabins, simply because they are blatantly obvious, the proverbial low-hanging fruit of plantation archaeology. And in fact, much of the plantation archaeology carried out on the coast, including Ossabaw, Sapelo, St. Simons, Jekyll, Cumberland, and at Kingsley Plantation, was and is tabby oriented. This is a mixed blessing.

While it has led to some important contributions in plantation archaeology, it has also undoubtedly failed to take into account the fact that tabby remains at a site may be just one architectural phase in a continuum of pre- and post-Emancipation housing over time. Assuming tabby cabins represent the *only* phase is simply an untested assumption. Admittedly there may or may not be additional undetected slave or Freedmen cabins at the coastal sites just named. But more importantly, most of the researchers who have excavated these sites do not have an answer to the multiple-architecture question, and that is the larger point I make in this paper. To a large extent the siren call of tabby lures many of us onto the reefs and shallows of small sample bias.

And that literary flourish leads to the last point to be made. Since wood frame structures can be maddeningly difficult to locate, what can be done about it? Refinements in GPR and other remote sensing technologies will eventually address this conundrum to some extent. But since many archaeologists cannot afford the luxury of owning or leasing GPR technology, an alternative is suggested that is illustrated with survey data from the South End plantation on Sapelo. First, using the systematic survey methodology described earlier, combined with GIS analysis, UTC researchers eventually discovered evidence of -- and spatially defined -- an antebellum slave component, despite the fact that an 1857 map reproduced below (Figure 6) showing the row of slave cabins that was targeted turned out to be off by a whopping 75 meters! Eventually, using the ArcGIS Spatial Analysis utility, the frequency distribution map presented in Figure 7 was generated that clearly showed where ceramic artifacts did and did not occur.

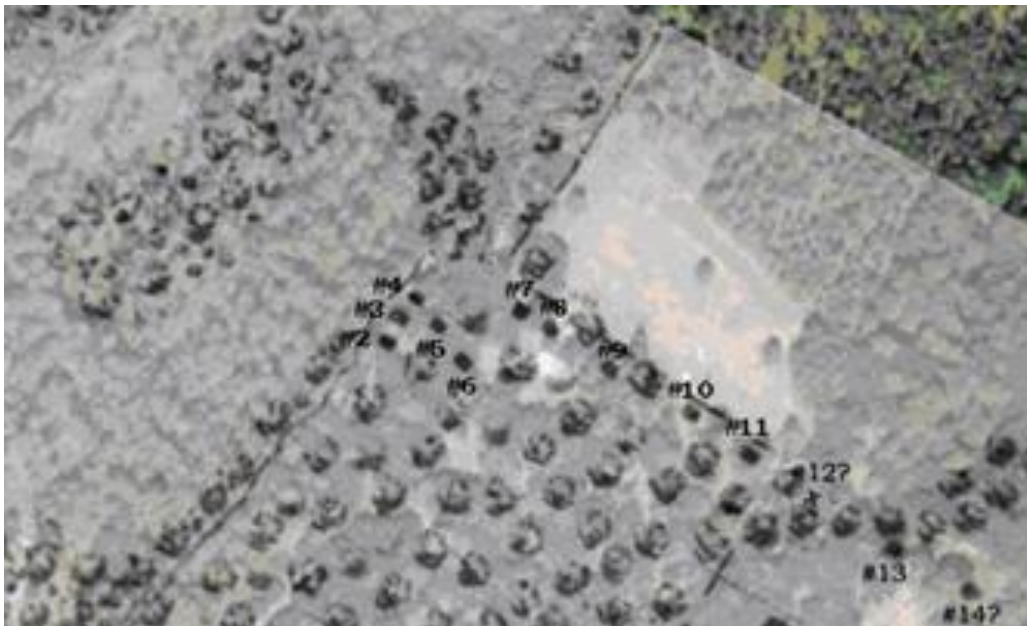


Figure 6. Google Map With 1857 Overlay Showing Slave Cabins (numbered) at the Spaulding South End Plantation, Sapelo Island. The true placement of the cabins 7 -14 was 75 meters farther south.

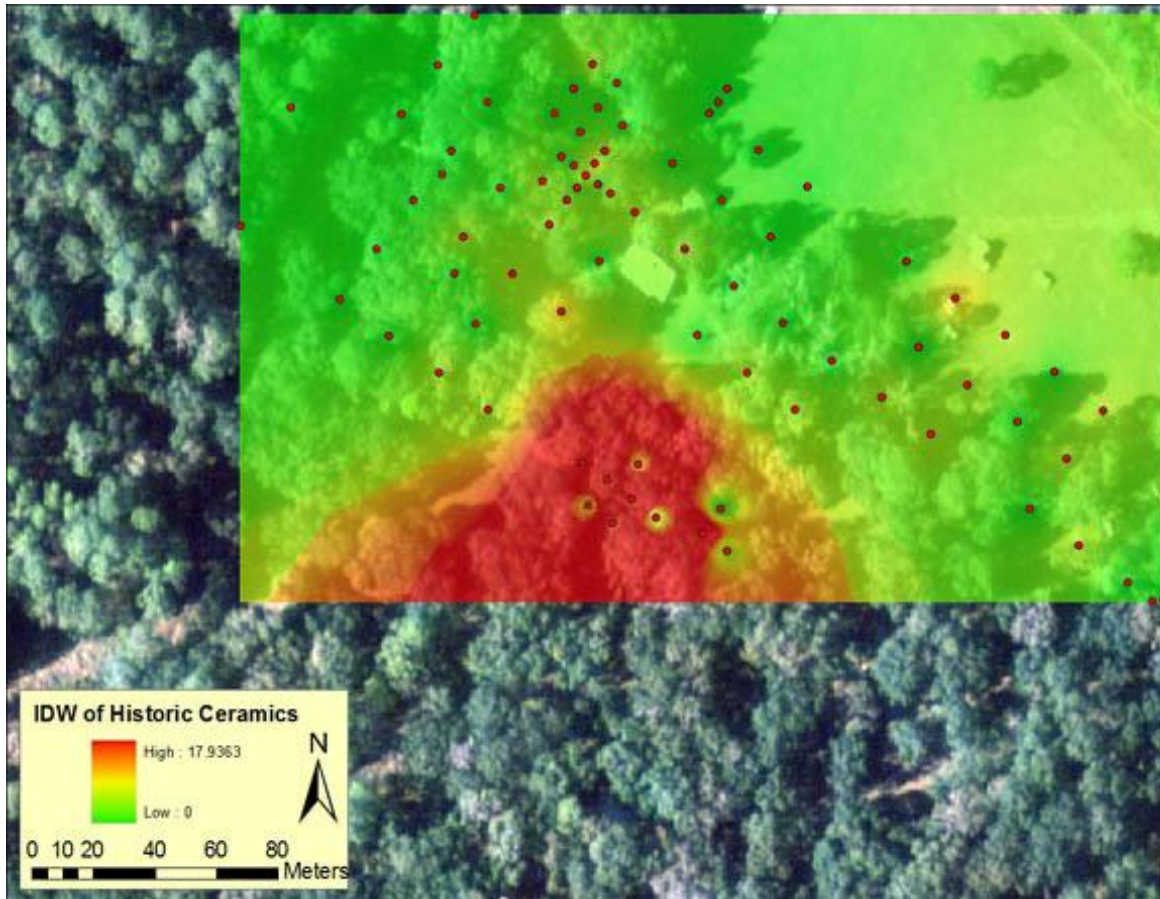


Figure 7. GIS Heat Map of Historic Ceramics, South End, Sapelo Island.

Frequencies for container glass, cut nails, and (to a lesser extent) faunal remains showed similar distributions. Consistent color gradients were used for all the maps, with green indicating a dearth of artifacts and red symbolizing a maximum value (hence the “heat map” label often given to such maps). What is *not* discernible is where specific frame cabins might be found within the red heat.

What we did during the following field season was to shorten the survey interval to 10 and sometimes even 5 meters to generate additional artifact density heat maps. What I will concentrate on now are the tight-interval historic ceramic and nail distributions shown in Figure 8. A close comparison of these two classes of artifacts shows a roughly inverse relationship. I interpret this to mean that the slave cabin that produced most of these artifacts was situated where the nail concentrations are heaviest.

Here are the major assumptions made about these particular artifacts. First, frame cabin locations should correspond to cut nail concentrations deposited in a *de facto* process (Schiffer’s [1972] use of the term), as the wood structures burned or disintegrated over time; and second,

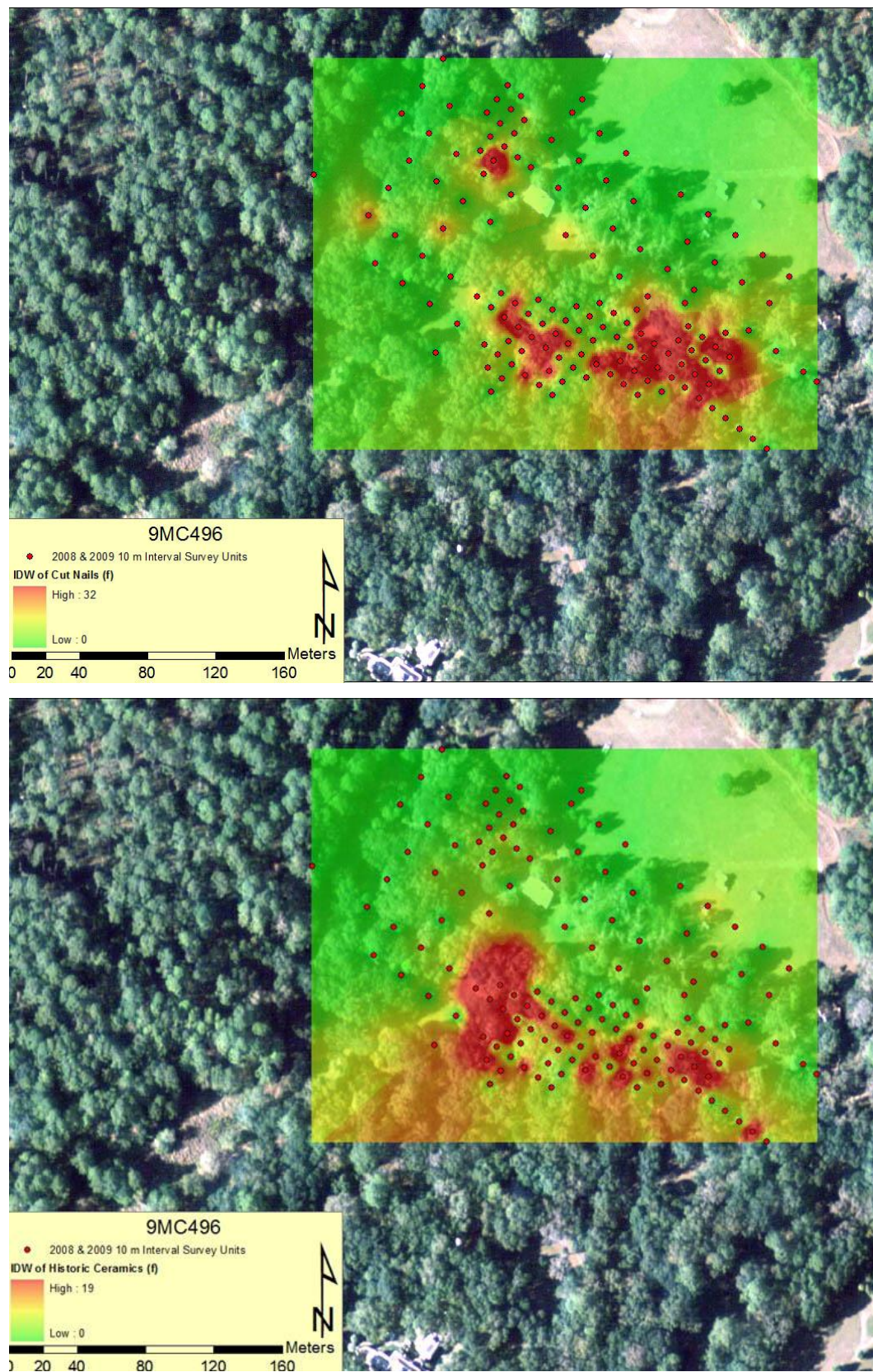


Figure 8. Historic Nail (top) and Ceramic (bottom) Frequency Distributions, South End Plantation.

since frame cabins had wood floors that prevented primary deposition, domestic refuse, including ceramics, would necessarily be intentionally deposited in secondary contexts outside the cabin footprints. This should result in an inverse spatial relationship between nails and ceramics. And that is what these nail/ceramic density maps seem to show. While not a perfect correlation, it is pretty tight. And it may be that the *only* way to realistically pin down frame cabin locations is by using such a survey approach. Secondary testing, with its vastly increased person-hours and cost, would not necessarily be superior to the survey approach outlined in this paper. My next task is to produce similar heat maps for Ossabaw's North End, although I suspect the 20 m survey interval we used may not be fine enough to locate individual frame cabins. Hence, a shorter survey interval may be required.

It has been nearly a half century since Charles Fairbanks jump-started plantation archaeology with a focus on the excavation of slave cabins and a de-emphasis on the big house. His advice still applies, to *all* slave cabins, not just the tabbies.

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