

Working Plantations on Sapelo Island: High Point Versus Chocolate

Nicholas Honerkamp, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Paper Presented at the 2006 Meetings of the Society for Historical Archaeology,
Albuquerque, New Mexico

Abstract: Back-to-back archaeological surveys on Sapelo Island, Georgia by the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga have concentrated on two sites: a substantial, intensively occupied plantation dating primarily to the first half of the 19th century (Chocolate) and an earlier, sporadically occupied operation that included a short-lived French component (High Point). This paper compares the archaeological manifestations of slave occupations at both sites and identifies distinct material contrasts between the slave assemblages. It is primarily in terms of architectural and ceramic characteristics that different living conditions for the two groups are most clearly indicated.

Introduction

At the most recent SEAC meetings in Knoxville last November, I had a disturbing experience: I listened to a paper presented by John Worth. Don't get me wrong—it was a fine paper, as John's presentations inevitably are. But it was disturbing nevertheless. In it he compared the documentary evidence indicating the unmistakable presence of a mission-era north Florida chiefdom against the archaeological evidence that showed nothing of the kind (Worth 2007). That there is in this case virtually no correspondence between the above and below ground data sets is disconcerting to say the least, as it calls into question the unique strength of historical archaeology's dual data base.

I mention this menlonchaly experience because it reminds me of High Point. Having cut my Sapelo archeology teeth on a survey of the Chocolate site (9MC96; Figure 1), which comes as close to being a showcase plantation as anything that is present on the island, results at the High Point site (9MC66) differed dramatically in unexpected ways from Chocolate. Integrating the two sites' documentary models with their distinct archaeological realities will be the focus of the rest of my paper.

Histories

Chocolate Plantation has a fairly well-defined time line for the heyday of the Sapelo's antebellum plantation period, but pinning down the initial occupation is more problematic. The first document-based possibility occurs during the mid-1700s, when Sapelo, along with St. Catherines and Ossabaw Islands, were claimed by Mary Musgrove and her husband Thomas Bosomworth by virtue of a disputed grant from the Creek Indian chief Malatchi. The British Crown eventually rejected the various Musgrove-Bosomworth claims and in 1760 sold Sapelo at public auction to a land speculator. A remarkably detailed Yonge and DeBrahm map (Figure 2), produced in that same year, shows three house symbols at Chocolate and another in the vicinity of High Point. Although the presence of these cartographic ink spots don't mean that the structures represented actually occurred on Sapelo, they at least suggest the possibility of a mid-18th century occupation at both sites.

Helping to narrow these two possibilities down, the documents indicate that Patrick Mackay purchased Sapelo Island in 1762 and developed a plantation on the north end. His operations centered on the High Point area but may have extended to Chocolate.



Figure 1. Satellite View of the Northern End of Sapelo Island, Showing the Location of Chocolate and High Point (Google Earth image).

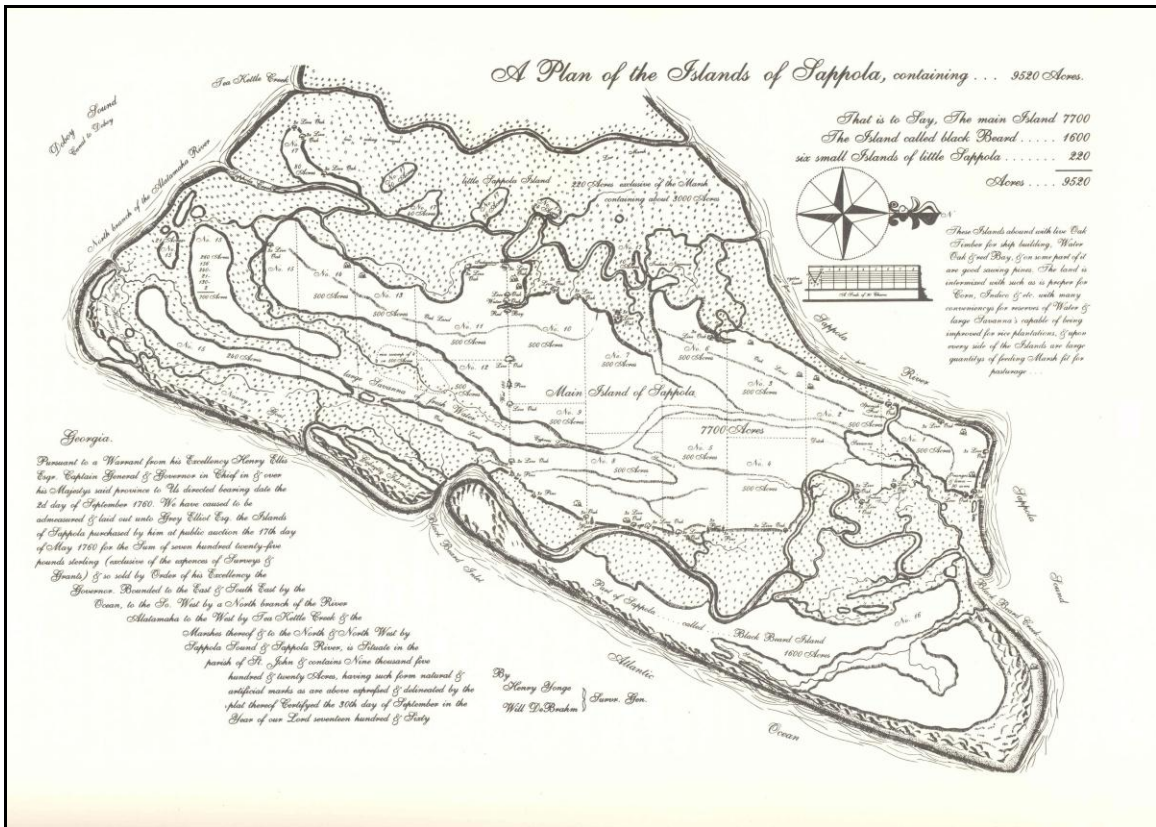


Figure 2. 1760 Yonge and DeBrahm Map of Sapelo Island.

Until his death in 1776, McKay concentrated on livestock production and growing corn and cotton. He probably built a residence, slave quarters, and support structures at High Point and elsewhere on the North End, and a wharf that accessed the relatively deep water of the Mud River most likely was a part of this initial landscape. After his death, the plantation was managed by Lachlon and William McIntosh before being bought by John McQueen, who purchased the property and slaves from Mackay's estate in 1784.

In 1789 McQueen sold Sapelo Island to Francois-Maria Loys Dumoussay de la Vauve. This was to initiate a short but ill-fated chapter of High Point's history, one that was rife with intrigue, conflict, and murder. Thanks to the Reign of Terror in France, Dumoussay rapidly rounded up several members of the French elite who desired to shelter their fortunes, not to mention their heads, in Georgia. They formed a partnership called the Sapelo Company ("Societe de Sapelo"), that jointly owned "land, livestock, slaves, furniture, houses, a boat, and other items" (Thomas 1989:42). Dumoussay was to act as the Company administrator, manager, and treasurer. The other members of the Company were Julien-Joseph Hyacinthe de Chappedelaine, a friend of Dumoussay who recruited the other partners; Charles-Pierre César de Boisfeillet, a retired military man who was Hyacinthe's maternal uncle; Cristophe Poulain DuBignon, a well-to-do merchant who had served in the French India Company; and Pierre-Jacques Meslé, sierre de Grandeclos, a nobleman and wealthy shipowner who never came to Georgia. After 1792 Meslé sold a half-interest of his share to Nicholas-Francois Magnon de la Villehuchet. Magnon, also a successful merchant and nobleman, managed to get the Sapelo land titles cleared and then promptly left for France. He was prevented from returning to Georgia by his beheading two years later.

Those partners still possessing their heads lived briefly on Sapelo at various times and places during the Company's brief existence. Of possible archaeological significance is the mention of a "community residence" at High Point, possibly the former McKay residence, where various combinations of partners and their families temporarily resided. Keber (2002a:180) describes this structure as "a frame house [which apparently included a chimney]...overlooking Sapelo Sound... simply furnished with three mahogany bedsteads, a chest of drawers, a bureau, one mahogany table, and assorted chairs." Several of the partners attempted to reside together in the High Point commune in 1791, but they clearly couldn't stand each other. The group-living experiment ended almost as soon as it began, and everyone scattered to different parts of the Island, with only César and his family residing at High Point.

This unhappy outcome was a harbinger for even more serious squabbles. By early 1793 the French consul in Charleston described the partners "at daggers drawn" (Thomas 1989:45). Probably due to the difficulty in actually making a profit in a rugged frontier milieu, bickering and rancor between the partners increased to the point that the Sapelo Company was dissolved in 1793 and all its accrued assets, including 15 slaves, were sold. Even the termination process was a source of acrimony: César publicly complained (in the *Georgia Gazette*) that the dissolution contract was fraudulent. Dumoussay countered by proclaiming César to be a big fat liar. Things went downhill from there. Citing mismanagement and fraud, numerous lawsuits were filed against Dumoussay's estate after his death in 1794, and the *coup de grace* (as it were) for the Sapelo Company occurred later in the year when César was indicted for murdering his own nephew (Hyacinthe)! Only DuBignon managed to escape this mess by swapping his share of

Sapelo property for land on Jekyll Island, where he developed a successful plantation (Keber 2002b). What this foul episode signifies is that there may be evidence of a late 18th century French presence at High Point. Meanwhile, Chocolate seemsto have been unoccupied at this time.

The French influence on Sapelo ends with Jean de Berard Mocquet Montalet, a French-born sugar planter who moved to Georgia from Haiti. Montalet married César's daughter in 1802, and upon her untimely death three years later he became owner of High Point. Montalet lived there and grew cotton and raised cattle until his death in 1814. The plantation was then sold for taxes, as Montalet had somehow missed paying any in the preceding decade, and other Sapelo planters purchased his slaves. Francis Hopkins, a prominent planter and an executor of Montalet's estate, was the buyer. However, he seems to have been an absentee landlord at High Point.

Meanwhile, Lewis Harrington purchased Chocolate from the vestiges of the Sapelo Company, and during the 1790s actively farmed the tract using the labor of 68 slaves. This constitutes the first definite occupation at Chocolate. The property eventually passed to Edward Swarbreck and Thomas Spaulding by 1802, when it was leased to Francis Hopkins. It is in the first quarter of the 19th century that the documentary records of the two sites diverge rather dramatically in terms of occupational histories. Chocolate becomes the focus of significant plantation activities, while High Point seems to have languished.

Hopkins worked Chocolate until Edward Swarbreck took over in 1808. Between 1815 and 1819 Swarbreck had tabby slave quarters and probably the plantation residence and other support structures built, replacing some of the earlier frame buildings on the plantation. Cotton fields extended a mile to the north and to the south of Chocolate. Evidence of at least 10 slave quarters, normally 14 feet by 20 foot tabby duplexes with central chimneys and finished tabby floors, survives today as ruins and archaeological features at Chocolate (Figure 3). Ray Crook estimates that the resident slave community may have totaled between 70 and 100 individuals. The tabby construction at Chocolate during Swarbreck's tenure was an enormous undertaking, unmatched at any other plantation on Sapelo Island.

Swarbreck sold the property to a Northerner, Dr. Charles W. Rogers, around 1827. Rogers also acquired High Point, but like Hopkins, seems not to have developed it. He continued operations at Chocolate and constructed a large tabby barn there. Containing several stalls and a generous two-level loft, this indicates that livestock and hay became more important on the plantation. The McIntosh County Tax Digest shows that Rogers owned 93 slaves in 1837.

Thomas Spaulding purchased Rogers' holdings, totaling 7,000 acres on the North End, in 1843. He then gave a large parcel, including Chocolate and High Point, to his son Randolph as a wedding gift. Largely ignoring High Point, Randolph and his family resided at Chocolate until the plantation house burned in 1853, when they moved into his father's house on the South End. Plantation operations at Chocolate and elsewhere continued under his direction until at least 1857, when Randolph moved to the mainland. In contrast to the numerous structures shown at Chocolate, a solitary structure is present in the High Point area on the 1857 Du-Val map shown in Figure 4. Large-scale agricultural production at Chocolate apparently ceased by this time. In the late 19th century one or more Geechee family resided at the former plantation, perhaps as tenant



Figure 3. Slave Quarters at Chocolate.



Figure 4. Redrawn 1857 Du-Val Map of the North End. Courtesy of Ray Crook, 1989.

farmers. The 1910 Federal Census indicates the household of Jacob Green (62 at the time), his wife Elisa, a son and grandson, and an adopted son at Chocolate.

Finally, John Griswold built a house at High Point shortly after the Civil War. Local historian Buddy Sullivan indicates that it was a restoration of Montalet's residence, and that Montalet's house was the refurbished Sapelo Company communal residence, which recycled McKay's original house. At any rate, using sharecropper labor, Griswold attempted to produce cotton, but he quit after only four years and leased the property and house to Archibald McKinley. McKinley only resided at High Point for six months. No one else seems to have occupied the site after McKinley's brief stay.

To summarize: High Point appears to have a definite British colonial occupation (McKay) and possibly a French cultural component (Sapelo Company and/or Montalet) up into the early 19th century. Although never extensive, slave occupations were undoubtedly included in the cultural mix on the North End. Thereafter references to occupation at the site are vague until after the Civil War. At Chocolate, there is a somewhat nebulous possibility of a British colonial presence in the third quarter of the 18th century, but starting in the late 18th century up to the Civil War there clearly were substantial improvements and development of the plantation as a full fledged slave-powered agricultural entity, vis-a-vis four consecutive major slave-owners (Harrington, Hopkins, Swarbreck, and Rogers). After 1857 Chocolate is the site of a small Geechee occupation until the beginning of the 20th century. High Point experiences new construction and brief occupation in the late 1860s by Griswold and McKinley, and was apparently abandoned after 1871.

Methodolgy

Both of these sites were systematically sampled using nearly identical methodolgies. As part of a University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC) archaeological field school, I supervised a survey of Chocolate Plantation in 2006 and High Point in 2007. The sites couldn't be more different in terms of topography. At Chocolate a well-manicured pasture is regularly cut and burned off by the Georgia Department of Natural Respources (DNR). At High Point DNR had engaged in limited cutting and controlled burning, but such an approach had not been employed in several years. This meant that about ¼ of the total person-hours at High Point was devoted to clearing grid layout lines.

At each site a 20-meter-interval grid was laid out using a total station, and then half-meter survey pits were screened to sterile using ¼" mesh. No units were dug inside known structures. At Chocolate 117 survey pits were completed, while at High Point 90 survey pits were dug on the 20-meter interval, with 11 supplemental units dug at shorter intervals in order to better define archaeological deposits. This immediately tells you something about the archaeological manifestations at each site—High Point required shorter intervals to provide adequate spatial information about site structure. Suffice it to say that there was much less material culture to work with at High Point. The 20-meter interval grid was suitable for analyzing and displaying artifact distributions at each site. Spatial modeling of various artifact types and classes distributions was achieved through the application of the GIS ArcMap Spatial Analyst toolbar (Chocolate) and Surfer 8 wireframe maps (High Point).

Results

The Chocolate survey produced substantial quantities of both artifacts and subsurface features (Honerkamp, Crook and Kroulek 2007; Honerkamp 2007). Following Stan South's (1977) classification system, almost most all functional classes and groups are represented in the artifact profiles. Features consisted of postholes and either trash pits or filled cellars. From the GIS contour map for all historic ceramics (Figure 5), there's a pretty clear distinction between the northeast and southwest halves of the parcel, with the division line roughly corresponding to the access road into the site. I suggest that what is illustrated here is nothing short of land use writ large, that is, at the site level. The northeast half of the survey area is completely free of foundations and largely devoid of historic artifacts of all types, not just ceramics, and it was almost exclusively devoted to farming. The southwest half contains all the antebellum foundations at the site and almost all of the ceramics recovered during the survey.

In this habitation area, relatively heavy concentrations of ceramics ($n=257$) are present in six primary locations. The unit adjacent to the Mud River contained the highest sherd count of any survey unit, and probably corresponds to a midden associated with a presumed early structure—a deep historic posthole was also discovered here. Behind the main house, heavy sherd counts are also associated with subsurface features, including a root cellar or trash pit next to an outbuilding. A second locus of ceramic disposal occurs about 20 m northeast of the main house. Although no feature was noted there, a posthole was recorded in the adjacent unit to the west. The unit directly in back (south) of the main house is also moderately sherd-heavy, and possibly represents a Brunswick-style disposal pattern (South 1977), while the front entrance (facing the Mud River) shows little sheet deposit refuse.

Four slave cabin locations also exhibited relatively high sherd counts, with two along the south slave cabin row, and the other two associated with north row cabins. The survey unit adjacent to High Point Road near a slave cabin foundation intercepted a heavy midden and was certainly one of the most productive tests at the site, for virtually all classes of artifacts. Oral history information indicates that this cabin was a house site for the Jacob Green family (Maurice Bailey, 2006, pers. comm.). The high artifact counts for this unit probably reflect refuse from both the antebellum and the postbellum periods.

In an effort to isolate early components at the site, a distribution query was run on pre-whiteware sherds; Figure 6 illustrates the results. The most obvious difference compared to the total ceramic distribution map is the absence of pre-whiteware ceramics from the main house area. This suggests that the initial planter house was probably adjacent to the Mud River. Interestingly, two slave cabins also show heavy early ceramic concentrations, suggesting that the later tabby cabins were built on earlier slave house locations, or that some slaves possessed early ceramic types (the “hand-me-down” phenomenon).

The survey yielded 241 fragments of vessel glass. This map (Figure 7) shows the fairly even distribution glass in the habitation area, with the highest frequencies concentrated in some of the same units that exhibited high ceramic counts. container glass is generally less common in the slave cabin areas, but the unit next to the Jacob Green home contained nearly 30% ($n=70$) of the site's total for container glass, indicating that glass items were much more available to the freedman family than to the earlier slave residents.

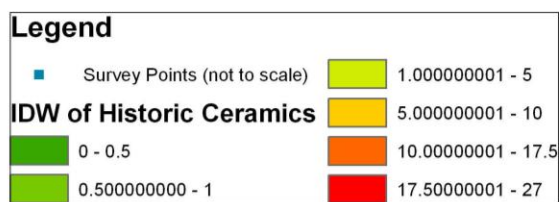
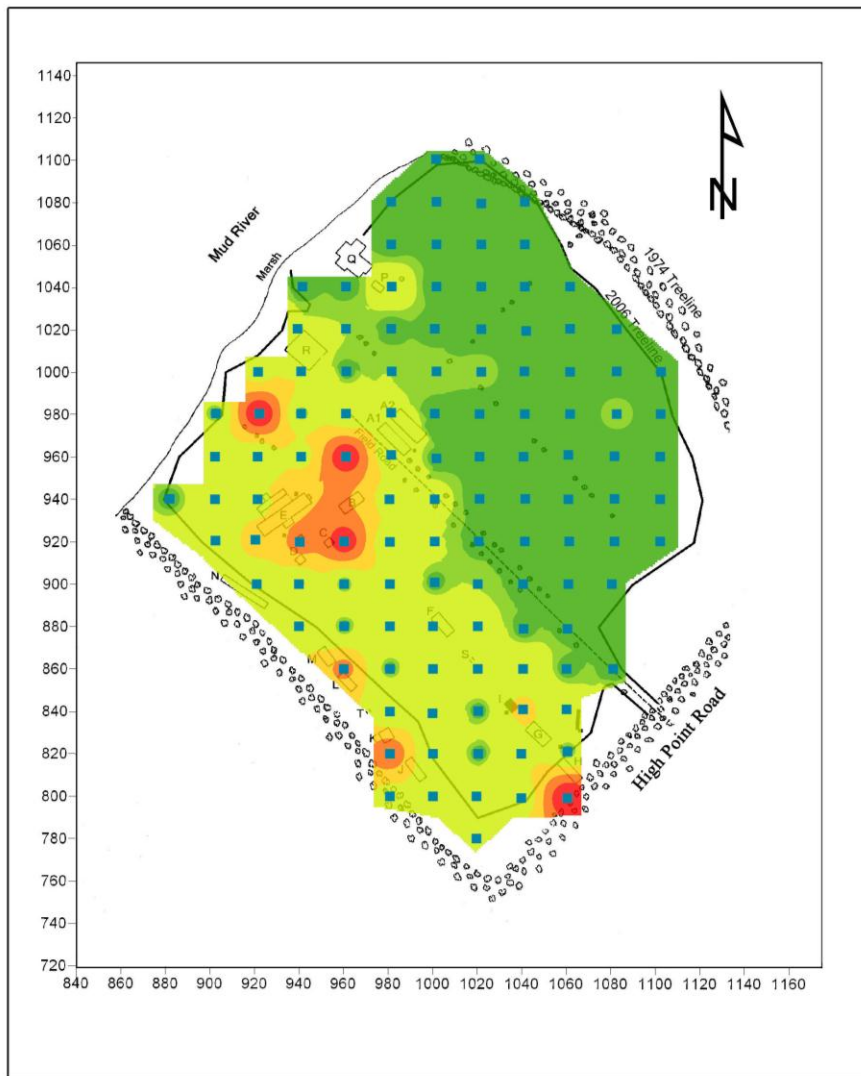


Figure 5. Chocolate Historic Ceramic Frequency Distributions, All Types.

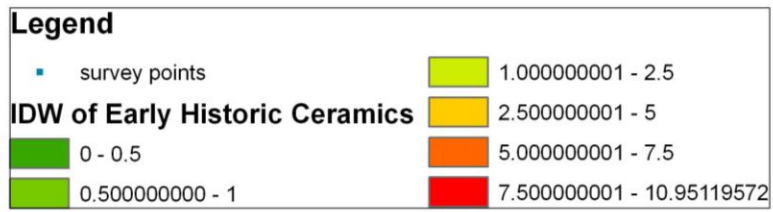
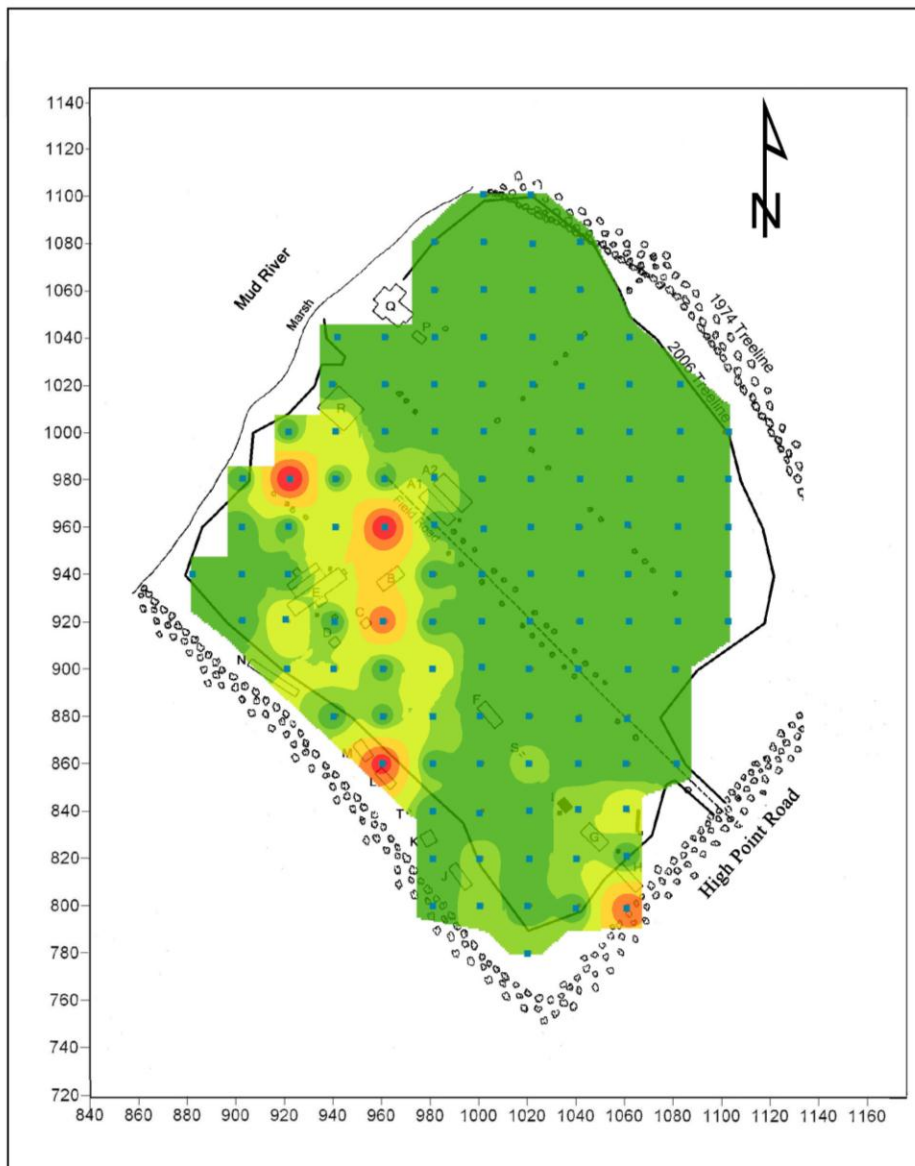


Figure 6. “Early” Historic Ceramic Frequency Distributions, Chocolate Plantation.

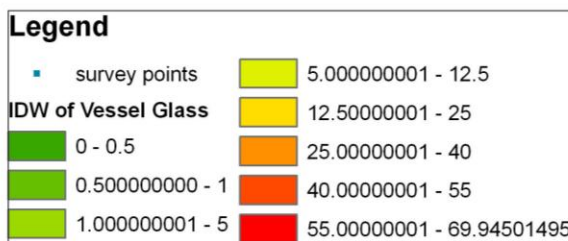
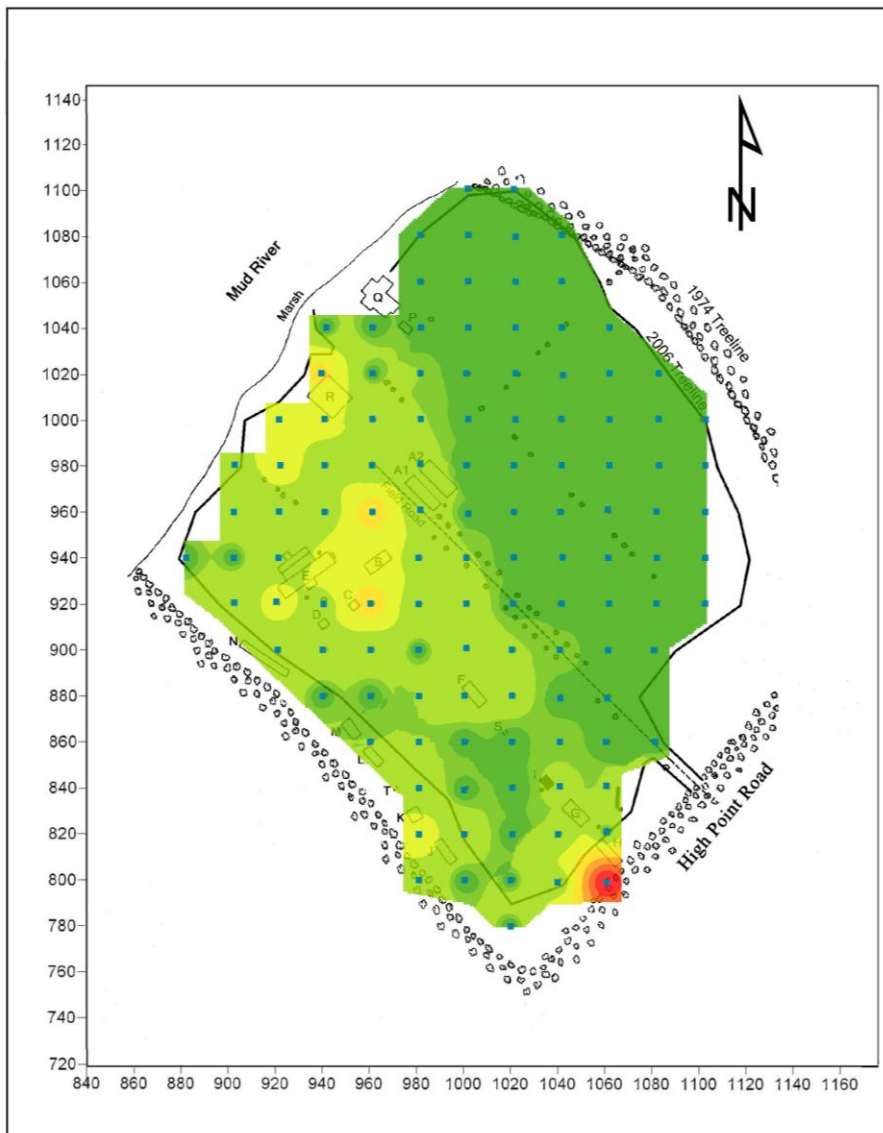


Figure 7. Vessel Glass Frequency Distributions, Chocolate Plantation.

The two architectural-related remains that will be examined and compared with High Point are cut nails and tabby plaster. Cut nails ($n=399$) are widely distributed in slave and non-slave locations (Figure 8). While some of these artifacts are undoubtedly associated with the Coffin-Reynolds period, most are probably 19th century in origin.

They are very clearly associated with structures, with only one slave cabin area with less than five sherds.

The tabby plaster that was analyzed lacks the coarse shell of structural tabby and as a consequence is much more fragile. It was used primarily as a finishing surface. We quantified it by weight (21368 g total) and generated this plaster tabby map (Figure 9). The most distinctive aspect of this distribution is the tendency of significant quantities of plaster to be concentrated pretty much exclusively near the big house or special-use structures but *not* near slave cabins. This difference was so dramatic at a plantation with unusually substantial slave residences that I suggest plaster have a strong positive correlation with status. This difference was also seen with window glass, and indicates a caste-based disparity in material culture associated with a basic aspect of life, in this case housing. Apparently glazed windows and plaster finishes were luxuries that were reserved exclusively for the plantation elites.

I will limit the High Point comparison to the same artifact categories discussed above. First, there were fewer artifacts of all kinds at this site (since there were no “supplementary units” dug at Chocolate, only regular-interval survey units will be used). For example, at a meta-level, the average number of sherds, container glass fragments, and square nails was 1.6, 0.81 and 1.1, respectively, at High Point, compared to 2.2, 2.1, and 3.4 at Chocolate. There was only one subsurface feature—a shallow, plaster tabby-filled trench in a survey pit—and a half dozen scattered, small tabby foundation fragments on the surface, but the continuous-foundation footings and tabby floors seen at Chocolate were conspicuously absent. So too were any trash pits, cellars, and postholes.

The most substantial feature discovered was the cut-tabby foundation of the Griswold House (Figure 10). Complete with a detached kitchen and nearby well, this is the same feature that Sullivan claimed was the former residence of Montalet, miscellaneous Sapelo Company near-do-wells, and even Patrick McKay. However, there are four reasons to associate these remains with a postbellum occupation: (1) not a single sherd predating whiteware was found in any of the adjacent survey units; in fact, very few ceramics of any kind were present near the house (See Figure 11); (2) ditto for the well, which contained fragments of dry cell batteries; (3) this foundation is unlike any other on the island, consisting of cut tabby blocks that were recycled from elsewhere (possibly even Chocolate); and (4) this structure is located a considerable distance from navigable water—presumably McKay would have sited his house next to the relatively deep Mud River to the west and not adjacent to the marshy shallows on the north end of the island. When early ceramics are modeled at the site (Figure 12), they are all south and west of this feature, which pretty well precludes a Montalet or earlier deposition at the extreme (Griswold) north end.

But the same can also be said of the westernmost portion of the site, directly adjacent to the Mud River and its prime location as a Sapelo *entrepôt* in the 18th century. While few early ceramics were found in survey units on the river’s edge at the western margin of the site, there are numerous colonial artifacts and the remains of a wharf on the riverfront. This is also the spot that two small fragments of structural tabby and a plain delftware sherd appear on the surface. I suspect that the McKay residence was present in this vicinity, but judging from the ongoing erosion here to the edge of the island, this early house site has probably been washed away.

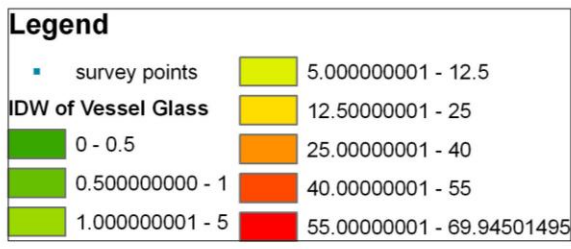
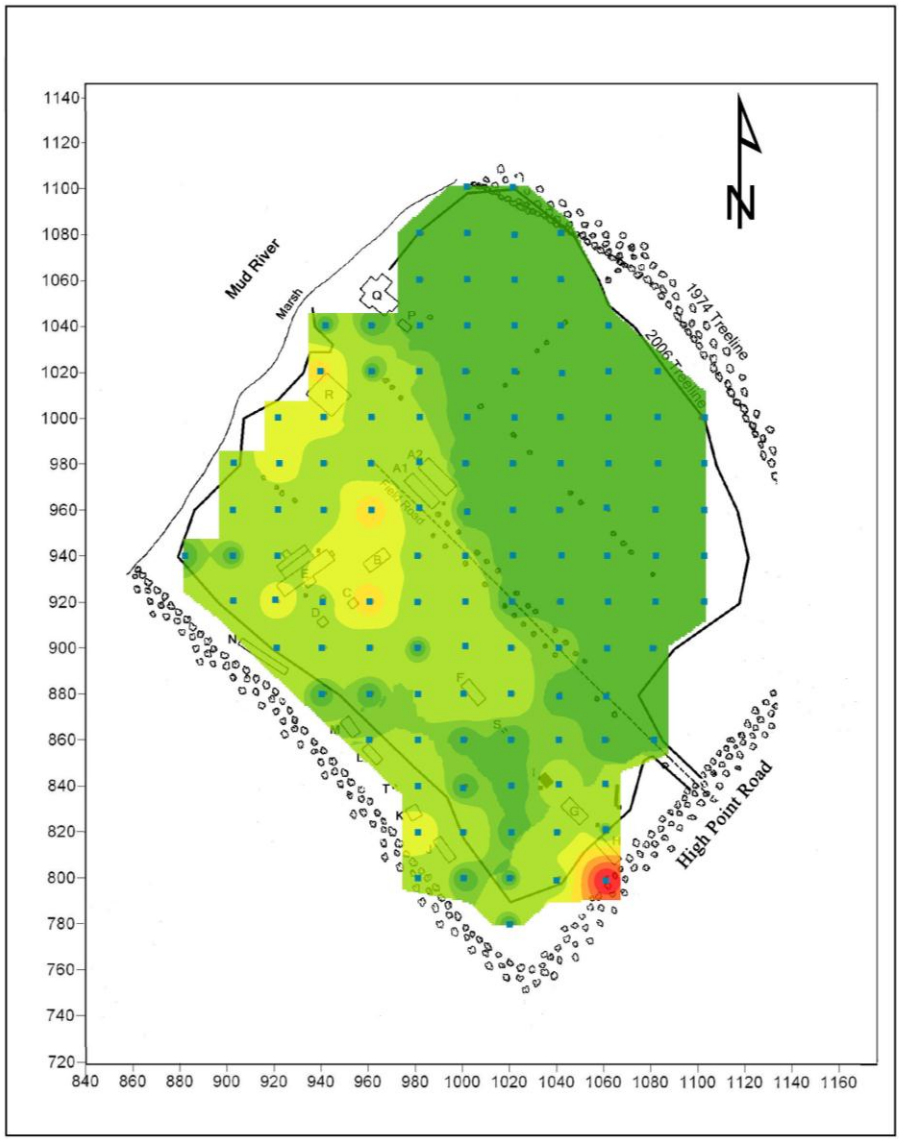


Figure 7. Vessel Glass Frequency Distributions, Chocolate Plantation.

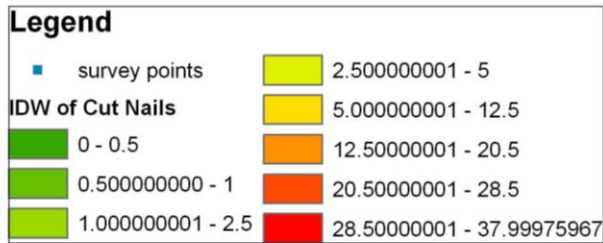
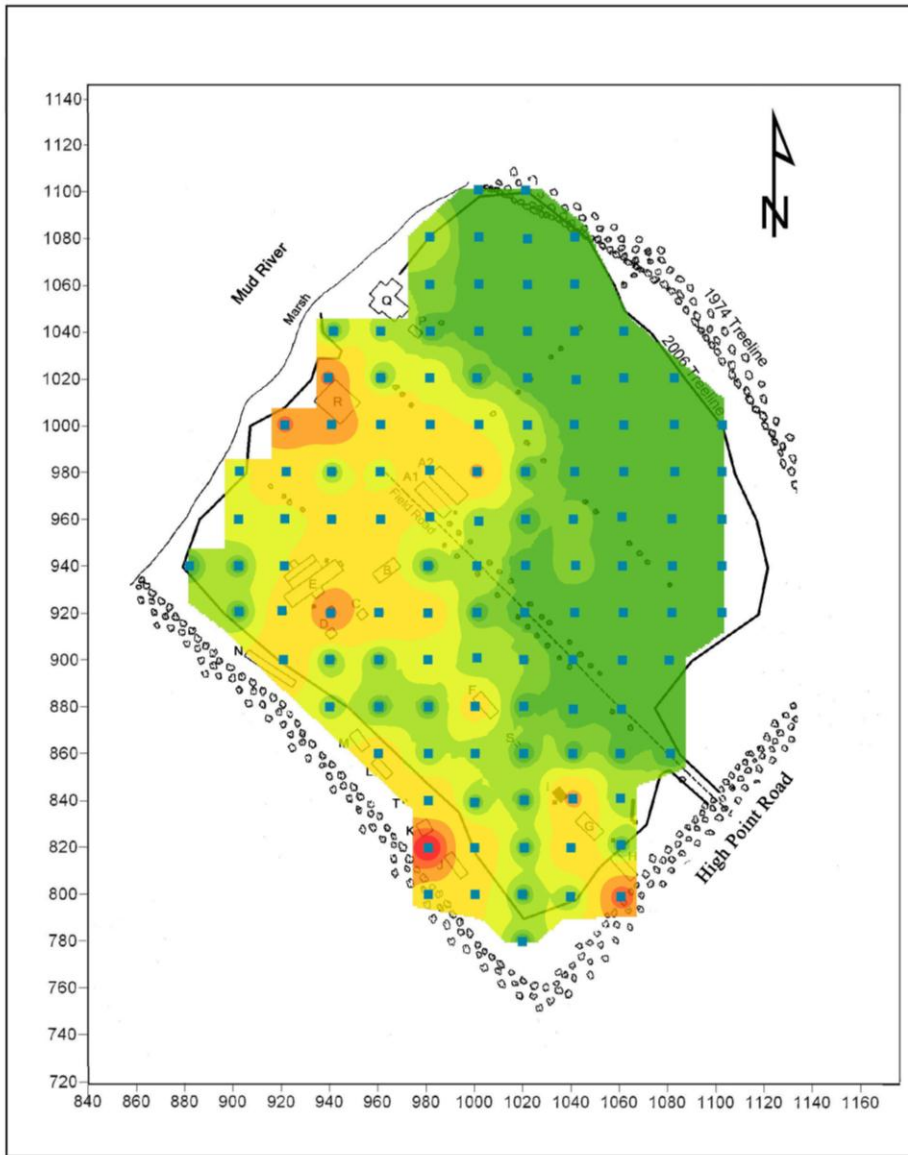


Figure 8. Cut Nail Frequency Distributions.

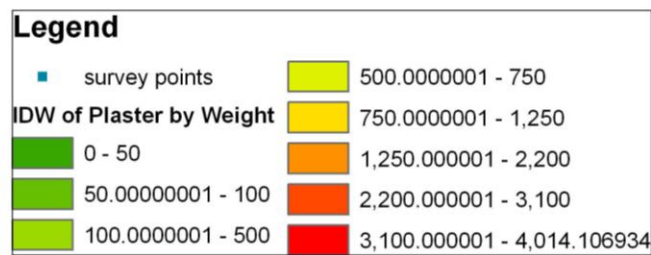
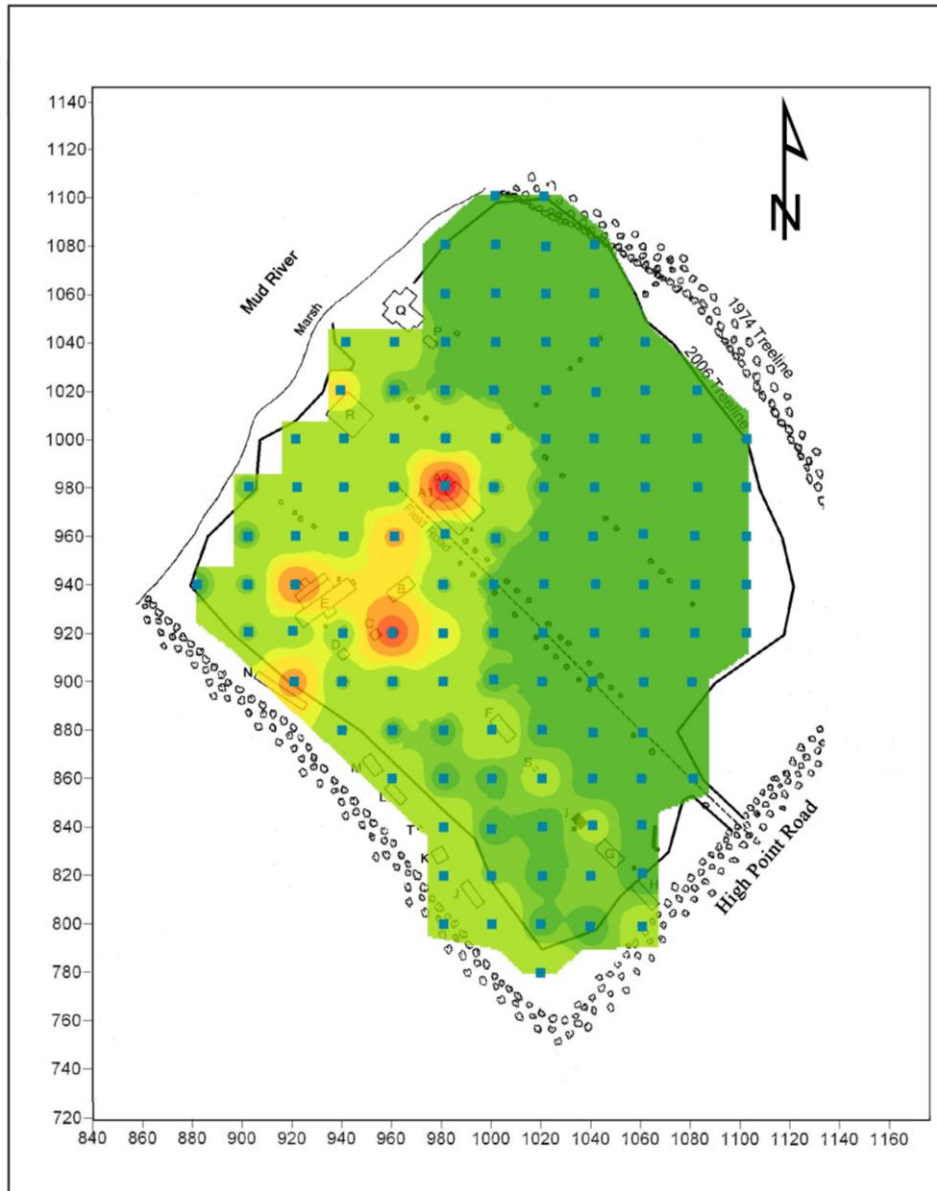


Figure 9. Tabby Plaster Distribution, By Weight (grams), Chocolate Plantation.



Figure 10. Griswold House Tabby Block Foundations. Facing northeast.

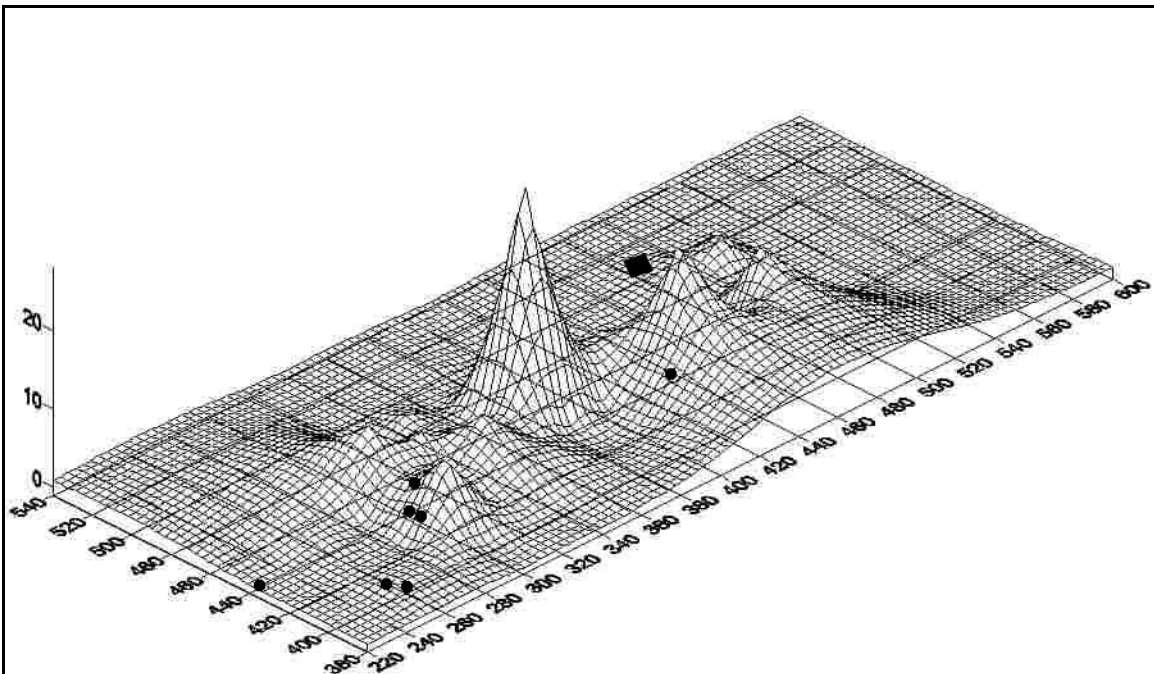


Figure 11. Ceramic Distributions at High Point. The Griswold house foundation appears as a black square. Surface tabby fragments appear as black dots.

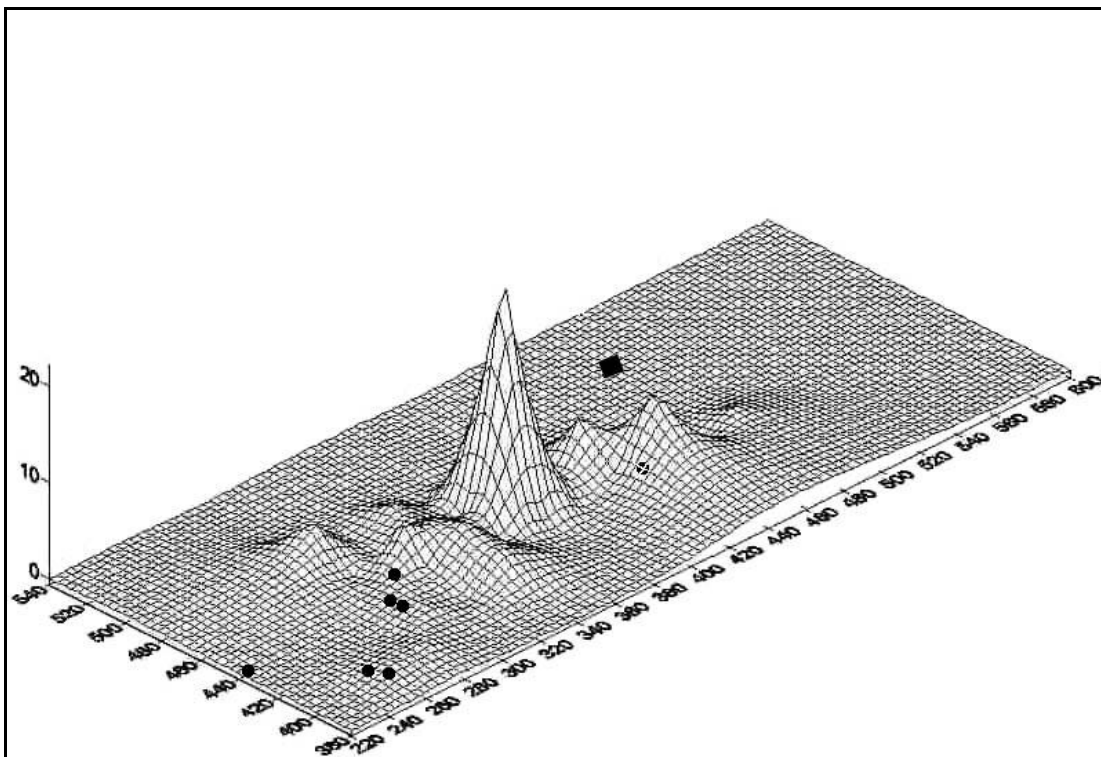


Figure 12. Early Ceramic Distributions at High Point.

Cut nails and plaster tabby are the final architectural materials to be considered. Figures 13 and 14. As with Chocolate, nails and plaster have only a moderate positive correlation. It should be noted, however, that just over 80% of the plaster was derived from a single survey unit (455N 320E). In order to prevent the rest of the site's tabby from being swamped by this unit in the nearest-neighbor-based model calculated by Surfer, an artificial cap of 5000 grams was input into the worksheet for this artifact category. If the presence of plaster is a hallmark of an elite residence at this site, there are three likely candidates. Also similar to Chocolate, nails certainly appear over a wide area, and these humble artifacts may be predictors of modest frame residents for slave cabins or other buildings.

Summary, Of Sorts

From this brief overview, it is unclear that a slave presence has been identified archaeologically at High Point, although the documentary records indicate that there surely was a slave workforce associated with McKay and Montalet. This brings me back to the “Worth Conundrum” that I opened this paper with. Perhaps John and I (and similarly puzzled historical archaeologists) are simply grappling with customary sampling issues, and we’re looking in all the wrong, that is, not representative places. I suspect, however, that the “missing” evidence for chiefdoms in the Suwanee Valley or slave occupations at High Point is more subtle than we care to—or even can—admit. My future work on this problem will continue to look closely at the known slave-context artifact associations (particularly spatial dimensions) from Chocolate, where artifact and document are in accord, and compare them to what has been derived from High Point, where artifact and document diverge.

To end on a high point (!), the High Point survey did produce five sherds of faience (Figure 15) and a fragment and one nearly whole French blade gunflint. At least for the French Connection, there is concordance in the duel data bases.

au revoir

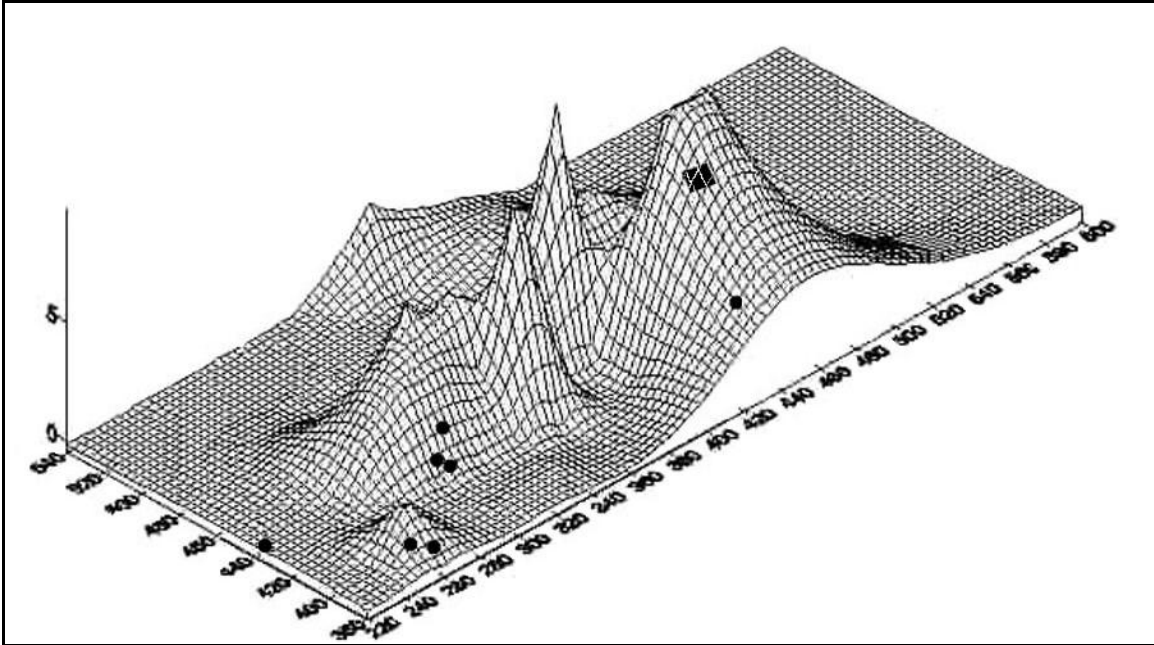


Figure 13. Cut Nail Distributions at High Point.

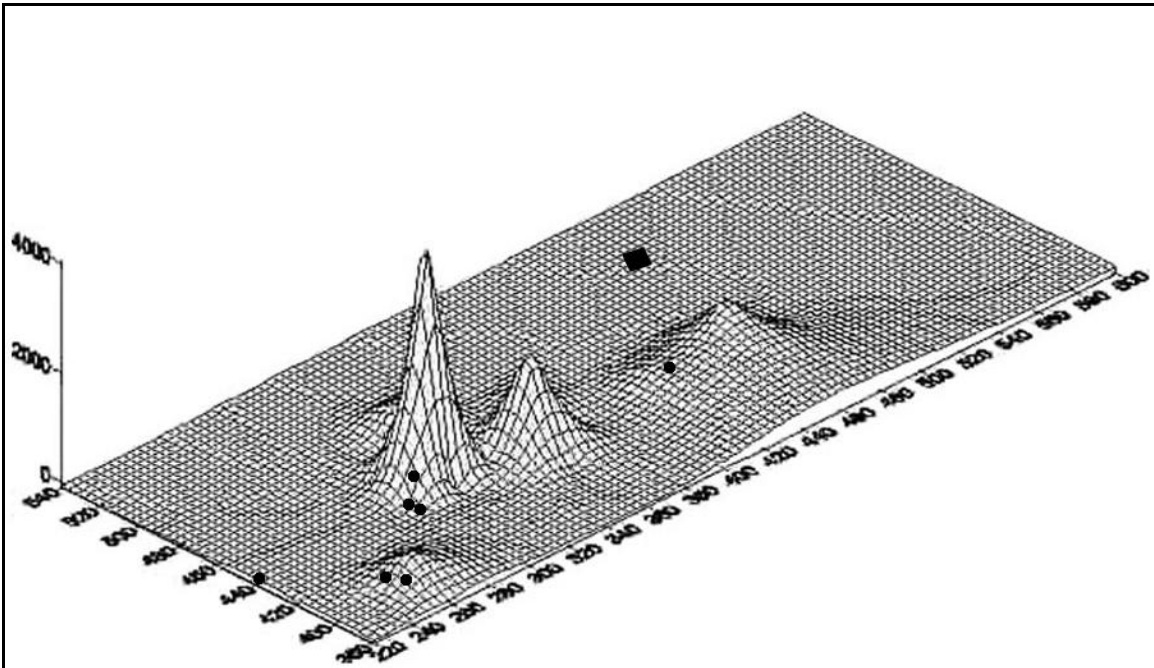


Figure 14. Adjusted Plaster Tabby Distributions at High Point.



Figure 15. Faience From Survey Units. All are Normandy Plain except FS 93, Rouen Plain.

References Cited

Honerkamp, Nicholas

2007 GIS Survey and Remote Sensing of Slave and Planter Occupations at Chocolate Plantation, Sapelo Island, Georgia. Paper presented at the 2007 meetings of the Society for Historical Archaeology, Williamsburg, Virginia.

Honerkamp, Nicholas, Ray Crook, and Orion Kroulek

2007 Pieces of Chocolate: Site Structure and Function at Chocolate Plantation (9MC96), Sapelo Island, Georgia. Report on file, Jeffrey L. Brown Institute of Archaeology, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

Keber, Martha L.

2002a Refuge and Ruin: The French Sapelo Company. *Georgia Historical Quarterly* LXXXVI, No. 2:173-200.

2002b *Seas of Gold, Seas of Cotton: Christophe Poulain DuBignon of Jekyll Island*. University of Georgia Press, Athens.

South, Stanley

1977 *Method and Theory in Historical Archaeology*. Academic Press, New York.

Thomas, Kenneth H., Jr.

1989 The Sapelo Company: Five Frenchmen on the Georgia Coast, 1789 – 1794. *The Proceedings and Papers of the Georgia Association of Historians* 10:37-64.

Worth, John E.

2007 Rediscovering Pensacola's Lost Spanish Missions. Paper presented at the annual meetings of the Southeastern Archaeological Conference, Knoxville, Tennessee.