

Defining Frame Slave Cabins at the Thomas Spalding Plantation, Sapelo Island, Georgia

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ABSTRACT: Two field seasons of survey-level research at the Spalding Plantation on Sapelo Island, Georgia have been devoted to locating wood frame slave cabins. Shown on an 1857 map, these structures are difficult to recognize archaeologically due to the scarcity of definitive architectural remains; in essence, no foundation elements survive when wooden frame cabins are set on blocks of wood, tabby, or brick that are robbed after the cabins are abandoned. However, indirect evidence for the presence of cabins may take the form of nail distributions that occur in an inversely spatial relationship with secondary refuse discard at this site: nails would be expected to mark the former cabin locations, and middens should occur adjacent to, rather than in, the cabin footprints. Using GIS, such spatial signatures have been tentatively identified on Sapelo Island.

INTRODUCTION

Sapelo Island, Georgia, contains several plantations that possibly date to as early as the 18th century up to the Civil War. These plantations were economically predicated on cotton and sugar cane production and several were owned by Thomas Spalding, one of the most prominent planters on the Georgia coast (Coulter 1940; Sullivan 1997). Several types of architectural remains are documented for the Geechee slave sites associated with Sapelo's plantations (DeVan and Honerkamp 2009). At High Point, on the northern end of Sapelo, possible 19th century slave architectural elements consist of tabby corner foundations for frame structures (Honerkamp 2008). At Chocolate Plantation, located on the west side of the Island and dating from roughly 1800 to 1860, the remains of substantial tabby duplexes formally arranged in parallel rows are present (Honerkamp et al. 2007). Ray Crook has excavated two small huts that were part of early 19th century Geechee villages at Behavior and New Barn Creek on the southwest side of the island. Rather than being built under the direction of Spalding or his supervisors, Crook suggests that these huts were slave designed and built, as they were reminiscent of West African vernacular architecture but composed of wattle and tabby daub; Crook also noted a probable re-occupation of one of these sites with a frame structure superimposed over the earlier architectural footprint (Crook 2008). Finally, a search for the remains of presumed wood frame slave cabins has been undertaken at Sapelo's South End. Located just north of Spalding's mansion, these cabins probably date to the mid-19th century as they appear on an 1857 map of the area and are missing from an 1862 map. (Honerkamp and Bean 2009). The general locations of all these sites are shown in Figure 1.

At the South End plantation (9MC496), as shown in Figure 2, an 1857 map depicts a cluster of cabins (numbered 2-6) north of the Spalding big house and a line of cabins (numbered 7-14) about the same distance to the northeast (DuVal 1857). This linear settlement patterning contrasts markedly with the dispersed Geechee villages at Behavior and New Barn Creek, both of which were part of Spalding's holdings. Since Thomas Spalding died in 1851, the South End slave cabin arrangement may reflect his son (and heir) Randolph Spalding's more formal approach to managing the plantation labor force (DeVan and Honerkamp 2009:20). It is assumed that the cabins identified in the DuVal map were frame structures set on corner posts of wood, brick, or tabby. Such

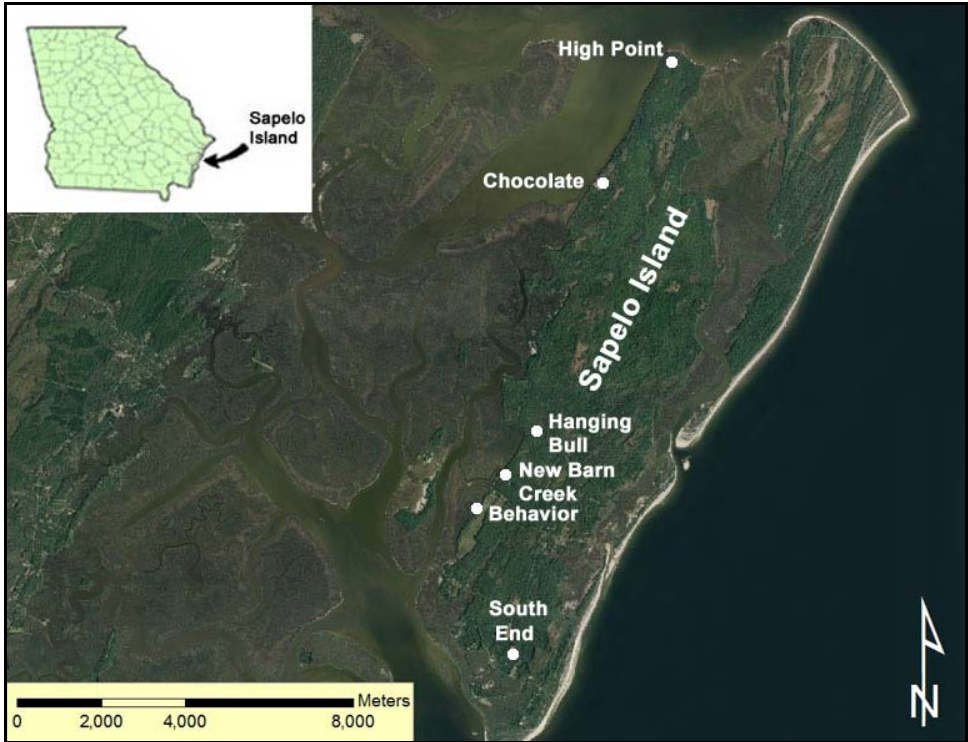


Figure 1. Locations of Plantation Slave Settlements on Sapelo Island.



Figure 2. Superimposed Section of the 1857 DuVal Map On a Google Image of the South End, Sapelo Island. Courtesy of Ray Crook.

structures were virtually ubiquitous for post-Emancipation Geechee domiciles, and seem to be the norm on Sapelo's plantations by the mid-19th century, having completely replaced the earlier wattle and tabby daub (Crook and Honerkamp 2009:12). Since they leave faint signatures in the archaeological record, such structures are extremely difficult to identify. The rest of this paper will concentrate on our attempts to do so.

SOUTH END ARCHAEOLOGY

Since 2006, the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga has undertaken a long-term survey program at Sapelo Island that has concentrated on locating and defining antebellum slave occupations. This research has been accomplished using summer archaeological field schools under the direction of the senior author. The basic research strategy has relied on systematic survey in order to identify the archaeological presence of slave material remains and to determine the structure of slave sites components. Although a survey-level approach is obviously not suitable for addressing all research questions, it does provide temporal, spatial, and to some extent functional data from plantation occupations.

The search for slave cabins on the South End began in 2008. Based on the DuVal projection shown in Figure 2, a series of half meter survey units were laid out on a 20 meter grid in the two areas believed to contain evidence of the slave settlement depicted in 1857. As shown in Figure 3, the survey interval was reduced to 10 m and 5 m in some areas. The survey revealed that the western portion of the site had been heavily truncated, as indicated in Figure 3; if the cluster of possible slave cabins shown on the 1857 map

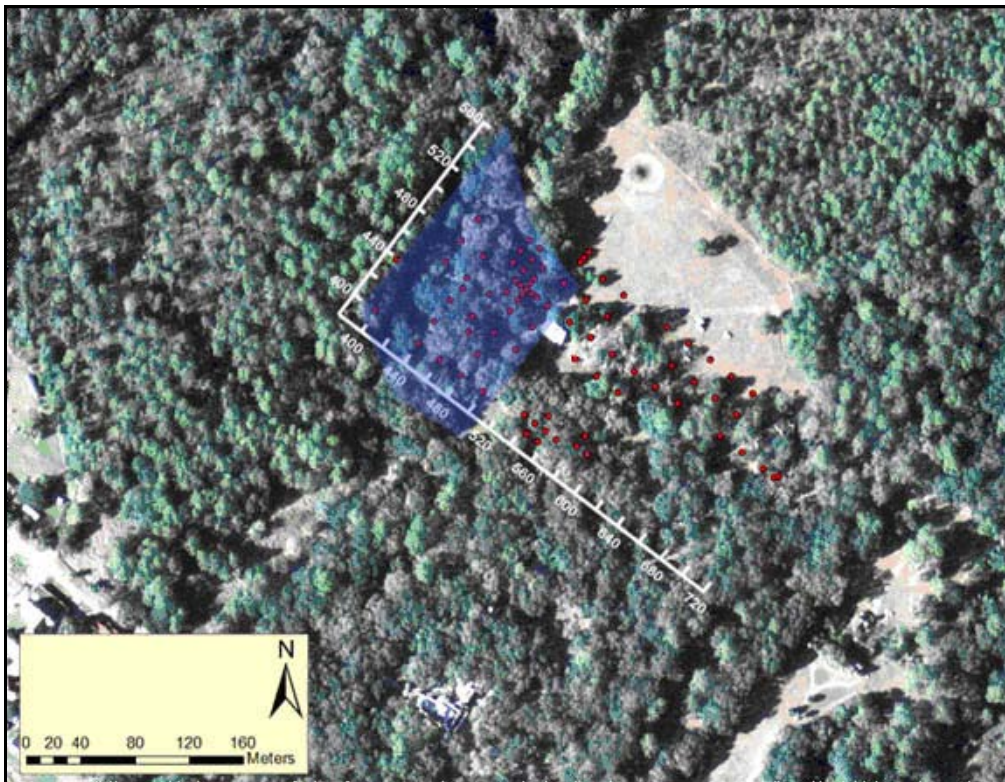


Figure 3. 9MC496 Survey Grid, 2008. Survey unit locations appear in red; blue shading indicates surface truncation or aggradation during the 20th century.

were once located there, their archaeological correlates are now lost (Honerkamp and Bean 2009:9).

In addition to this bad news, the relatively undisturbed sections of the site that seemed to correspond to the line of cabins numbered 7-14 also produced next to nothing in the way of antebellum artifacts, indicating that the 1857 map was either inaccurate or that the scale of the map had been incorrectly calculated—or both. The lacuna of ceramic artifacts is graphically modeled through the application of the ArcGIS Spatial Analysis utility to create artifact distribution maps; Figure 4 illustrates the occurrence (and non-occurrence) of historic ceramics at 9MC496.

Fortunately, during the last two days of the 2008 field season some sherds were noted on the surface of the site about 50 m south of the projected line of cabins. Once surveyed, this area produced the heavy ceramic distributions shown in Figure 4. Density distribution maps for container glass, cut nails, and (to a lesser extent) faunal remains show similar distributions. Consistent color gradients are used in all our GIS maps, with green indicating no artifacts and red symbolizing a maximum value.

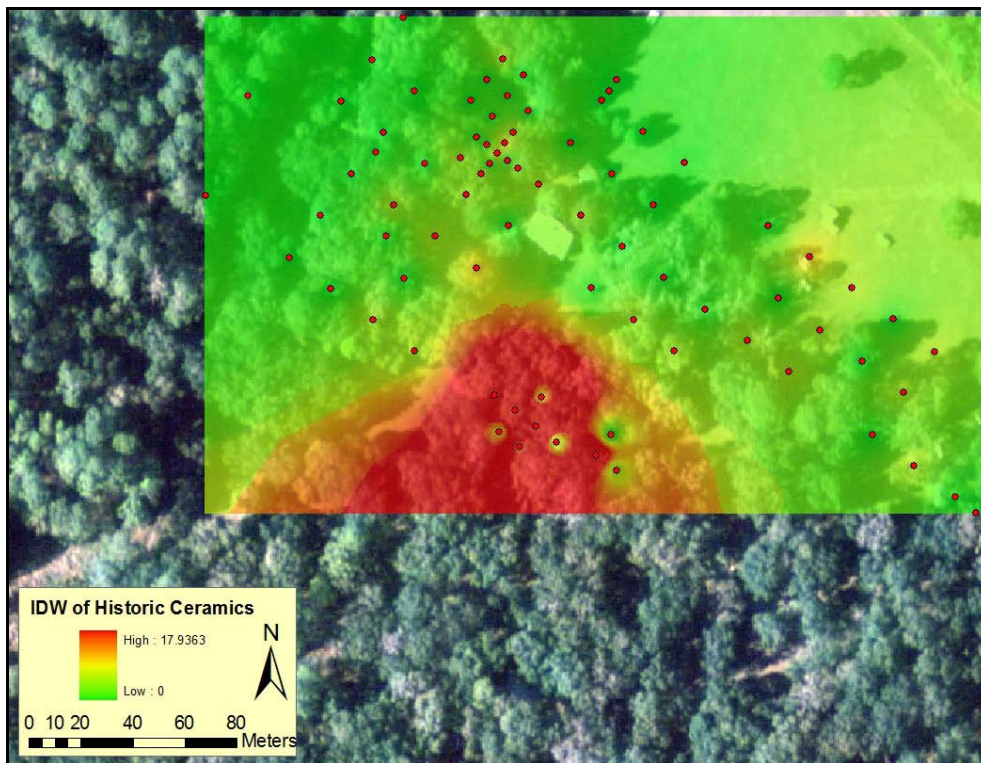


Figure 4. South End Historic Ceramic Frequency Distributions, 2008.

Ceramic types from the southernmost units at the site include plain and transfer printed pearlware, a single sherd of creamware, plain, edged, banded, and transfer printed whiteware, and alkaline glazed stoneware. The profile of one of the survey units in this area presented a sloping stratum that appears to represent the edge of a historic pit or at least a substantial sheet deposit. The surface collection from this area included a small fragment of structural tabby, antebellum ceramic fragments, and a complete blade gunflint. Numerous clothing and personal items were also recovered (Figure 5).



Figure 5. South Slave Cabin Area Artifacts. Top, left to right: Bone button; porcelain button; iron and brass suspender button; copper hook-and-eye fragment. Bottom: Brass buckle; gray blade gunflint; burned bone toothbrush fragment.

The belated discovery of what appeared to be a possible slave midden led to a second season of survey work in the presumed south slave cabin area. The 2009 research was focused on two principal goals: (1) determining the spatial and temporal parameters of the South End archaeological record, and (2) attempting to identify the presence of frame structures associated with the antebellum (presumably slave) component. Specifically, if wood frame cabins were present in this area, they should be discerned archaeologically mainly by the presence of square cut nails in primary context (Schiffer 1982), assuming substantial nail reclamation and/or reuse has not occurred. Corner posts of brick or tabby that would support wooden joists were not expected to be encountered due to probable reuse of such obvious materials; the same was probably true for any brick hearths and chimney remains (and stoves may have replaced fireplaces). In fact, only one unit contained brickbats at the site, but it was located in an area of high nail concentrations. Secondary refuse, particularly ceramics, container glass and faunal remains would be expected to be deposited adjacent to the cabin footprint, following a Brunswick style refuse disposal pattern (South 1977) and assuming the frame cabins had wooden floors that would preclude primary refuse disposal. Thus, midden and architectural materials would be expected to occur in an inverse relationship: the midden would be adjacent to the cabins, while nails would generally although not exclusively occur within the cabin footprint.

2009 SURVEY RESULTS

Rather than relying on the 20 m survey grid that had been used at the other sites investigated by UTC, the standard survey interval in 2009 was reduced to 10 m. This tighter interval was used in an attempt to better define what was assumed to be a fairly subtle archaeological record. After re-establishing the site grid with a total station, a total of 80 half-meter survey units were excavated to sterile using 1/4" mesh screen; two survey units were expanded to 1 x 1 m test pits due to the presence of features. These 80

survey units were combined with 65 units excavated in 2008, so that only artifacts associated with the 10 m grid system from 2008 and 2009 are presented in the following maps. Table 1 presents the total ceramic assemblage derived from all proveniences at the site. Of these, 237 were associated with the 10 m grid units.

Table 1. Total Ceramic Frequencies and Weights, South End.

Artifact Type	Frequency
Unglazed Earthenware	2
Lead Glazed Earthenware	3
Lead Glazed Redware	2
UID Earthenware	6
Plain Delftware	1
Astbury Ware	1
Plain Creamware	2
Plain Pearlware	16
Blue Transfer Printed Pearlware	32
Brown Transfer Print Pearlware	1
Blue Shell Edged Pearlware	8
Green Shell Edged Pearlware	2
Blue Hand Painted Pearlware	3
Banded Pearlware	1
Plain Whiteware	153
Blue Transfer Printed Whiteware	31
Brown Transfer Print Whiteware	3
Red Transfer Print Whiteware	1
Blue Shell Edged Whiteware	12
Green Shell Edged Whiteware	1
Banded Whiteware	13
Annular Finger Painted Whiteware	1
Dendritic Whiteware	1
Polychrome Hand Painted Whiteware	8
Blue Hand Painted Whiteware	4
Sponge Decorated Whiteware	2
Flowing Blue Whiteware	1
Yellowware	1
Brown Salt Glazed Stoneware	2
Alkaline Glazed Stoneware	2
Blue on Brown Incised Stoneware	1
Blue Salt Glazed Stoneware	3
Plain Porcelain	5
Modern Porcelain	1
TOTAL	326

From the dateable types ($n=285$), a mean ceramic date of 1846.2 was calculated. Besides the inevitable Ditch Witch® utility trenches associated with nearby modern structures, features included a prehistoric Deptford refuse pit and two historic postholes (Figure 6).



Figure 6. South End Features. Left, prehistoric Deptford trash pit. Right, historic postholes, 390N 550E.

The 1 x 1 test unit containing the postholes produced red, clear, and blue beads; (Figure 7, bottom), several lead swan shot and percussion caps, a lead fishing weight, and plain and decorated whiteware pearlware ceramics. A fourth bead, ribbed and with a yellowish tint, was found nearby (Figure 7, top).



Figure 7. Beads from the South End, 2009.

Figure 8 illustrates the 2008-2009 frequency distributions for cut nails at the site, based on the 10 m survey interval. While we acknowledge the difficulty in dating nails, the presence of antebellum ceramics in this part of the site, coupled with the general absence of wire nails dating to the postbellum period (Adams 2002), indicate that most in our sample are probably antebellum in origin. We propose that these frequency contours roughly correspond to the locations of two frame slave cabins at the site. This assumes that the nail fragments were deposited in primary context. Another assumption imbedded in our proposal is that subsequent plowing at the site, if it did occur, would have a minimal effect on artifacts as small as nails, and in any case this type of post-depositional lateral displacement would be consistent across the site and therefore a negligible post-deposition variable. That the historic postholes were located on the edge of one of the two definable nail distributions (see circle, Figure 8) is an indication of at least some earth-fast elements associated with these structures.

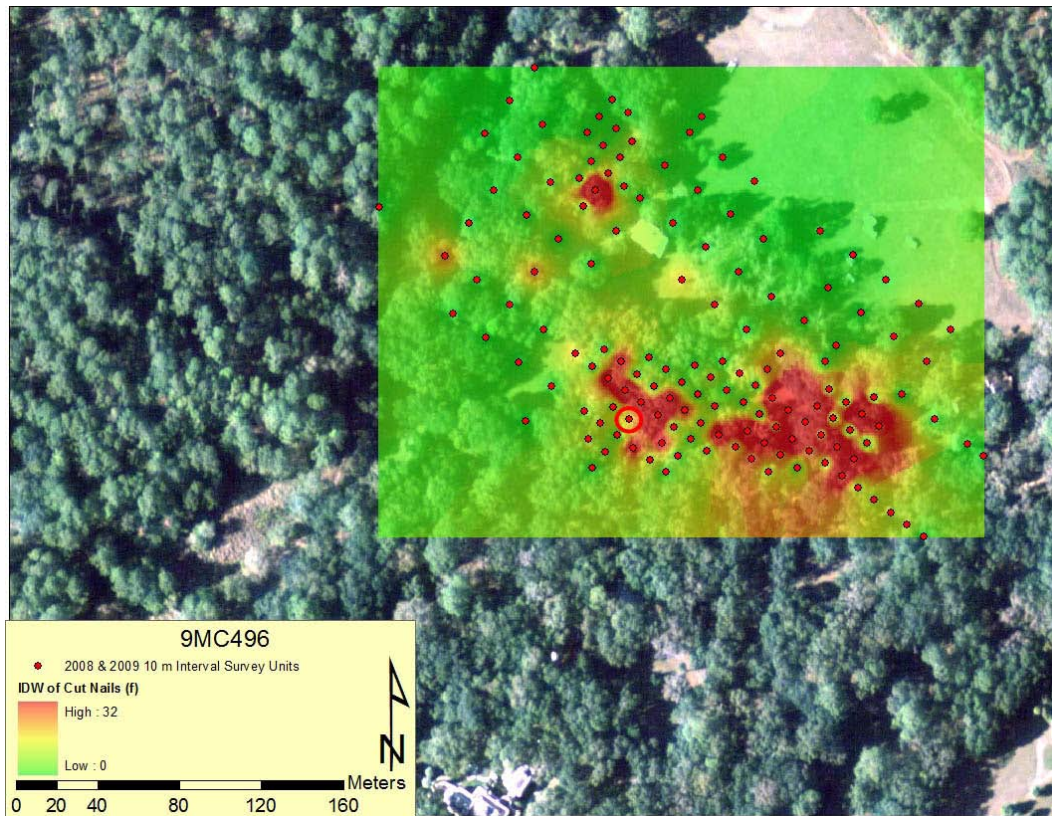


Figure 8. Frequency Distribution of Cut Nails, 10 m Survey Interval. Circled unit = postholes.

An interrelationship should also exist between nails and midden materials, that is, there should in general be an inverse spatial distribution between square nails and domestic refuse, assuming wood floors in the frame buildings that would preclude primary deposition (intentional or unintentional). Refuse disposal from entrances and exits of structures—or at least outside the structure’s footprint—would be necessary for a frame cabin. As shown in Figures 9, 10, and 11, such an inverse distribution is generally although not perfectly present for ceramics, container glass, and faunal remains, respectively; container glass in particular is rather sporadic, which may reflect our inability to isolate antebellum period from later glass artifacts, as well as the small sample size for this artifact group ($n=130$). At any rate, our predictive model of differential architectural versus domestic artifact distributions appears to be generally supported by the survey data at the South End.

CONCLUSIONS

While we naturally would have preferred a *perfect* inverse correlation of architectural and domestic artifacts, what the 10-m survey interval and GIS analysis seems to have captured are the faint signatures of at least two frame cabins. Not surprisingly, these distributions are much less obvious when using 20-m interval survey data. We believe this reflects the elusive archaeological nature of frame structures, meaning that intervals of 10 m (or even less) are required in order to discern cabins that contain few if any earth-fast elements. This has important CRM implications for future

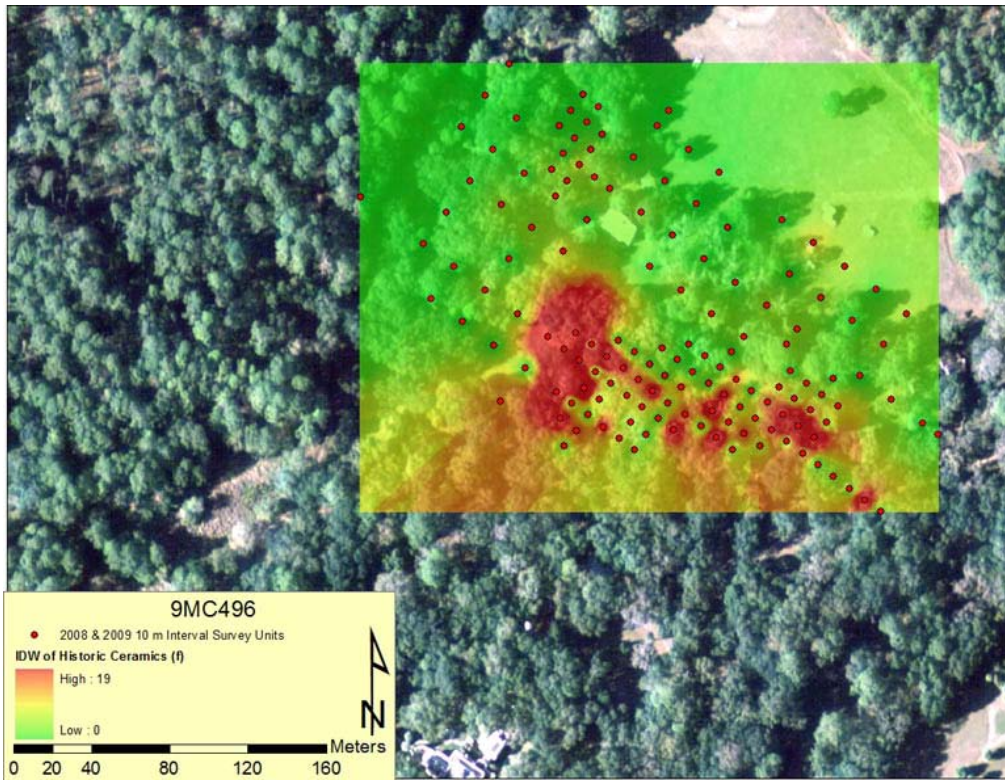


Figure 9. Frequency Distribution of Ceramics, 10 m Interval Survey.

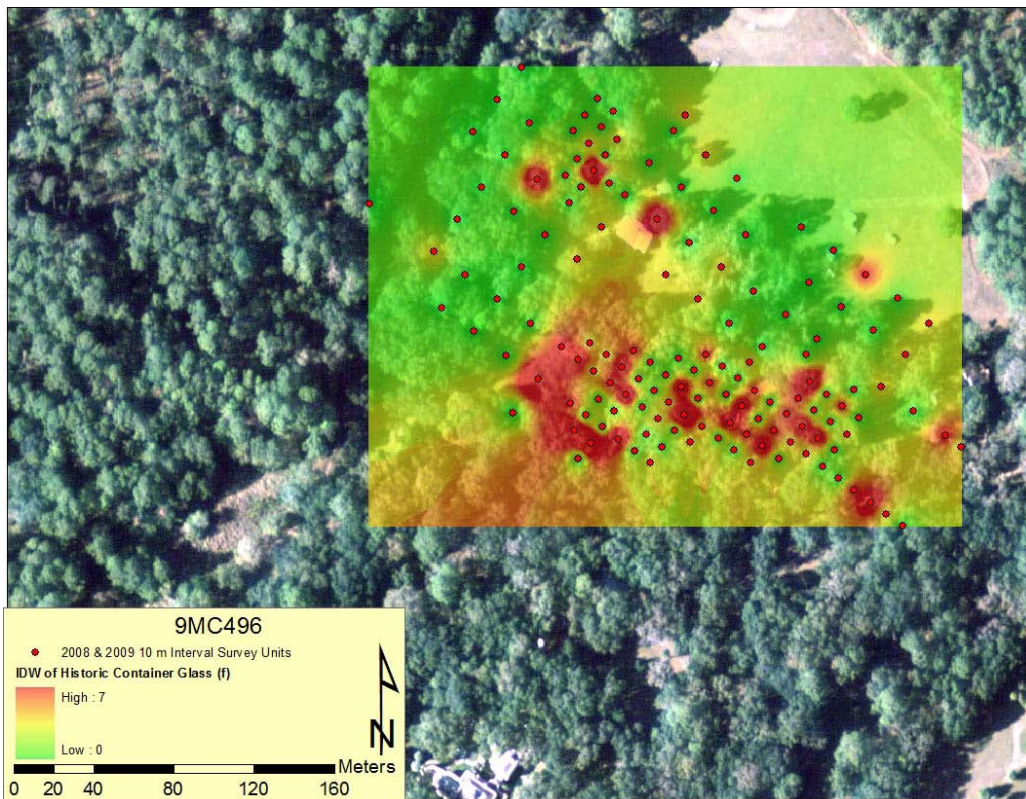


Figure 10. Frequency Distribution of Container Glass, 10 m Interval Survey.

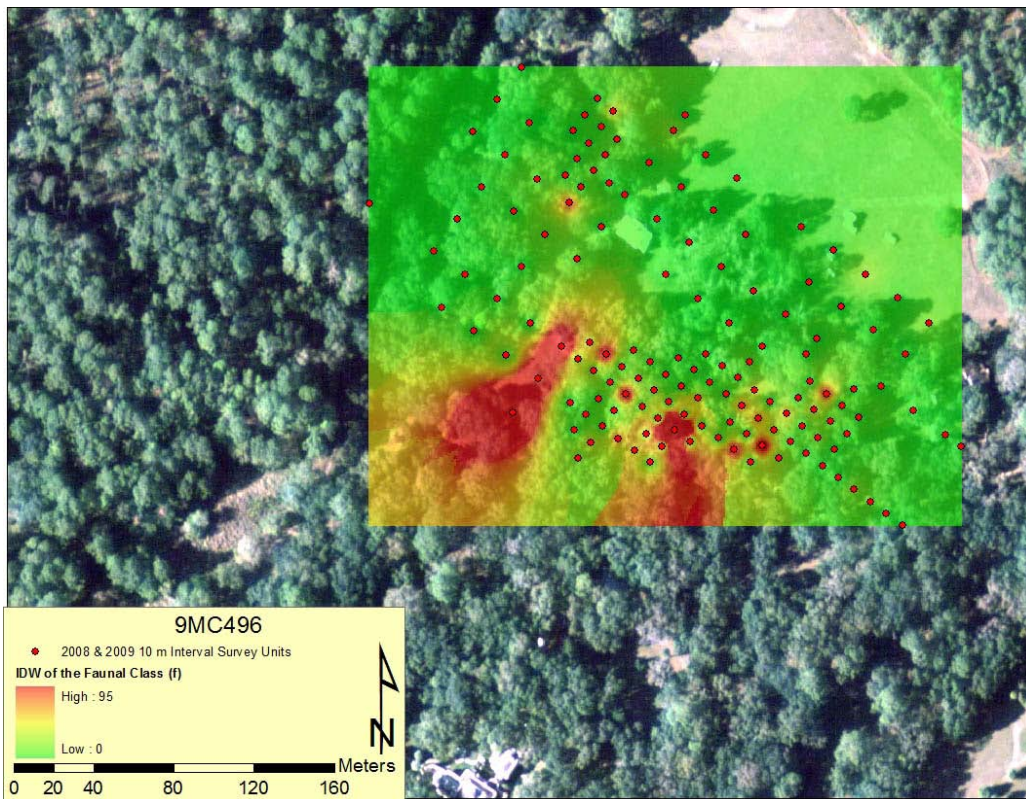


Figure 11. Distribution By Weight of Faunal Remains, 10 m Interval Survey.

research on Geechee sites on Sapelo and elsewhere: for sites with such poor visibility, archaeological focus (Deetz 1967) can only be achieved at the higher resolution of 10 m survey intervals.

The UTC survey has succeeded in identifying the probable presence of an antebellum slave occupation at the South End that in all likelihood corresponds to documented slave cabins on the DuVal map. But in identifying such structures, a larger question emerges. Why was there a shift to frame structures from poured tabby duplexes or African-derived wattle and tabby daub cabins? Substantial hard-tabby construction is a function of the economic milieu of a capitalistic plantation approach: tabby is extremely durable, but it is a time and labor-intensive construction technique and planter investment. Also, on post-Emancipation Sapelo, lumber may have become cheap and accessible during the 19th century, as lumber production became increasingly important in the coastal economy (Ray Crook, personal communication). Surely the difference in cost compared to more easily and cheaply constructed wooden buildings played a part for the shift away from tabby, especially when the South End plantation came under the control of a notably less successful planter after 1851, i.e., Randolph Spalding.

There may be a larger force at work here as well. Joe Joseph (1993) has proposed a novel theory concerning the apparent narrowing of differences in material culture between slaves and nonslaves in the 19th century tidewater area, including housing. Joseph proposes that an earlier race-based ideology in the plantation Low Country eventually shifted to one that emphasized labor specialization. This was a function of the development of a later, strictly capitalist plantation system, and this accompanying

economically-based ideological adjustment is reflected in the archaeological record. As Joseph suggests (1993:69), “With the shift to tidal rice agriculture, European-American planters stopped emphasizing the differences between Africans and Europeans, to the point that the material evidences of such cultural variation disappeared.” While Charles Orser (2007:23-24) has criticized this model for its “whole-culture” interpretation and a lack of emphasis on the effects of racialization as a permanent fact of plantation life, Joseph at least offers an intriguing suggestion to account for the puzzling contraction in the material-culture disparities between Low Country slave and planter sites over time. Perhaps this is reflected in the faint evidence for frame structures that we think we have identified at the South End of Sapelo Island. Such structures do not automatically signify a slave cabin the way tabby duplexes and African-styled huts do. Non-slave laborers lived in such homes, as did their enslaved counterparts.

Frame structures are common today among Geechee residents on Sapelo. Their pre- and post-Emancipation antecedents will probably always be archaeologically elusive, but they are still accessible.

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