

“Efforts to Preserve and Interpret the Combahee Ferry”

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More and more there are calls by public agencies and by archaeologists to remember our obligations set out in the 1966 National Historic Preservation Act to preserve our cultural resources “as a living part of our community life,” and to “give a sense of orientation to the American people.” The Combahee Ferry Historic District (CFHD) mitigation project is an ideal example of how the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) criteria for designation were used to assess the site for its importance in multi-layers of history including: Agriculture, Archaeology (Historic), Ethnic Heritage Black, Landscape Architecture, and Social History, and taken as a thematic whole illustrates the settlement, growth, development, rise, and decline of the South Carolina Lowcountry from the colonial through the modern eras. It is a natural, historical, and cultural landscape demonstrating the broad patterns and concrete details of much of early American history through the Civil War and of South Carolina history to the mid-twentieth century.

The South Carolina Department of Transportation (SCDOT) began to develop plans to widen the last two-lane stretch of US Highway 17 in South Carolina in the 1980s. This section of the highway extends through the ACE Basin in Beaufort and Colleton counties; the ACE Basin is an extensive series of waterways and historic landscapes along the Ashepoo, Combahee, and Edisto Rivers. However, the road widening plans were abandoned in the 1990s because of concerns about environmental impacts to the Basin. The widening of US Highway 17 to a four-lane divided highway would affect the largest acreage of wetlands ever in South Carolina up to that time. Initial cultural resources investigations identified a number of potentially significant sites at or near the Combahee River crossing but did not identify the most important historical event associated with this locale, the June 1863 Combahee Ferry Raid co-led by Harriett Tubman. This is the only locale within South Carolina and one of the few in the United

States that can be directly linked to Ms. Tubman and closely associated with the emancipation of African American slaves.

Since the late 1980s, archaeologists, both academic and in the cultural resources management world, have produced several important works that address historical themes related to ferry boats, landings, and ferry sites. Archaeologists in Alabama and Mississippi stated during their exhaustive study of the Tombigbee River that the “examination of ferry sites, with their dock construction and refuse areas, extant engineering elements of bridges and artifact concentrations from historic fords, is necessary for a complete definition of the historic road system.”¹ In 1988, archaeologist Mark Newell stated in a review of the rivers around Charleston that many ferryboats and sites remained and could provide important studies.² Archaeologist Jim Errante argues that, while a large percentage of plantations in South Carolina and Georgia maintain elements related to their “waterscape” (i.e., boat landings, sunken vessels, rice fields, causeways, etc.), “most archaeological studies, especially in cultural resources management (CRM) projects” have failed to assess or inventory them.³

Following a horrendous bus accident that resulted in the deaths of US Navy personnel in 2004, the SCDOT again decided to widen the highway since no other feasible alternative existed to relieve the safety issues inherent in this narrow stretch of road. Also, the bridge over the Combahee River, constructed in 1947, was now obsolete and required replacement. Brockington and Associates and Tidewater Atlantic Research conducted intensive surveys of the US Highway 17 corridor and identified one historic

¹Larry Murphy and Allen R. Saltus, *Phase II Identification and Evaluation of Submerged Cultural Resources in the Tombigbee River Multi-Resource District, Alabama and Mississippi*, vol. 17 (Tuscaloosa: The Office of Archaeological Research, University of Alabama, 1981), 9.

²Bradford Botwick, “Underwater Historic Archaeological Sites in South Carolina: A Research Plan” (M.A. thesis, University of South Carolina, 1989); Mark Newell, “Lost Ladies of the Rivers: An Overview of South Carolina’s Vanishing Heritage of Shipwrecks” (paper presented at Dive South Carolina ‘88, Columbia, South Carolina, 1988). For other studies see Lynn Harris, *The Waccamaw-Richmond Hill Waterfront Project 1991* (Columbia: South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, 1992).

³James R. Errante, “Waterscape Archaeology: Recognizing the Archaeological Significance of the Plantation Waterscape,” in *Carolina’s Historical Landscape: Archaeological Perspectives*, ed. Linda F. Stine, Martha Zierden, Lesley M. Drucker, and Christopher Judge (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 206.

property along this 21 mile stretch of highway, the Combahee Ferry Historic District which contained layers of history.

The First Layer of History: the Combahee Ferry

The area's first layer of history was first identified during the archival research. As the Senior Historian for the project, I guided the historical research, which included a cartographical study of the area. Historical maps show the layout of waterways, as well as the "location of landings, plantations, ferries, docks and wharves, forts."⁴ We gave particular attention to early maps of the colony to find which ferries the cartographers listed, their locations, and other details.⁵ Using the maps, we identified two ferries along the project route, the Combahee and the Ashepoo ferries. By the end of the colonial period, Combahee Ferry served as the principal crossing of the lower Combahee River.⁶

Based on the archival record, it was apparent that there were possible archaeological remains of a ferry in our project area. The ferry was one of the most significant historical modes of transportation in South Carolina from the colonial period to the development of bridges and, in the early twentieth century, the modern highway system. Because of the very nature of South Carolina's geography, it was vital, from the start of the colony, to have a means to cross the many rivers that flow from the interior to the Atlantic Ocean.⁷ The number of ferries that developed in the first fifty years of the

⁴ James Spirek and Christopher Amer, *The Port Royal Sound Survey, Phase One: Preliminary Investigations of Intertidal and Submerged Cultural Resources in Port Royal Sound, Beaufort County, South Carolina* (Columbia: Underwater Archaeology Division, South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of South Carolina, 1999), 84.

⁵South Carolina has a wealth of early maps. For a useful review of the colonial maps of South Carolina as well as other Southern colonies, see William P. Cummings, *The Southeast in Early Maps* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962).

⁶ Lawrence S. Rowland, Alexander Moore, and George C. Rogers, Jr., *The History of Beaufort County, South Carolina: Volume 1, 1514-1861* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1996), 116, 122.

⁷Charles F. Kovacik and John J. Winberry, *South Carolina: The Making of a Landscape* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1989), 81. Kovacik and Winberry is the definitive work on the geography and landscape of South Carolina. The rivers of the state have not been thoroughly studied as rural landscapes. The one exception is Henry Savage, *River of the Carolinas: The Santee* (1956; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968); however, Savage prepared this work before many of the important examinations of landscapes appeared. There is a definite need for scholars to reexamine the important rivers of South Carolina—the Ashley, Broad, Combahee, Cooper, Santee, Pee Dee, and Wando.

colony are apparent in a 1730 map of the political division of South Carolina which shows ferries at several rivers, such as the Savannah, Combahee, Edisto, Cooper, Ashepoo, Ashley, Broad, Pee Dee, Wando, and Santee. The ferry as an integral part of South Carolina's transportation network was the first layer of history. Therefore, the first layer of history was a ferry site, which contained possible archaeological remains. Yet, that was just the beginning.

The Second Layer of History: Radnor and a tavern, and the economic history

At the Combahee Ferry site, archival research indicated there was a town, Radnor; and a tavern, which represented another layer of history, the economic development of the area. With the success of the Combahee River Ferry, Stephen Bull established the town of Radnor in 1734 on his father William Bull's Newbury Plantation. It was not uncommon for large planters to branch out of the agricultural business to provide transportation and other services for their neighbors. Many owned gristmills and sawmills, and a few owned stores. Sometimes they dreamed of elaborate, planned towns. Bull planned Radnor to be a port of entry for loading and unloading ships of burden, because it was located between Charleston and Port Royal. During the colonial period, navigation on the Combahee River centered on transportation for the rice industry.⁸ In addition to being a local economic center, an act of the Commons House of Assembly on March 11, 1737 established Radnor as a market town. Records indicate that the town consisted of several buildings; however, the town never grew out of its infant state.

With the success of the Combahee Ferry and the creation of Radnor, Colonel John Mullryne of Beaufort constructed a combination store, lodging house, and public house in Radnor.⁹ It is not surprising that a tavern such as this was located at the Combahee Ferry. Taverns were among the most important social, political, and economic institutions in

Jamie W. Moore, "The Ashley and the Cooper Rivers," in *Rolling Rivers*, ed. Richard A. Bartlett (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1984), 10-13.

⁸ Gordon P. Watts, Jr., *Underwater Archaeological Remote Sensing Survey Proposed US 17 Bridge Widening and Replacement Corridor Beaufort and Colleton Counties, South Carolina* (Washington, NC: Tidewater Atlantic Research, Inc., 2005), 17.

⁹ Rowland, et al., *The History of Beaufort County, South Carolina: Volume 1, 1514-1861*, 116.

American colonial life and often were located at ferry sites.¹⁰ The July 11, 1754 issue of the *South Carolina Gazette*, contained an advertisement by Katherine Wyerhysen, the tavern keeper, for:

private lodging and entertainment for man and horse and also to ferry travelers over the said river, at the rate formally established by act of assembly

One shillings and three pence for a foot passage

Two shillings and five pence for man and horse

Five shillings for a chair and horse.¹¹

Taverns and public houses in South Carolina first opened within coastal communities such as Charleston. By the end of the seventeenth century, these businesses had begun to spread inland. Sites with regular traffic, such as Combahee Ferry were among the first locations to construct shelter and provide food, lodging, and information to passers-by. Rural taverns offered food, drink, stabling and care for horses, and a place to sleep for weary travelers. Taverns maintained by female proprietors often attempted to keep alcohol consumption to a minimum at their establishments, in order to maintain a reputation free from suspicion of other more illicit activities.¹²

Although the primary focus of taverns at crossing points was service to travelers, these businesses offered more than just fare and rest. Some archaeologists and historians have suggested that roads and their associated structures, such as ferry crossings, bridges, taverns and inns, have been generally overlooked within this developmental period suggest it.¹³ Preceding sentence is unclear/not a sentence? Archaeologist William Barr

¹⁰ Diana diZ Rockman and Nan A. Rothschild, "City Tavern, Country Tavern: An Analysis of Four Colonial Sites," *Historical Archaeology* XVIII (1984), 112; Tyrel G. Moore, Jr., "Role of Ferryboat Landings in East Tennessee's Economic Development, 1790-1870," *Studies in the Social Studies* 18 (1979), 5.

¹¹ The *South Carolina Gazette*, July 11, 1754.

¹² See Sharon V. Salinger, *Taverns and Drinking in Early America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002).

¹³ William Barr, "Strawberry Ferry and Childsbury Towne: a socio-economic enterprise on the western branch of the Cooper River, Saint John's Parish, Berkeley County, South Carolina," (master's

contends, “ferry crossings are of primary significance to socioeconomic patterns found in settlement.”¹⁴ Barr argues that the construction of the ferries usually resulted in the establishment of an inn or tavern to serve patrons of the crossing.¹⁵ Although taverns and inns are well documented through historical literature from the colonial period, extant structures at ferry crossings have been difficult to locate. Therefore, we had another layer of history and the opportunity through archaeological investigation to examine an important site. But archival research continued to provide more layers of history.

African American History and the Ferry

With the presence of the ferry and nearby rice fields, we knew that the area had a large African American presence and might have significance related to African American history. The archival record indicates that from the earliest ferry charters, slaves manned several of the ferries operating in the Lowcountry, so slaves probably operated the ferry.¹⁶ Also, the slaves worked the rice fields in the area, yet, there was an even more important aspect of the African American history.

With the fall of Port Royal and Beaufort, General Robert E. Lee, commander of the new Department of South Carolina, Georgia, and East Florida on November 5, 1861, changed the defense strategy for the rivers of the state. Lee moved the defenses from the coastal islands and deep waterways inland to where the rivers emptying into the sounds were narrow and shallower. At these spots, including Combahee Ferry, he ordered the construction of batteries and fortifications to stop Union advances. The fortifications would be manned with pickets and reinforced by reserves moved along the Charleston and Savannah Railroad. The strategy protected the South Carolina–Georgia coast against

thesis, University of South Carolina, 1995); H. Roy Merrens, ed., *Colonial South Carolina Scene: Contemporary Views, 1697-1774* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1977), 138.

¹⁴ Ibid., 45.

¹⁵ Ibid., 79-80.

¹⁶ David J. McCord, ed., *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina, Vol. IX* (Columbia, SC: A.S. Johnston, 1841), 61.

deep penetration by Union forces until General William Sherman's attack from the interior of the state.¹⁷

In the summer of 1863, the Union Army conducted operations along the Combahee River in an effort to test a new strategy of raiding the inland waterways and targeting plantations for destruction and slaves for freedom. By 1863, several commanders of Union African American units advocated raids behind the Confederate lines, with the primary goals of recruiting freed slaves into the army and gathering supplies. Colonel James Montgomery, a former Kansas Jayhawker and follower of John Brown, led a regiment of former slaves on the first of what was to be a series of raids. Additionally, Montgomery was supported by the intelligence work of Harriet Tubman, the former Underground Railroad leader, who also accompanied the raid.

In June 1863, Union forces traveled up the Combahee River to attack the plantations along the river. There were three landings along the river: Field's Point, Tar Bluff, and Combahee Ferry. The raid of the plantations resulted in massive destruction of private property and the freedom of between 750 and 800 slaves. Of the slaves rescued, more than 400 enlisted in a new regiment formed at Hilton Head, the 3rd South Carolina Infantry. Later, the unit became part of the 21st United States Colored Infantry. Additionally, property damage for the entire raid, exclusive of slaves, was estimated to be around \$2 million.

Although the Combahee Ferry Raid was important in several aspects of American history, as the American public struggled with the memory of the Civil War, certain aspects, including the contributions of the African American soldier, became problematic in the Jim Crow society of the South. During World War II, the US government began to celebrate the contributions of African Americans to the US military tradition. This celebration of otherwise ignored groups was likely a response to the philosophy of fascism and the racists of Nazi Germany and Imperial Japan. The elevating of African American heroes also helped to bind the nation together during the struggle. In 1944, the US military honored Harriet Tubman's memory and contributions to the Union Army, by naming a United States Liberty ship, *SS Harriet Tubman* (Hull Number 3032).

¹⁷Russell Frank Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (New York: Macmillan, 1973), 100.

During the 1960s, again the memory of Tubman and the Combahee Ferry Raid reemerged on the national stage. Recent scholarship has shown that women during the 1950s and early 1960s were struggling with contradictory images. While some popular magazines, like *Life*, promoted an image of domesticity, others tried to show women that they had an alternative. Later in the 1960s, groups like the National Organization of Women formed, and women became active in the Civil Rights and other political movements. In this period of change and realization of race and gender, African American women turned to the Combahee Ferry Raid as a symbol. In the 1970s, a group of African American women formed the Combahee River Collective as a means to counter the opposition they viewed in the society and culture surrounding them. The Combahee River Collective drew on traditions of earlier writers and orators including Henry David Thoreau and Frederick Douglass.

Developing the NRHP Nomination

Therefore, we had multiple layers of important history, and a collection of resources, we needed to blend the resources together in a cohesive manner. The Combahee Ferry NRHP District includes 18 resources: eleven terrestrial and underwater archaeological sites and seven aboveground architectural or landscape features. We determined that the period of significance for this district is from circa 1700 to circa 1930, this represents the period of operation of the ferry. The historic district contains resources associated with four major themes: (1) the development of South Carolina's transportation network, (2) military activities during the Revolutionary War and Civil War, (3) the development of rice plantations in the ACE Basin, and (4) development of the local economic institutions (e.g., taverns/stores).

The Combahee River Historic District is a remarkably intact historic and cultural landscape. Many historic structures, and objects from the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries are still standing, and archaeological remains of settlements, fortifications, and other structures that supported agricultural activity are generally intact. In addition, landscape features such as rice fields, banks, canals, a causeway, roads, and a cemetery, many of them present on eighteenth and early nineteenth century plats and maps, can be seen on the ground today. Although the cultural landscape has evolved with

changing land uses, the district retains its historic rural setting of banked and ditched marshes and swamps, upland pine and hardwood forests, narrow tree-lined roads, and river views largely unobstructed by modern development.

By the mid-eighteenth century, the Combahee River served not only as a principal transportation route for plantation goods, services, and people but also played a vital role in the successful production of rice. The earliest rice cultivation was on inland fields created from swamps and along creeks and branches at some distance from the river, in some cases more than a mile, and removed from tidal influence. During the mid-eighteenth century the technology to control tidal flooding of the fields was introduced to the Combahee River, and the tidal marshes became the focus of rice cultivation. A complex system of dikes, dams, canals, and trunks, much of which is either still visible or nearly intact throughout the district. These landscape features are tangible evidence of the work of thousands of slaves who provided the labor force for the plantations.

Several resources contribute to the development of South Carolina's transportation network at the Combahee Ferry site. Site 38CN256 is the submerged remains of the ferry crossing. Also present near the ferry site is the possible remains of a vessel (38CN255), and several scatters of archaeological materials related to the maritime activities or the construction of an earlier highway bridge (38CN19, 38BU2137, and 38BU2138). These sites illustrate the transportation activities that occurred at this locale.

Several resources contribute to the military activities during the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. The Combahee River witnessed the development of numerous rice plantations, from which South Carolina derived much of its wealth in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Skirmishes likely occurred here during the Revolutionary War and the Civil War, although we have recovered no direct evidence of these engagements to date. Sites 38BU1217, 38BU1884, and 38BU1885 are Confederate earthworks that do indicate the strategic importance of this locale for the Confederate defense of the Charleston to Savannah Railroad.¹⁸ Tubman, the principal "conductor" of the Underground Railroad, helped organize the Combahee Ferry Raid, and may well have

¹⁸ James Henry Gooding, *On the Altar of Freedom: A Black Soldier's Civil War Letters from the Front* (Garner Books, New York, 1992)

been the first woman in United States history to plan and execute an armed campaign.¹⁹ The rice fields (551 0441) contribute to the recreation of the setting of the ferry crossing during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially during the Civil War, providing the visitor with an appreciation of what Tubman would have seen on the night of her historic raid.

Several resources contribute to the theme of rice plantations in the ACE Basin. The Cypress Plantation rice fields (551 0441) and the causeway (551 1475) illustrate the rural landscape that developed because of rice cultivation. The Combahee Ferry also was operated by the owners of the Newport Plantation (551 291) and its previous incarnations. In addition, an African-American cemetery (38BU1218) illustrates that African Americans remained in the area after emancipation and took up farming under the new systems of tenancy and sharecropping that developed after the Civil War. Also, the cemetery has at least two graves of soldiers of the 34th US Colored Infantry Regiment (originally the 2nd SCCVI) that participated in the June 1863 raid. The 1811 plat of Newport Plantation shows a possible row of slave houses on the east bank of the Combahee River, in an area that is currently marsh lands. We investigated this area and both banks of the Combahee around 38BU1216 by canoe and found no dry ground. The area shown on the plat was made land during the eighteenth and/or nineteenth century, and has likely eroded into the river. It is possible that submerged resource 38CN19 may represent the remnants of these buildings.

Blending all of these resources together, we recommended the Combahee River Historic District is nationally significant in the areas of Agriculture, Architecture, Archaeology (Historic), Ethnic Heritage Black, Landscape Architecture, and Social History and taken as a thematic whole illustrates the settlement, growth, development, rise, and decline of the South Carolina Lowcountry from the colonial through the modern eras. All of these features illustrate the continuing use and occupation of the area from the early settlement patterns of the late seventeenth century to the changing uses of the landscape in the early decades of the twentieth century. The agricultural character of the

¹⁹ Kate Clifford Larson, *Bound for the Promised Land: Harriet Tubman, Portrait of an American Hero* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2003).

region from naval stores to rice and indigo, and later to conservation, waterfowl and game management, and tree farming, was imposed on the natural setting and in turn produced a unique cultural landscape through the period of significance, ca. 1670-ca. 1950 [1700-1930 above]?

The historic district is eligible for the NRHP under Criterion A because the US Highway 17 crossing of the Combahee River has strong historical associations with significant themes related to the development of South Carolina and the United States. From the early eighteenth century, this location served as the primary crossing for all travelers between Charleston, Beaufort, Savannah, and all lands south, by either a ferry or a bridge. The causeway (551 1475) that carries US Highway 17 over the Combahee River marshes and the remnants of the original road through archaeological site 38BU1216 (5011) follow the earliest route that crossed the Combahee River. Submerged archaeological site 38CN255 may be the remnants of a Civil War pontoon; other underwater archaeological sites (38CN19, 38CN256, 38BU2137, 38BU2138) reflect episodes of vessel trimming or elements of older bridges or wharves that once served the ferry. The Combahee River witnessed the development of numerous rice plantations, from which South Carolina derived much of its wealth in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The rice fields on the east bank of the river (551 0441), although lacking well-preserved features, reflect this aspect of South Carolina history.

Additionally, the historic district is eligible for the NRHP under Criterion B for its association with two well-known abolitionists, Harriet Tubman and James Montgomery, who led a Union Army raid at the Combahee Ferry in 1863. Tubman was an important abolitionist leader and assisted in the development of African-American units in the Union army. Montgomery had been active in the Kansas border disputes before the Civil War. In January 1863, after meetings with abolitionist George Stearns, Kansas senator Samuel Pomeroy, and President Abraham Lincoln, the War Department authorized Montgomery to recruit and organize a black regiment in the Department of the South. The unit would eventually become known as the Second South Carolina Colored Volunteers.

In addition, the historic district is eligible for the NRHP under Criterion C because it contains several sites (38BU1217, 38BU1884, 38BU1885, and 38CN257) that

are excellent examples of Confederate earthworks that indicate the strategic importance of this locale for the Confederate defense of the Charleston to Savannah Railroad. Remnant batteries present at 38BU1216 both east and west of US Highway 17 demonstrate construction specific to the Civil War.

Finally, the historic district is eligible for the NRHP under Criterion D because site 38BU1216 contains the intact subsurface remnants of buildings that likely served the ferry keeper and ferry patrons during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Encampments associated with fortifications can provide information about the daily life of soldiers during the Civil War. Submerged resources may yield information about transportation and maritime activities that occurred at the Combahee Ferry. It reflects the development and evolution of transportation infrastructure during the eighteenth through twentieth centuries, the economic development of the region, and African-American use of the Lowcountry landscape during the Postbellum period. It reflects Confederate efforts to defend the Charleston to Savannah Railroad and was the scene of one of the most important events related to the emancipation of enslaved African Americans that occurred during the Civil War in South Carolina. Archaeological investigations at 38BU1216 can provide important information about the people who operated and used the Combahee Ferry; investigation of 38CN255 may provide information about the construction of vessels employed as ferries at this crossing.

Mitigation of the Site and Public Involvement

Once identified, the SCDOT immediately began efforts to avoid or minimize impacts to the District. The SCDOT, Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), and the SC State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) entered into negotiations to define the activities necessary to mitigate adverse effects to the District. Given the nature of the ACE Basin and its terrain, there was no feasible alternative to building the new road atop the existing roadway. Portions of the project were redesigned to create the smallest possible footprint through the District and to avoid specific features related to the Civil War occupations of the ferry crossing. A Memorandum of Agreement between the principals outlined six tasks necessary to mitigate the adverse effects of the US Highway 17 projects to the CFHD.

Brockington and Associates, in consultation with the SCDOT and SCDAH, developed a public outreach program concerning the CFHD as further mitigation for adverse effects that the district will suffer as a result of the proposed project. The program will include multimedia presentation that showcases the important historical themes and events related to the Combahee Ferry Historic District. The five products include: one double-sided historical marker, a double-sided outdoor interpretive sign within a covered kiosk, a traveling panel exhibit, two educational lesson plans for local schools, and a website.

In summary, our primary goal for the CFHD was to protect this important collection of resources. While many people find the Tubman raid the most interesting part of the area's history, we attempted to show the multiple layers of history and their interconnection. The raid would not have happened where it did if the ferry was not an important transportation and economic center. The town, Radnor, and the plantations would not have developed like they did without the ferry.