

**The Archaeology of Indian Slavers and Colonial Allies:
Excavations at the Yamasee Capital of Altamaha Town**

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Between June 2006 and January 2007, Brockington and Associates conducted data recovery excavations at the Yamasee town of Altamaha, located in the lower coastal plain of South Carolina. This town served as the capital for the Lower Yamasee from as early as 1695, and was abandoned shortly after the start of the Yamasee War in 1715.

Ethnohistorical research has traced the cultural origins of the Yamasee towns in South Carolina to Indian settlements within Spanish Florida along the Georgia coast during the mid to late 17th century; and earlier to Indian provinces located in the interior of Georgia from the 16th and 17th centuries (Figure 1). Altamaha, along with the other three Lower Yamasee towns, all derived from Indian provinces in the Oconee River Valley in central GA. In 1683, the Yamasee, along with much of the Guale population, migrated to South Carolina from coastal GA following attacks from other Indian groups and pirates, as well as enduring abuses in the Spanish repardimento labor drafts.

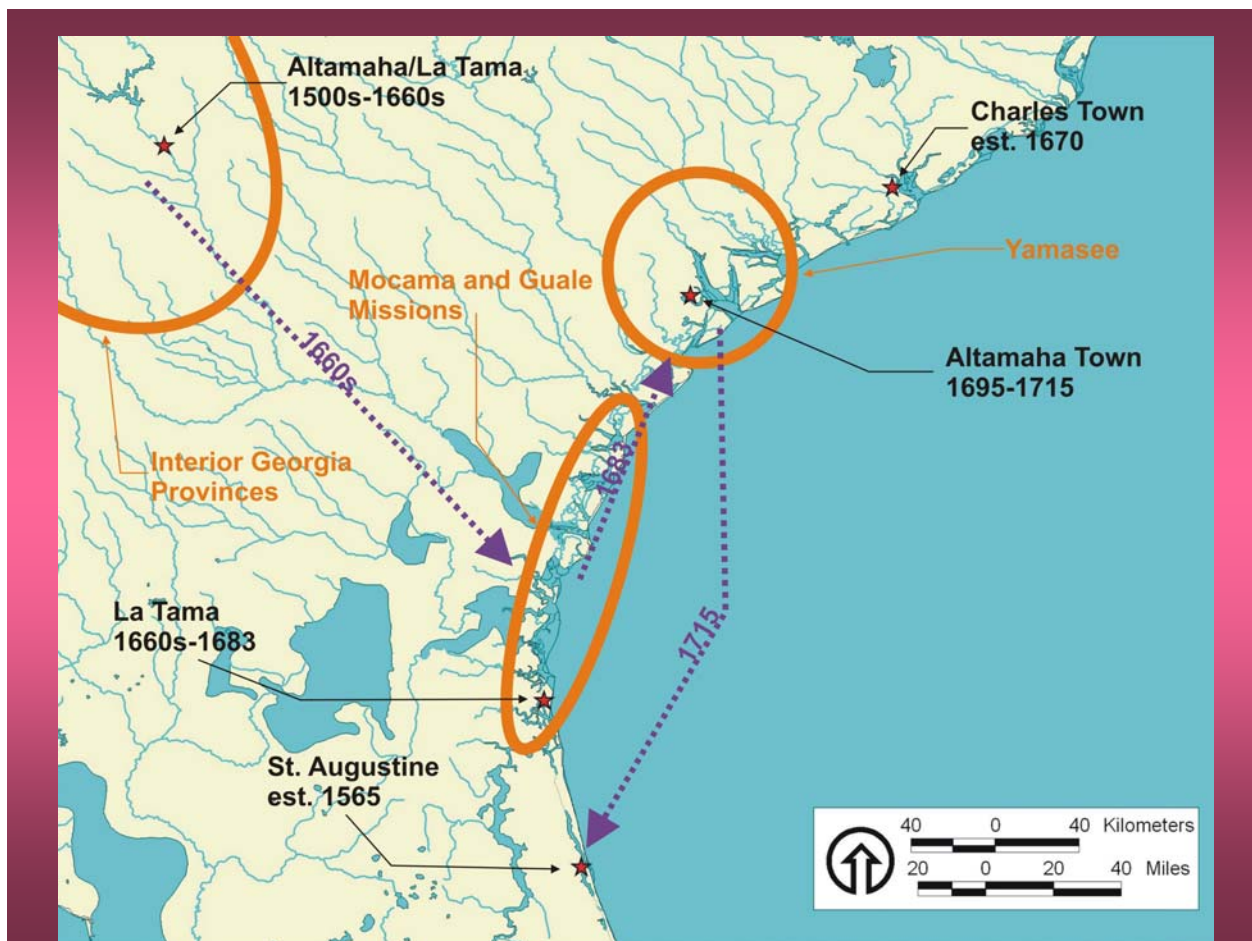


Figure 1. Location of Yamasee migration between the Sixteenth and early Eighteenth centuries.

While in South Carolina, the Yamasee become allies with the English colonists from Charleston during the late 17th and early 18th century. The Yamasee occupied the land between the English colonists in Charleston and the Spanish in Florida, providing a protective buffer between the two European colonies. The Yamasee fought along side the colonists during the

Tuskarora war in North Carolina and against the Spanish in Florida. The Yamasee raided other Indian groups, particularly those in Spanish Florida, and sold them to the colonists as slaves. In 1715, this alliance between the Yamasee and the colonists ended with the outbreak of the Yamasee War, which resulted in the relocation of the Yamasee back to Spanish Florida near St. Augustine a few months later.

Altamaha Town consists of two adjacent sites located near the confluence of the Colleton River and Chechessee Creek in Bluffton, SC (Figure 2). Our field investigations were focused within the 2.2 hectares of 38BU1836/1837 and 9 of the 32 hectares of 38BU20/1206, approximately 1/3rd of the site. The remaining 21 hectares of the larger site, is protected in the Altamaha Preserve which is maintained and owned by Beaufort County.

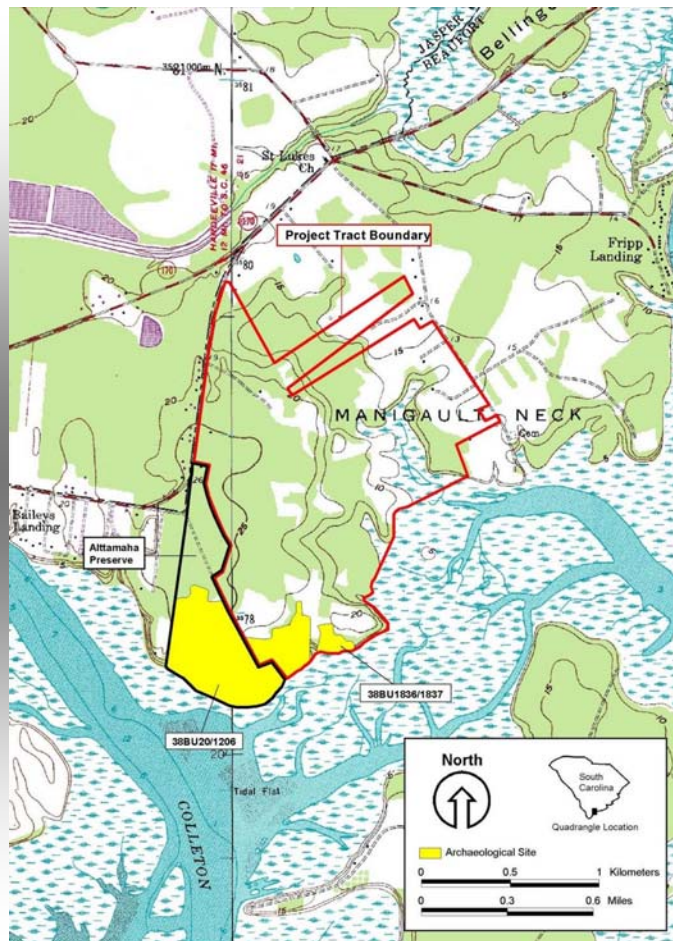


Figure 2. USGS topographic location of Altamaha Town.

This portion of a 1732 plat shows the location of Altamaha Town, flanked by the Yamasee towns of Chechesy Town to the east and Okatie Town to the west (Figure 3). In the early 1990's Bill Green and Chester DePratter confirmed the location of Altamaha Town within 38BU20/1206.

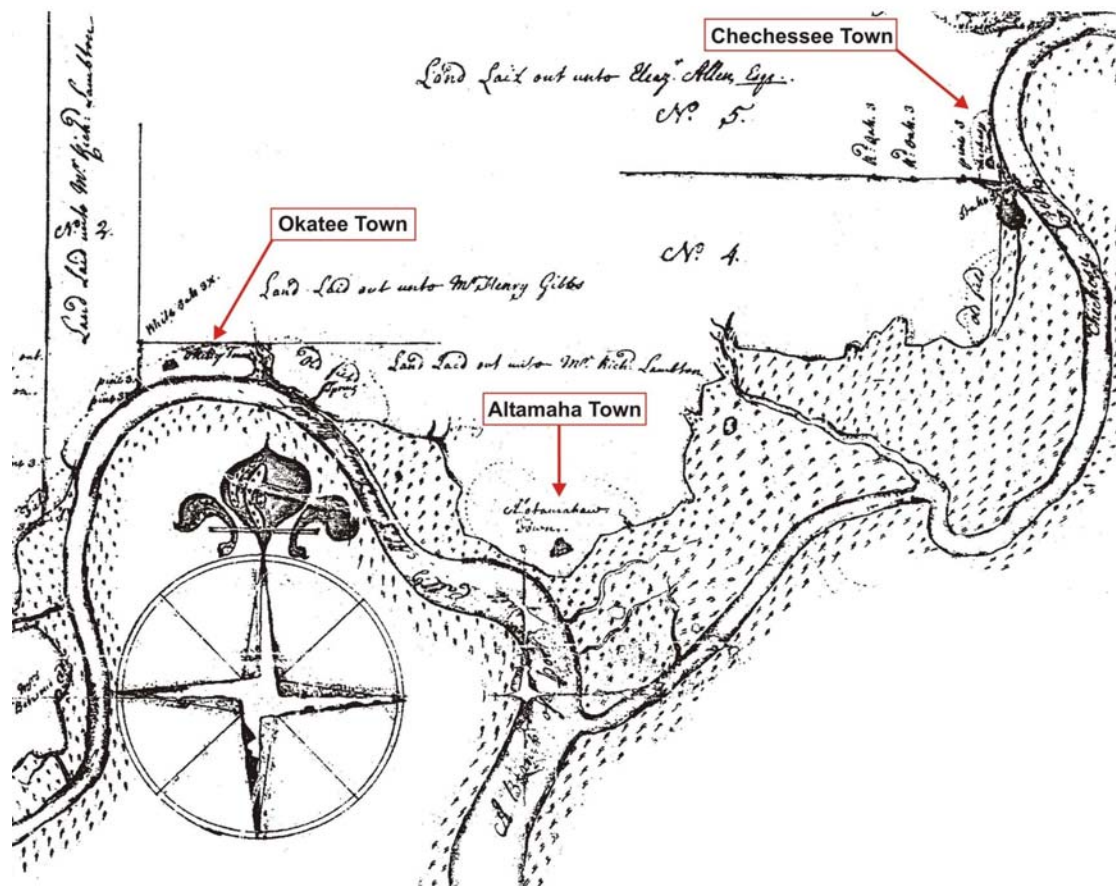


Figure 3. 1732 plat showing the location of Altamaha Town.

In 1999, Brockington and Associates conducted Phase I survey across the entire site and identified various areas that contained Yamasee-related artifacts (Figure 4). The areas outlined in Blue and Orange shows the general locations of our data recovery excavations. The blue areas were thought to have contained a concentration of Yamasee-related artifacts; the orange areas are empty spaces between these concentrations.

This first phase our current investigation consisted of close interval shovel testing, metal detection, and detailed mapping (Figure 5). At the larger site, shovel tests were excavated at 5 meter intervals to redefine the concentrations of Yamasee-related artifacts. At the adjacent smaller site, shovel tests were excavated at 7.5 meter intervals in 2005 that provided more than adequate data for determining Yamasee-artifact concentrations.

The next phase of our investigation included hand excavated units, mechanical striping, and feature excavations (Figure 6). Using density maps based upon data from the close interval shovel tests, hand excavated units were placed in the areas of the densest concentrations of Yamasee artifacts. In total, we excavated 574 sq meters by hand. Using a smooth-bladed backhoe, approximately 2,600 sq meters was mechanically scraped.

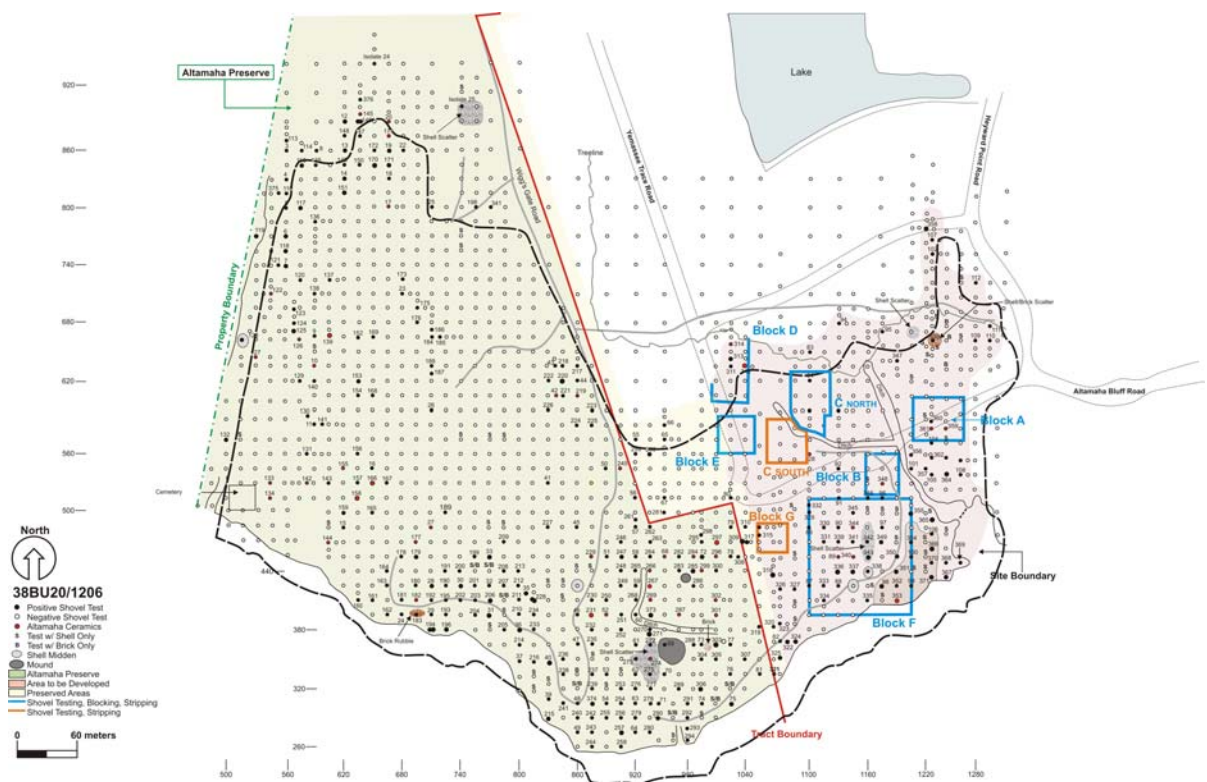


Figure 4. Plan map showing location of survey shovel tests and additional areas of interest for data recovery excavations.



Figure 5. Clockwise from top left: a) archaeologists using total station for detailed mapping of Altamaha Town; b) archaeologists using $\frac{1}{4}$ -wire mesh to screen artifacts from excavated shovel tests; c) use of metal detector in an effort to define metal concentrations at the site; and d) excavation of shovel test pit.



Figure 6. Clockwise from top left: a) view of continuous hand excavated block of units; b) technicians cleaning the excavation floor by troweling and shovel schnitting; c) use of a backhoe to expose cultural features; d) excavation of a cultural feature.

Both the mechanical and hand excavations were dug to approximately 40 -50 cm below the ground surface, the zone where Yamasee cultural features were easily identifiable (Figure 7). Our investigations benefitted from a lack of disturbances resulting from plowing, timbering, or past agricultural land use, which made for simplified feature identification. From this, we were able to identify 383 possible cultural features.

Based upon the configuration of post features, we identified six identical circular houses in five of the areas we investigated (Figure 8). Three of these houses were located within our hand excavated block of units, the other three were located within mechanical scrapes. All of these houses are approximately seven meters in diameter. Several interior posts are found inside each structure which may be the remnants of either sleeping platforms or wall partitions. No hearths were found inside any of the houses, and only one house contained storage pits. These houses are similar in size and shape to round pre-contact houses found in the Oconee River Valley, the general location of the Yamasee cultural origins. This suggests that despite interaction with Europeans, the Yamasee retained their cultural traditions for building houses.



Figure 7. Clockwise from top left: a) use of a boom-lift to obtain a bird's eye view of the exposed excavation floor; b) archaeologists examining cultural features in the excavation floor; c) view from the boom-lift over the excavation floor.

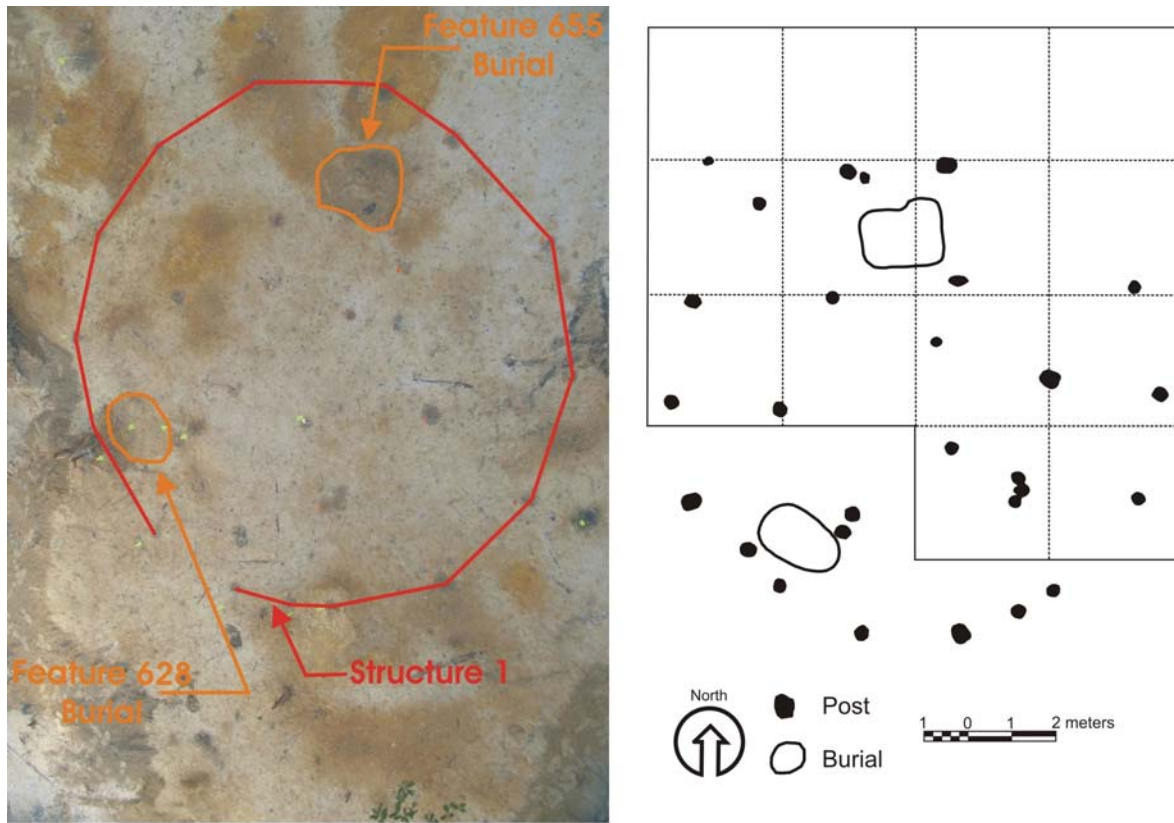


Figure 8. Photograph and plan drawing of Structure 1.

Six human burials were identified in five of the six houses (Figure 9). The burials were situated just inside the exterior walls of the houses. This burial sketch shows a flexed interment with an adornment of blue glass bead acquired through trade. The remains of a woven mat was located near the skull. A few iron nails were also identified.

Several features were also present in yard areas outside of the Yamasee houses (Figure 10). These yard features include storage or trash pits, linear trenches, various shell piles and smudge pits. Additional configurations of posts, which are possibly the remnants of screens or racks were also identified.

In the southeastern portion of the larger site, 71 posts spaced at roughly 25-30 cm apart from one another are aligned to form a palisade wall (Figure 11). The wall is approximately 25 meters long and opens up facing towards a point overlooking Chechesee Creek; perhaps providing some use as a defensive fortification against intruders traveling downstream.

The majority of the artifacts were pottery sherds. Among the decorated ceramics, Altamaha Line Blocked or over stamped rectilinear pottery appears to be the most common diagnostic pottery among the Yamasee-related materials (Figure 12). Here we have a large

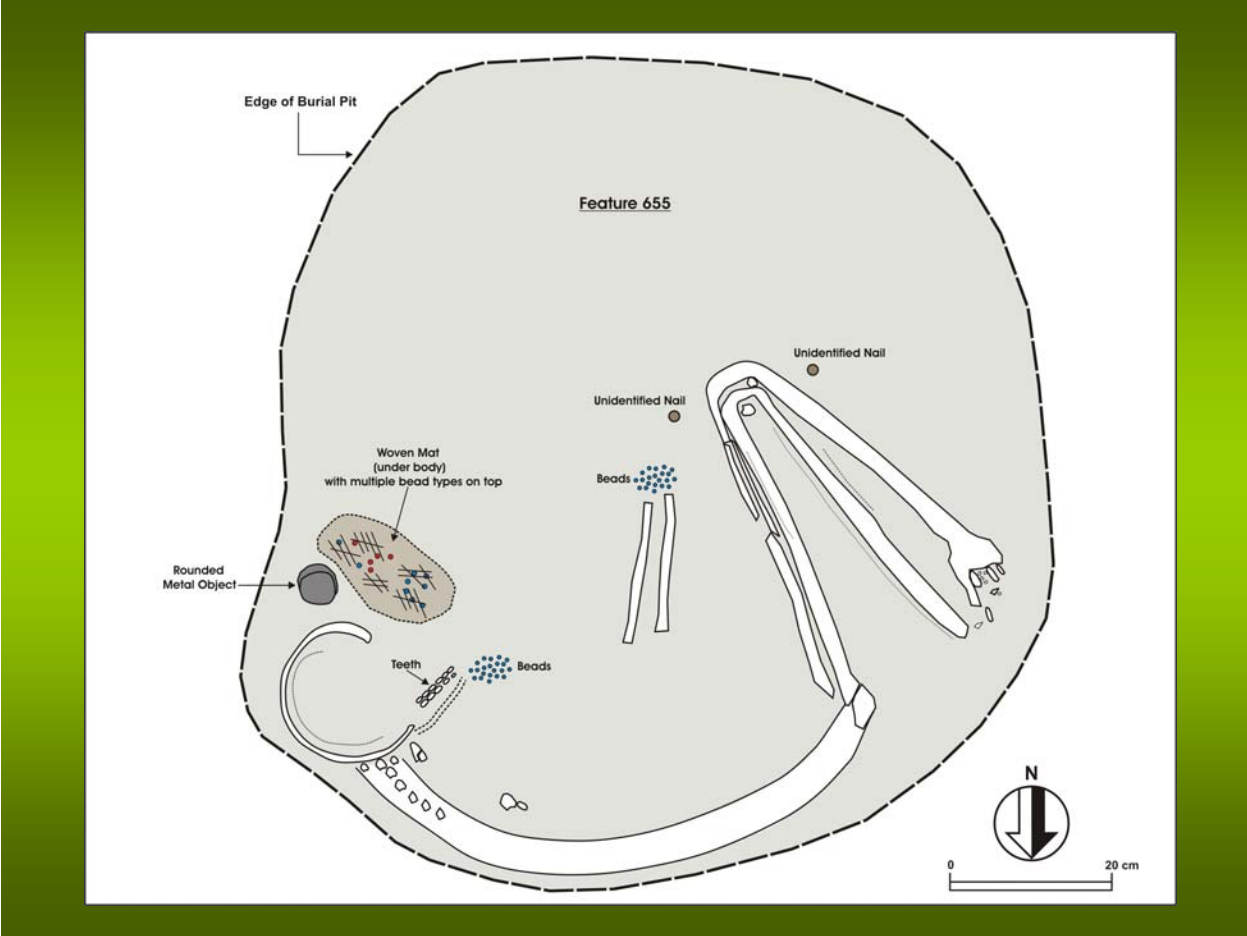


Figure 9. Plan view sketch of burial.

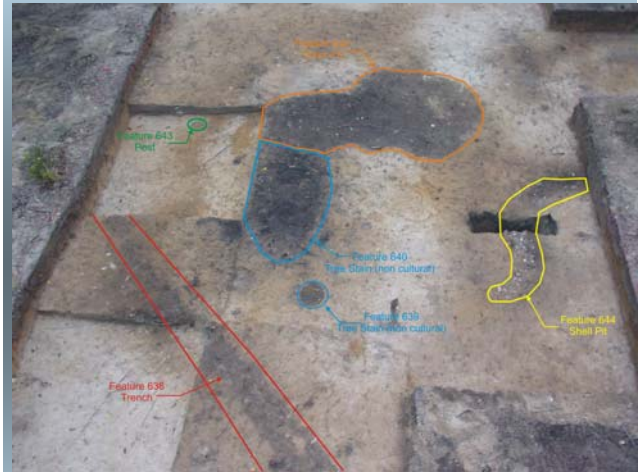
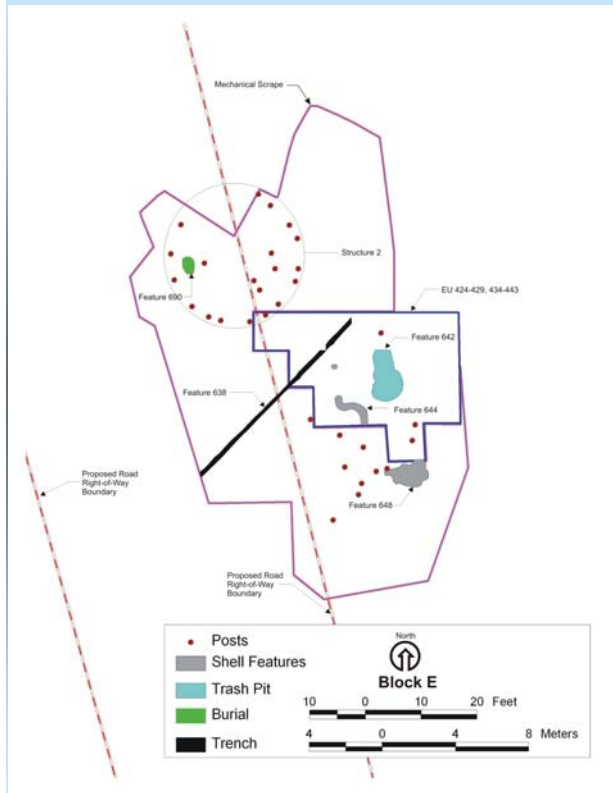


Figure 10. Plan view of yard area associated with Yamasee household.



Figure 11. Palisade identified at Altamaha Town.



Figure 12. View of large storage jar recovered from a cultural feature at the site.

storage jar with a wide folded and reed-punctated rim, which is typical for Altamaha series ceramics.

Here are some other examples of decorations on Altamaha pottery (Figure 13). Based on a cursory observation of the assemblage, the curvilinear stamped sherds and the incised sherds appear to be substantially less common than the line block sherds.

Altamaha series ceramics with red filmed interiors were also commonly found at the site (Figure 14). Looking at this vessel here, we can see that the red filming was restricted to the top four cm of the rim interior.

This vessel is a heavily sooted St. Johns bowl, a rare find at Altamaha Town (Figure 15). The vessel is diagnostic due to its chalky paste made from freshwater sponge spicules. This pottery type is found along the coastal areas of FL and not in SC.

It is likely that the only native group who was making this pottery at this time were the Ais, who lived around the central portion of Eastern Florida (Figure 16). Archival evidence suggests that this group was raided and enslaved by the Yamasee sometime between 1704-1711.



Figure 13. Various decorations on Altamaha stamped pottery.



Figure 14. Red-filmed interior on Altamaha vessel.



Figure 15. St. Johns vessel recovered from a storage pit at Altamaha Town.



Figure 16. Location of Ais Territory within Spanish Florida.

On this map near the headwaters of the St. Johns River, it states “Here the Carolina Indians leave their Canoes when they go to war against the Floridians.” Although speculative, it is likely that this vessel was brought back to Altamaha Town from a raid into that area and was possibly used to carry small plundered items.

There was also an abundance of trade goods the Yamasee received from their interactions with the nearby English colonists (Figure 17). Artifacts related to their use of English firearms, such as gunflints and muskettballs, were recovered throughout the site.

These are two similar brass, Jesuit rings that were recovered near two separate Yamasee houses located at different areas of the site (Figure 18). The designs of these rings are similar to the L-heart series of Jesuit rings found on other post-contact period sites in North America.

Glass beads are the most common trade item found (Figure 19). The top photo shows over 2,000 small blue glass seed beads. The bottom left photo shows the different types and colors of barrel, tubular, and round beads recovered. The photo in the bottom right shows the variety of colors found among the tiny seed beads.



Figure 17. View of gunflints (left) and musketballs (right) recovered from Altamahah Town.



Figure 18. Views and sketches of Jesuit rings.



Figure 19. Various glass trade beads recovered from the site.

These are other trade items (Figure 20). Going clockwise from the top left: two silver earrings; the face to a stoneware bellarmine vessel; some unknown pewter object, which I think may have been used for smelting lead; a Delft lid to a sugar bowl; and small olive green glass onion bottle.

The Yamasee also modified several of the trade items they acquired (Figure 21). The top two items are both knapped from olive green bottle glass, the top left item is a Dallas projectile point, the upper right item appears to be a glass hide-scraper. The items on the bottom left are tinkler cones made from rolled brass. On the bottom right we have a brass reckoning counter, which is a coin-like objects used for accounting. This one has been modified with holes punched in it so it may be worn like a pendant.

Over 60,000 artifacts were recovered from our investigations, and artifact processing is halfway complete. Several analyses are planned for the material once it has been completely processed. This includes detailed vessel analysis, chemical analysis of ceramic sherds, subsistence studies using the faunal and ethnobotanical remains, as well as additional archival research.



Figure 20. European trade goods, clockwise from top left: a) two silver earrings; b) face from a stoneware bellarmine vessel; c) unknown pewter object possibly used for smelting lead; d) Delft lid to a sugar bowl; and e) small olive green glass onion bottle.



Figure 21. Modified European trade goods, clockwise from top left: a) projectile point knapped from olive green bottle glass; b) hide scraper made from olive green bottle glass; c) pendant made from a brass reckoning counter with pierced holes; and d) tinkler cones made from rolled brass.