AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF JEKYLL ISLAND

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INTRODUCTION

Humans have called the small barrier island now known as Jekyll home for centuries, but only the most obvious and recent reminders of a remarkable history are appreciated by today’s visitors. Tourists and vacationers become familiar with the conspicuous houses and manicured landscapes of the Jekyll Island Club and their connection with wealthy U.S. industry giants of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Many also are impressed by the ruins and reconstructions of tabby structures on the island’s north end that stand as memorials to English colonization of the Georgia coast during the 18th century and to the later plantation endeavors of the French owners of the island, the DuBignon family.

As significant as these historic resources are, they represent only part of the total cultural heritage of Jekyll Island. What now stands above the ground at interpreted historic sites is a small fraction of the material remains that exist. Much more survives below the ground surface as archaeological information – buried structural foundations, landscape features, and the artifacts and food remains that were consequences of daily life. Plus, at least 95% of the total patrimony of the island preceded British interests here, when the island was home to Native Americans for over 4,000 years before the first European arrived. This prehistory is Jekyll Island’s hidden cultural heritage, marked by traces of oyster shell (the principal component of shell middens) on the ground surface and the buried archaeological evidence left by countless generations.

Archaeological and archival research has been undertaken on Jekyll Island for more than 50 years, providing a basic outline of the island’s cultural history (Tables 1 and 2). Forty-four archaeological sites, both prehistoric and historic, have been recorded thus far as a result of various survey efforts on Jekyll Island and its nearby hammocks (Figure 1). The well-known historic sites – Horton House and Millionaire’s Village – also were the locations of major prehistoric sites, indicating that high-ground areas that are easily accessible by water have provided attractive settlement locations for many different cultures for centuries. Many of the other smaller prehistoric sites also are located in areas along the margins of the island, places providing immediate access to tidal streams and estuarine resources. The few prehistoric sites located in the interior of the island reflect seemingly aberrant and very interesting situations that may reflect markedly different adaptive patterns or topographic and environmental conditions that have changed since the sites were occupied.

Information is quite limited for most of the smaller sites recorded during surveys. Cultural provenience is lacking for those marked only by scattered shell on the ground surface and lacking diagnostic artifacts. In addition the site at North Picnic Area is a secondary deposit of materials eroded from the original site or sites (probably along the northern end of the island) then transported by currents and redeposited along the beach. Further south along the eastern side of the island, three isolated scatters of oyster shell on top of an old dune ridge just west of a hotel area probably are the result of historic or even modern activities rather than any prehistoric event.

The first clearly indicated Native American occupation on Jekyll Island was associated with an early foraging culture associated with what archaeologists refer to as the St. Simons Phase. Dating to as early as 2,400 B.C., these people lived in permanent settlements as central bases for foraging estuarine, riverine, and forest resources during a time marked by periodic sealevel advances and evolving ecosystems.
Figure 1. Skyll Island showing approximate locations of recorded prehistoric and historic archaeological sites. Adapted from U.S.G.S. 7.5 minute Skyll Island, Ga. Quadrangle (1957)
### TABLE 1 Jekyll Island Cultural Time Line

**Native American Period (Prehistoric & Protohistoric)**
- Preclassic Archaic Phase – circa 7500 B.C. – 2400 B.C.
- St. Simons Phase – circa 2400 B.C. to 1000 B.C.
- Refuge Phase – circa 1000 B.C. to 500 B.C.
- Deptford Phase – circa 500 B.C. to A.D. 700
- Swift Creek Phase – circa A.D. 100 to 700
- Wilmington Phase – circa A.D. 700 to 1000
- Savannah Phase – circa A.D. 1000 to 1500
- Irene/Guale/Mocama – circa A.D. 1500 to 1680
- *Currently not identified on Jekyll Island*

**Colonial Period**
- 1736/38 – William Horton granted 500 acres on north end of Jekyll
- 1737 – Spanish map shows “sawmill of the English” on the north end
- 1738 – Horton had built a house and made improvements
- 1742 – Battle of Bloody Marsh on St. Simons. Spanish occupied Jekyll, used Horton’s house as a hospital, and burned the house when they retreated. The frame structure was rebuilt using tabby. Horton granted another 500 acres along the Ogeechee River, where he lived until his death in 1749
- 1749 – Jekyll becomes a military reservation, under the charge of Captain Raymond Demere
- 1763 – Jekyll is annexed to the Province of Georgia
- 1768 – Jekyll is granted to Clement Martin

**Plantation & Modern Periods**
- 1785 – Jekyll sold at Sheriff’s sale to Richard Leake
- 1791 – Jekyll sold to Francis Maria Loys Demoussay
- 1792 – Jekyll sold for taxes to Mazon de al Villehuchet, then deeded to the Sapelo Company (four of five Frenchmen who also owned Sapelo, Blackbeard, and a portion of St. Catherines Islands)
- 1793 – Sapelo Company is dissolved, Jekyll apparently is deeded to one of the Frenchmen – Christopher DuBignon
- 1793 – DuBignon establishes and operates a plantation on Jekyll; inherited by his descendants following his death in 1825
- 1861-64 – DuBignon Plantation was “sacked and burned.” Confederate battery was constructed near the present airport
- 1886 – Jekyll purchased from DuBignon descendants by the Jekyll Island Club. Clubhouse, cottages, and support buildings are constructed
- 1898 – Gun placements erected on southern and northern ends of the island for defense during the Spanish-American War
- 1947 – Jekyll purchased through condemnation proceedings by the State of Georgia
- 1954 – Causeway completed, connecting Jekyll to the mainland

Overall population density appears to have been fairly low along the coast, with groups living on the barrier islands in settlements atop and around large circular-shaped mounds of shell and other food refuse (known as shell rings) and along rivers on top of shell mounds (which also were formed by the accretion of shell and other refuse). Occupation appears to have been concentrated along the northern end of Jekyll Island during the St. Simons Phase, perhaps as a consequence of occasional short-term visits by foraging groups from large nearby sites on St. Simons Island. However, the possibility exists that a shell ring or similar large settlement may have been located along the northern edge of the Jekyll Island, an area that now has been sub-
TABLE 2
ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS ON JEKYLL ISLAND

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1952</td>
<td>Informal Survey (Larson &amp; Caldwell)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1966</td>
<td>Excavations at Horton House and Brewery (Fairbanks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>Extensive Survey/Surface Collection (DePratter &amp; Crusoe)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1974</td>
<td>Salvage Excavation at the Golf Course Site (Cook &amp; Nielsen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1975</td>
<td>Additional Survey/Surface collection (Macgregor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Extensive Survey/Testing and Inventory (Crook)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>Mapping/Testing at Horton House (Crook)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>Testing at Horton House (Crook) Campground Expansion Assessment (Crook &amp; Harris)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>Testing at Horton House (Crook)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Great Dunes Golf Course Assessment (Crook &amp; Harris)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>Red Row Survey/Mapping/Testing (Crook)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Red Row Testing (Crook)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Testing at the Jekyll Island Club Garbage Dump (Crook)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>Sanborn Map Structural Relocation (Crook &amp; Ralston)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>Testing in the Historic District (Wilson)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Horton House Mapping/Testing (Elliott)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>Testing at Jekyll Island Club Hotel Parking Lot (Wood)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

merged by rising sea level and eroded by tidal actions and currents.

When sea levels began to drop to a temporary low-stand around 1,000 B.C., there were dramatic changes in the coastal ecosystem and St. Simons Phase settlements were disrupted. A transitional culture known as the Rufuge Phase became widespread along the coast, but no sites of this period have been recorded on Jekyll Island.

Occupation resumed on Jekyll Island sometime between 500 B.C. and A.D. 700. Probably the first to resettle the island were small bands of semi-nomadic hunters-fishers-gatherers who were seasonal visitors to the island during the Deptford Phase. These groups overlapped with others of a different cultural tradition known as Swift Creek (also known as Kelvin) who appear to have immigrated to the coast from inland areas of Georgia. The most substantial site associated with the Swift Creek occupation was located in the interior of the island and contained an earthen burial mound.

Sporadic occupation on the island occurred during the following Wilmington Phase, beginning about A.D. 700 and continuing for some 300 years. Very little is known about the genesis of this culture and its adaptive patterns anywhere along the coast. Presumably, small residential groups associated with this archaeological phase visited the island intermittently for hunting, fishing, and gathering purposes.

The most intensive and extensive Native American settlement on Jekyll Island occurred during the Savannah Phase between about A.D. 1000 and A.D. 1500. This occupation was associated with large populations who lived in permanent villages and had a mixed economy based upon horticulture (maize, beans, and squash) along with substantial reliance on estuarine and oak forest resources. A central part of the adaptive system of this socially and politically complex culture included movement of family groups from the permanent villages during periods of the year for the exploitation of seasonally available resources in other areas. The prehistoric archaeological assemblage at both the Horton House Site and Millionaires Village dates primarily to the Savannah Phase, and represents the two largest, and most complex, prehistoric sites on Jekyll Island. The prehistoric components at these sites have been disturbed by subsequent historic activities. However, substantial intact subsurface remains survive for future investigation.

Little information is available about Native American occupation on Jekyll Island during the protohistoric and Spanish mission periods. The island was known to the Spaniards as the Isla de Ballenas (Island of Whales) and while missions of the Mocama evidently were located to the north on St. Simons Island and to the south on Cumberland Island, none were reported on
Jekyll Island. However, archaeological evidence indicates there was indigenous occupation on the island during this time period. Irene Phase and Mission Period native ceramics, more common at other sites associated with the Guale north of Jekyll Island, were encountered as minority wares at the Horton House site. Ceramics associated with the native Mocama appear to be very similar to earlier Savannah Phase wares, leading to the possibility that some of the sites on Jekyll Island assigned to the late prehistoric period may contain materials that actually reflect Native American occupations during the mission period.

The overall distribution of archaeological sites on Jekyll Island suggests that the current natural landscape may have changed somewhat since the time of Native American occupation. The southern-most prehistoric site on the island is the Savannah Phase Huddle Site, located some 4 kilometers north of the southern tip of the island. The absence of more southerly indigenous sites suggests that little if any inhabitable land existed in this area during the prehistoric period. Historic sites also are uncommon on the south end of the island — recorded resources are limited to a Spanish American War gun placement that guarded St. Andrew Sound and an unmarked cemetery noted on an 1888 U. S. Coast and Geodetic Survey map. The position of the gun placement indicates that the southern-most shoreline has advanced more than 300 meters since 1898.

Today, the southern third of Jekyll Island is marked by tidal creeks and marshes on its western side, low scrub areas and parallel, vegetated dune ridges to the east, and active deposition at the southern end of the island. The current marsh areas, dissected by tidal creeks along Jekyll Creek, may have been more extensive and the eastern dune system less stable during prehistoric times.

Much research remains to be undertaken to advance our understanding about the archaeological resources on Jekyll Island. As preserved sites located on state lands, they are an archive of irreplaceable information about cultural history and human ecology, and also offer potentially valuable clues about the geological processes that created this barrier island.

The archaeological sites of Jekyll Island are protected under Georgia laws and Federal statutes, with civil and criminal penalties for their destruction or disturbance. Visitors should take nothing but pictures and leave nothing but footprints.

**SUGGESTED READINGS**


