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Report of Findings: The Search for Fort Balfour and Coosawhatchie Battlefield

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**Report of Findings:
The Search for Fort Balfour and Coosawhatchie Battlefield**

Submitted By:

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University of South Carolina**

Submitted To:

**Lowcountry Council of Governments
Yemassee, South Carolina**

January 5, 2005

Introduction

In the fall of 2004 the Lowcountry Council of Governments (LCG), Yemassee, South Carolina requested the assistance of the University of South Carolina, South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology (SCIAA) in locating the Revolutionary War fortification Fort Balfour and the Coosawhatchie battlefield. This effort was in support of Phase 1 of the LCG's on-going development of a "Lowcountry Revolutionary War Trail," a 22.5 mile scenic and historic trail through Beaufort, Colleton, Hampton, and Jasper counties, highlighting events and sites associated with the American Revolution. The specific goal of the project was to conduct an archaeological survey to locate artifacts or features that were associated with the two sites thereby confirming their precise physical location. If the sites were confirmed, a secondary goal of this project was to provide a preliminary assessment of site conditions to make recommendations about the future possibility of professionally guided public participation in archaeology at the sites. A third goal was to assist the LCG in promoting a public understanding of the American Revolution in the lowcountry, specifically the Beaufort, Jasper, Colleton, and Hampton county region. Project funding was provided by a grant from the LCG. This funding provided for approximately two weeks effort by a team of two people.

The battle of Cooswahatchie was fought on May 3rd, 1779 (Figure 1). With the continuing stalemate in the north, the British decided to turn to the southern colonies in hopes that loyalists there would support the effort to suppress the revolution. In December 1778 the British entered Georgia and fought a number of battles there. In early 1779, the Americans under General Benjamin Lincoln advanced against Augusta leaving British Major General Augustine Prevost an opening to move against Charleston by crossing the Savannah River. Opposing him was General William Moultrie with two Continental Regiments. Moultrie was camped at Tullifinny Hill in present day Jasper County, with Colonel John Laurens at Coosawhatchie—the same location as modern day Coosawhatchie, South Carolina. Laurens, against orders crossed the river and skirmished with the advancing British numbering some 2,400 men. He was quickly forced back across the river and back to Tullifinny Hill. After the battle morale was so low General Moultrie decided to retreat toward Charleston (Lipscomb 1974:23).

The exact construction date of Fort Balfour has not been determined, but it was probably after British Lord Balfour became commandant at Charleston in the fall of 1780 (Figure 2). In April of 1781, Colonel William Harden was detached by Francis Marion with about 70 or 80 men to operate against the British south of Charleston. They captured a post at Red Hill near the present day Saltketcher Bridge on Highway 17. They then proceeded south to the bridge where they skirmished against British cavalry. On April 14, they pressed south along or near present day U.S. 17 to Pocotaligo, where Fort Balfour was located. Harden was able to convince the fort's occupants that he had enough men to take the fort, and loyalists inside the fort surrendered. Two British officers had been captured at a nearby tavern a short time before.

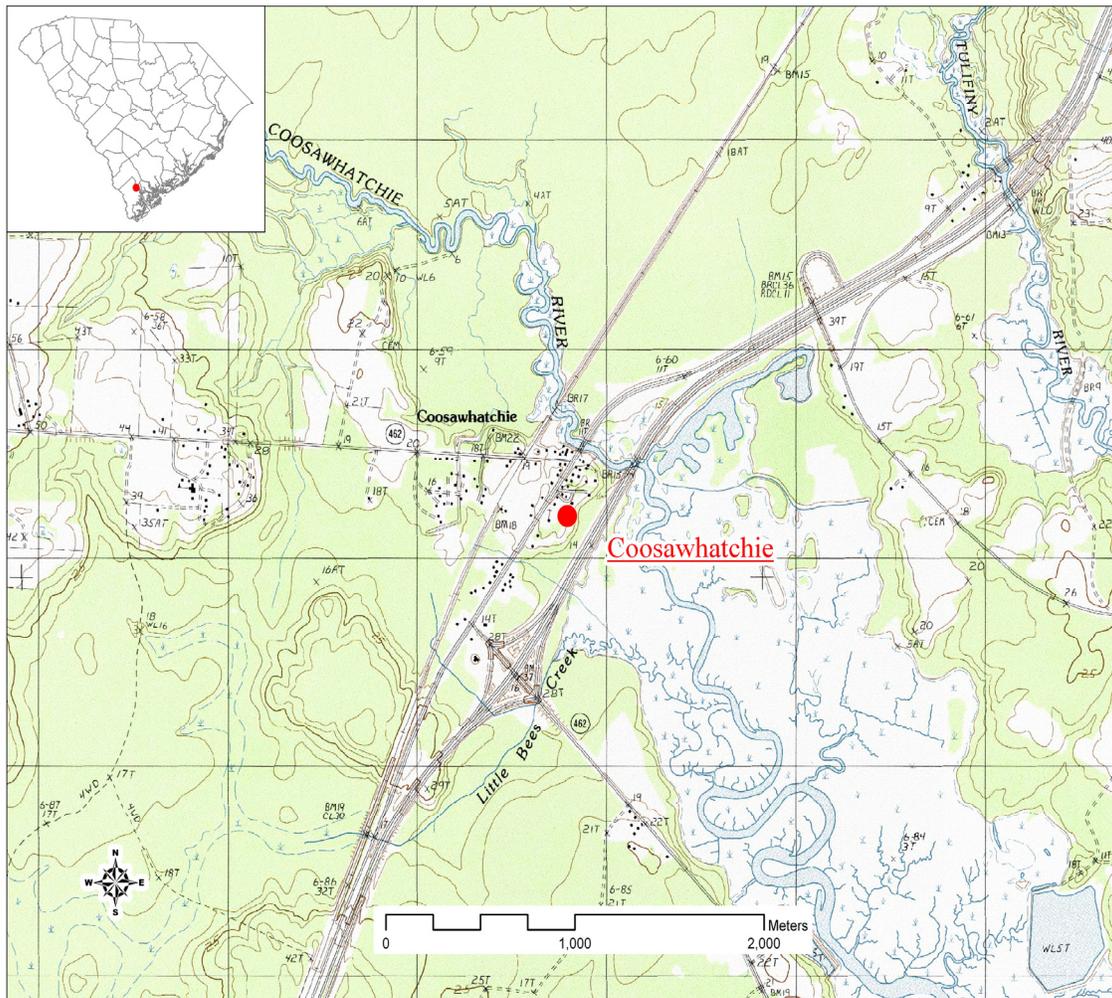


Figure 1. General location of Coosawhatchie Battlefield. U.S.G..S.

The Americans leveled and destroyed the fort, retreating before British reinforcements arrived (Lipscomb 1978:26).

Methods

Past experience at 18th and 19th military sites century has confirmed that the most expedient method of locating such sites is to conduct historic document research to determine a finite number of likely sites, and to conduct on the ground controlled metal detecting surveys at those locations. An extensive historic document archival effort and development of a historic narrative was precluded by funding limitations. It was the

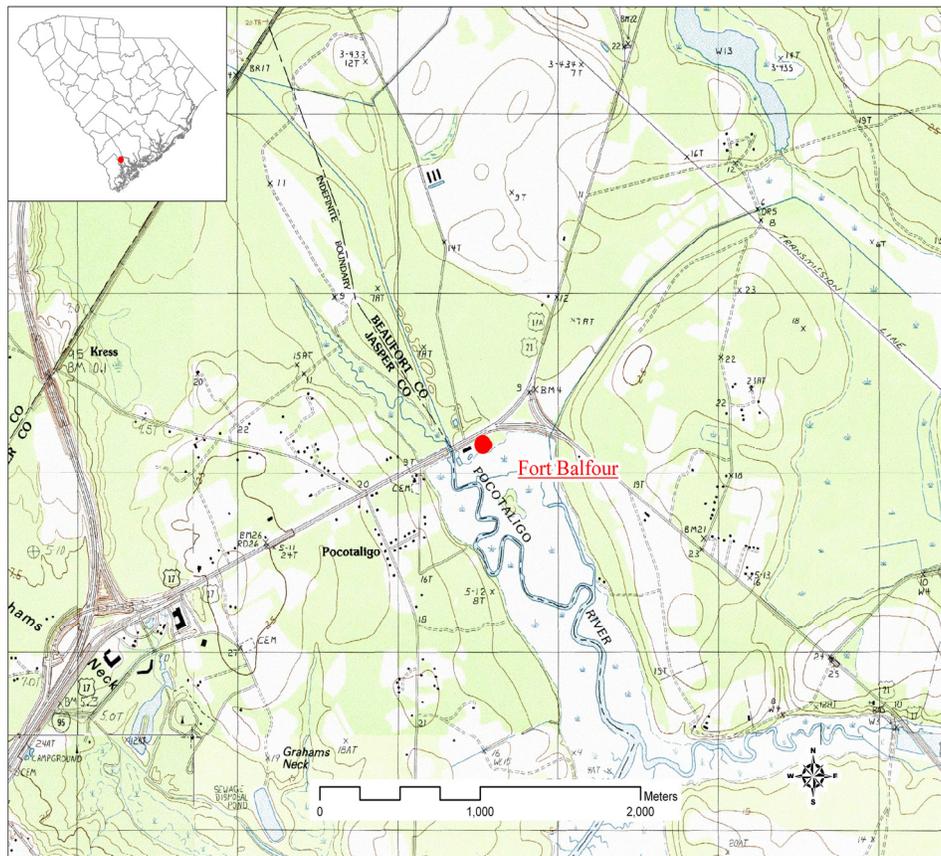


Figure 2: General location of Fort Balfour. U.S. G. S.

desire of the LCG to put the majority of project funds into the field effort while they and volunteers assisted in the historic research.

For the field effort, it is obvious to note that military hardware—bullets, accoutrements, gun parts, and uniform materials--are very diagnostic, distinctive, and are found universally at camps, forts, battlefields and other related military activity sites. Because they are highly valued, most battlefields, campgrounds, and fortifications have been visited by relic collectors in the recent past who have conducted their own research and have usually found such sites many years before professional archaeologists reach the sites. For this reason, another important method for finding and confirming military sites is to find relic collectors who are willing to share their information with the professional. Once a site is located, traditional shovel testing and other archaeological excavation techniques can be used to assist in locating military features such as fortifications, but are not useful for small scale battlefields, skirmish sites, or short term camps, wherein little or no land modification was conducted. During this project, the primary search tool was the metal detector survey; shovel tests were unwarranted because

of the paucity of results and disturbances to the sites. Metal detector finds (artifacts) associated with the Revolutionary period were mapped using a GPS instrument. Revolutionary War artifacts and other artifacts collected were bagged and returned to SCIAA for stabilization and cataloging. Artifacts not associated with the Revolution were not collected unless they needed cleaning to determine their age, or would assist the archaeologists in determining the site's function or cultural association.

Results of Survey

The SCIAA team consisted of two people, Principal Investigator Steven D. Smith and archaeologist James B. Legg. Historic research was briefly conducted for both sites during the week of November 29 through December 6, 2004 by the SCIAA team. Field work consisted of five days metal detecting November 1 and December 30, 2004, December 9 and 10, 2004, and December 22, 2004. The archaeologist cataloged and stabilized artifact finds during the week of December 13th through December 20th. During the field work, the SCIAA team coordinated their effort with the LCG and Mr. Earl "Smittie" Cooler, who assisted by locating landowners and obtaining entry permissions. Mr. Cooler also provided water transportation to one of the search areas that was surrounded by marsh and Pocatoligo Creek. The LGC project director, Ms. Ginnie Kozak, provided overall project coordination and LGC GIS expert Keri McCallister assisted with landowner research and contacts.

Archival research by the SCIAA team consisted of visits to the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, and the University of South Carolina Thomas Cooper Library, and the USC South Caroliniana Archives. Three primary resources were found that were especially helpful for Fort Balfour research, that being the Memoirs of Tarleton Brown, a manuscript of Governor Paul Hamilton, and a letter of Colonel Harden to General Marion, April 18th, 1781; all participants in the capture of the fort. In addition, a number of maps narrowed down the most likely areas (inherent military probability points) to conduct the metal detector search. The most important maps were: 1) the modern (1943) Yemassee USGS. topographic map, 2) modern ArcIMS aerial photograph created by the Beaufort County GIS Department, 3) Civil War period maps by Union engineers, 4) Mills Atlas, and most critical, 5) a 1918 USGS Yemassee map.

During the short project duration, neither the LCG nor the SCIAA team was successful in locating a relic collector familiar with the Revolutionary War sites within the region. The area was the site of extensive Civil War activity--both battles and fortifications by both sides. For this reason the area has been extensively and thoroughly collected by relic collectors interested primarily in Civil War relics since metal detectors became commercially available. It is certain that Civil War relic collectors have also hit the Revolutionary War battle sites in the area including both Coosawhatchie and Fort Balfour. However, it is less clear that there have been collectors seeking Revolutionary War materials exclusively. For instance, the LCG and SCIAA interviewed Mr. McCallister, a local resident with Civil War artifacts, however, he did not have any Revolutionary War artifacts in his collection, nor knew of anyone who collected such

materials among his acquaintances. The SCIAA team also interviewed collectors familiar with the area but none knew of Revolutionary War collections or collectors. No doubt there are Revolutionary War materials within Civil War collections from this area. The SCIAA team also interviewed Ms. Brenda Williams, who grew up in Coosawhatchie. Both McCallister and Williams remembers seeing and picking up military artifacts but were not sure if they were Civil War or Revolutionary War artifacts.

Coosawhatchie Battlefield

Research for the Coosawhatchie battlefield was assisted by the above referenced maps and brief descriptions of the battle by General William Moultrie (Moultrie Volume 1 1802:291-297; Ramsay Volume 2 1785:12-13). Few other historic resources were readily available for this battle, which is more properly described as a skirmish. Most secondary accounts of the American Revolution do not mention the skirmish, even those confined to South Carolina's battles. However, the general landscape features associated with the battle were well known, that is, the town of Coosawhatchie, Tullifinny Hill camp, and the historic roads. Historic maps clearly indicate that the 18th century village or location of Coosawhatchie is within the modern village of Coosawhatchie. This was actually unfortunate. It was clear at the first reconnaissance that the modern village had probably obliterated the battlefield, and given the relatively light battle action, finding some remnant of the battle would be difficult. On the other hand, finding even one or two musket balls of the period would assist in confirming the location of the action.

Four areas within Coosawhatchie were seen as having some potential to locate artifacts associated with the battlefield (Figure 3). Three of these sites were located along the south bank of Coosawhatchie River at the village: 1) Mr. Neal Cordial's property immediately east of the modern bridge crossing the Coosawhatchie on old highway 17, 2) A funeral home property immediately west of the bridge, 3) a Baptist Church property west and adjacent to the funeral home property. The fourth site was along a ridge line at Coosawhatchie, about 1/4 mile south of the bridge, an obvious place for either the Americans or British to have deployed, or both. On this ridge was an open field behind a house and between Highway 17 and Interstate 95.

Our interview with Mr. Cordial indicated that his property had been extensively disturbed by a fish camp, gasoline station, construction camp, and his own placement of fill on the east half of the property. Within the first hour of metal detecting, it was clear that the entire property was covered with as much as 12 inches of fill, full of metal readings, and impossible to metal detect with reasonable hope of finding a Revolutionary War artifact. A survey of the bank at that location was also fruitless. Likewise, the funeral home site was on fill along the bank, the rest of the property was covered in gravel. Finally, the Baptist church property was found to have been bulldozed. None of these areas could be properly searched. At the ridge line, a two acre field was



Figure 3: Metal detecting search areas shown on 1918 Yemassee topographic map.

searched for approximately four hours. No Revolutionary War artifacts were found. Civil War artifacts were recovered (see catalog), and other artifacts suggested an antebellum house site.

The final potential site associated with the battle is a ridgeline north at Tullifinny Hill where the Americans camped before the battle. This area has some potential. During this short project, the LCG was unable to obtain access.

Fort Balfour

Primary sources and maps related to Fort Balfour narrowed the search region to the one square mile area around the modern location known as Pocotaligo (Figures 4, 5 and 6). This area can be defined as from Pocotaligo Creek Bridge east to the intersection of US 21 and US 17, and on both sides of that road. Today, the road is a four lane highway, and it is obvious that this modern road has taken out many historic features.

It is clear from the historic record that the capture of Fort Balfour unfolded as follows. Colonel Harden's men moved against Fort Balfour along the road that crossed the Saltketcher River. This is today modern Highway 17 and map research indicates that

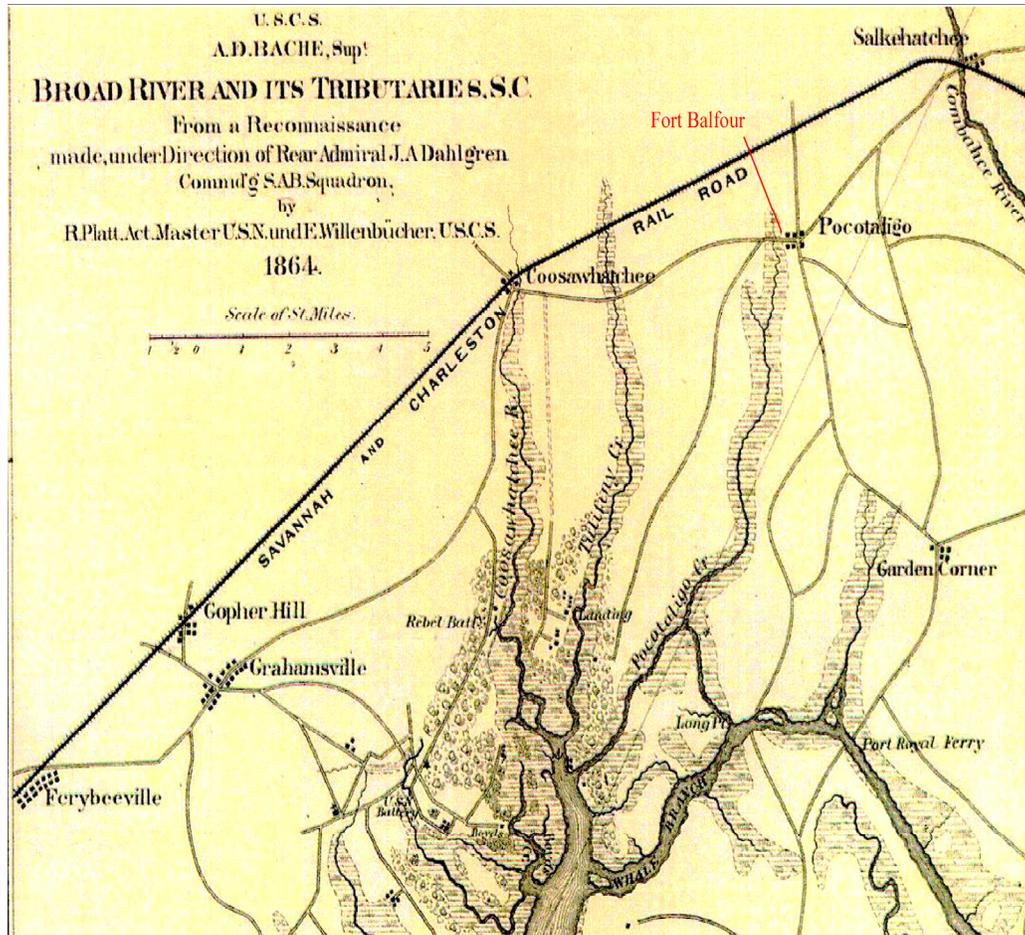


Figure 4: 1864 Roche map of region around Pocotaligo and Coosawhatchie.

the modern roadbed is very close to the colonial roadbed. In looking at maps from the 18th century up to the present, this route is the only practical route from the Saltketcher Bridge, where Harden was camped, to Pocotaligo (for example, Figure 4). Once Harden “got within sight” of the fort, he deployed his men and “sent ten of the best horses to draw them out, but luckily Colonels Fenwick and Letchmere were at Vanbiber’s, and were taken, with seven of the Dragoons” (Harden to Marion, April 18th, 1781). One of the Americans in this action was Paul Hamilton who wrote a manuscript of his experiences in the war. “Vanbibers” was a tavern, an important clue as to the location of the fort, as the tavern stood for sometime after the war and was even visited by President George Washington during his southern tour. Hamilton adds additional details, stating that “Twelve well mounted young men. . . were selected and order to decoy the Cavalry out. With this view we moved on briskly and openly, toward Von Bitters Tavern, which stood almost a quarter of a mile from the Fort, and in full view” (Hamilton in Charleston Yearbook, 1898:317). The British cavalry had deployed, but after seeing the action at the

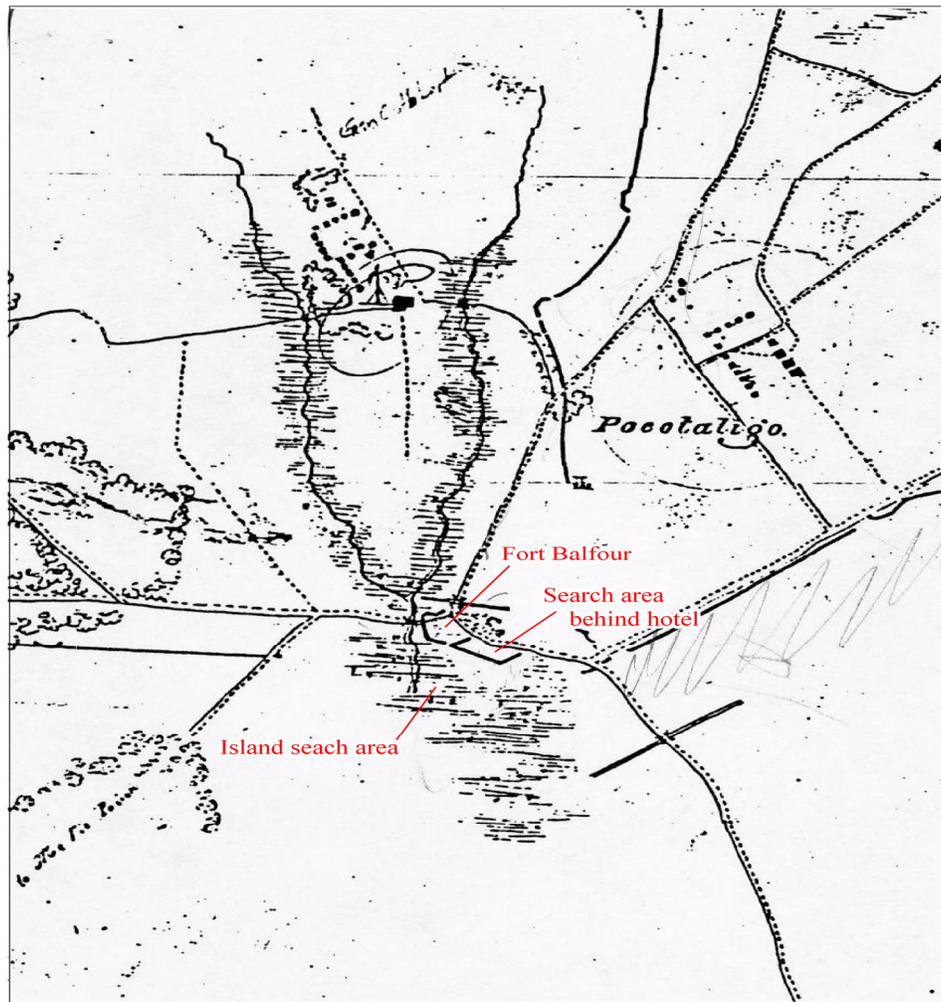


Figure 5: Charles Suter Map of Pocotaligo area, n.d. (circa 1864).

tavern and the American cavalry deployed in a pasture awaiting them, they returned to the fort.

Yet another eyewitness was Tarleton Brown, who claims to have led the selected mounted force against the fort. Brown states “When we came in sight of it [the fort], I took thirteen of the best mounted men to survey the premise, and to lead them out if possible. When we had got within about two hundred yard of Bambifer’s house, where the British had deposited their wounded, I saw a negro run in the house, and immediately I saw several men running for the fort: we struck spurs to our horses, and soon came up with them and tool them prisoners” (Brown, Internet). Brown offers these additional details concerning the fort’s location; “...for the fort was advantageously located and well fortified, approachable only at three points, all of which were well guarded by a

deep creek and cannons” (Brown, Internet). As stated earlier, the fort surrendered without additional fighting. Finally, Brown adds important information that after they paroled the prisoners to Charleston, the Americans “burnt the house and leveled the fort with the ground” (Brown, Internet).

The historic accounts seem to indicate that Vanbiber’s Tavern was at Pocotaligo, probably at or near the intersection of US 17 and 21 (Figures 4 and 5). The fort then was logically either west, east, or south of the tavern. From this information three search areas were defined (Figure 5). The first of these was to the south. South of the intersection today there is no high ground except a small island about 1/4 mile south of the Pocotaligo Bridge along Pocotaligo Creek. Some local traditions placed the fort on this island. The island was reached by boat. Upon landing it became clear that the island did not have sufficient ground surface for an extensive military construction, either a Civil War or Revolutionary War fort. From US 21, the site appears to be an elevated shell mound with extensive tree cover. However, in fact, the site has no high ground nor does it have much shell. After a 2 hour search, with the recovery of one Civil War minie ball, it was clear that the site was not the site of Fort Balfour.

The second search area was site was east of the modern intersection behind an abandoned hotel on US 17 (Figure 5). Adjacent to this site, east of the hotel, is a private residence. Behind the hotel and residence is a timber area and about four hours were spent there searching during the first two field days. One rifle ball was discovered, which was encouraging. However, no other diagnostic artifacts were found and the rifle ball can not be confirmed as having an association with the fort or activities during its capture. It is possible that it represents activities associated with the occupation but it also could represent a single hunting episode during the 18th or early 19th century.

Based on the historic accounts, and assuming the tavern was located near the Highway 21 and 17 intersection, the area with the greatest inherent military probability (ie. the most likely location given the tactics of the day), would have been west of the intersection, along the Pocotaligo River. Near the river, the fort could have covered the river, the road, and the intersection. A 1918 topographic map, produced prior to extensive ground modifications strongly supports this argument (Figure 6). The 1918 topographic map clearly indicates the only high ground at this site prior to modern land modifications was a circular point of land at the river. Today a Family Worship Center is located there and formally it was occupied by a restaurant (Figure 1).

Immediately west of the worship center there is a small spit of ground (approximately 10 meters by 4 meters) that is the bank of the Pocotaligo River. This area has been designated in the past as archaeological site 38BU1126, and dates as early as the early 18th century. Ceramic and glass artifacts can be collected there dating from the 18th to the 20th century. There is also a shallow dug out area that separates this spit from the shoreline creating what appears to be a boat slip. This location is the head of navigation for the river, and thus makes it even more likely that Fort Balfour would have been constructed within cannon shot of this boat slip.

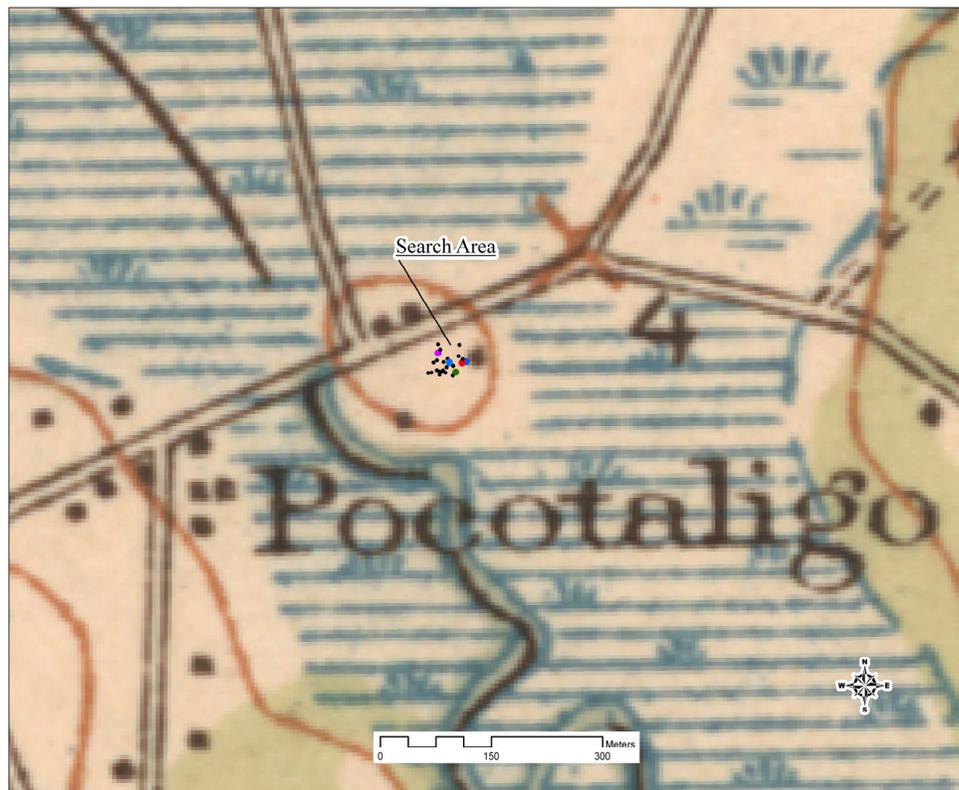


Figure 6: Close up of 1918 Yemassee topographic map with metal detecting find locations.

Construction of the restaurant and church have extensively modified the ground just inshore of the boat slip. However, east of the church parking lot is a small woods of approximately 1/2 acre. This area was searched for approximately 16 hours, the most thoroughly covered area of the current project (Figures 6 and 7).

This area has had not only modern disturbances, including abandoned cars, but was also greatly disturbed by Civil War activities. The Confederate Army constructed an extensive network of batteries and lines in the area to protect the Charleston to Savannah Railroad (Figure 4). At Pocotaligo today, remnants of these lines still exist on both sides of the modern highway, and also along the southern edge of the woods east of the church. As a result of a thorough metal detecting survey, a number of Civil War period minie balls were recovered (see catalog). The site is a significant Civil War resource for the area and should be protected.

The Civil War military artifacts were quite interesting to the survey team, but were not the goal of the project. What was found of interest to the project goals in the search for Fort Balfour were two unfired musket balls typically fired from British Brown Bess muskets, two smaller balls (one unfired, one fired) either for an 18th century pistol or rifle, a carved musket ball of unknown caliber, and a English King George (either II or

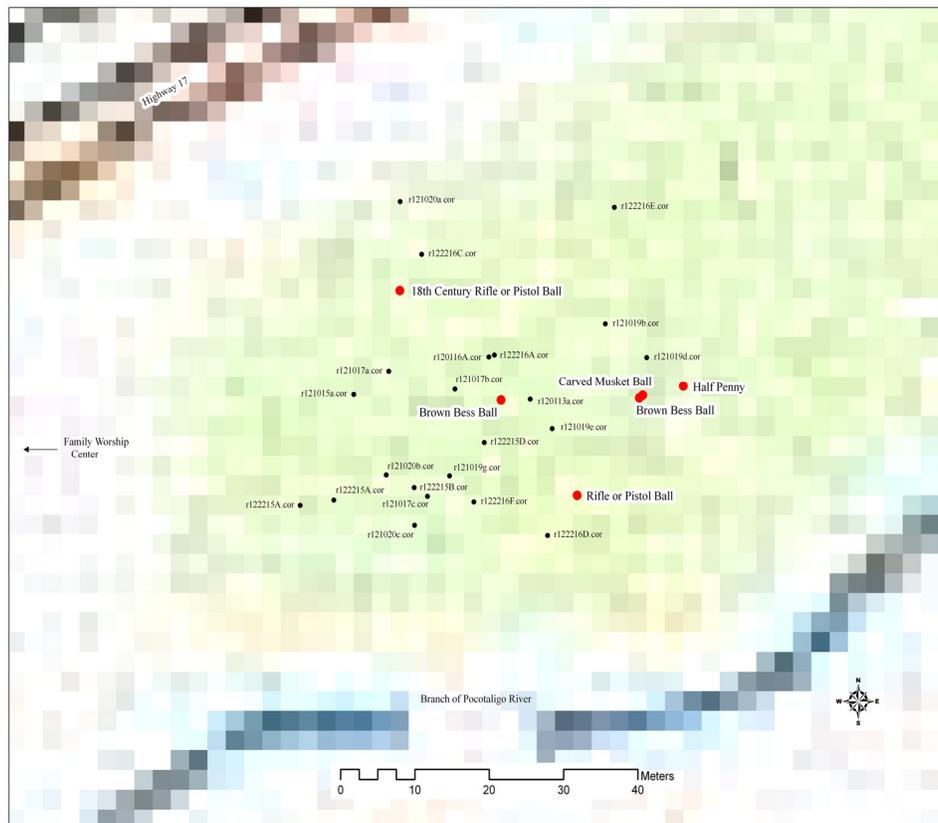


Figure 6: Location of metal detected artifacts at Pocotaligo.

III) half-penny. While the recovery of these Revolutionary War artifacts is not 100% proof that we have found Fort Balfour, the combined historical, map, and archaeological evidence strongly points to this area being the location of the fort. The musket balls and English half penny were very likely to have been lost or fired during the fort's occupation by the British. The two Brown Bess musket balls most assuredly were the result of some Revolutionary War activity at that location.¹ Most likely, the exact location of the fort is the church property or underneath the modern four-lane highway. In this case, it must be said that modern development can not be totally blamed for the fort's loss, as the extensive Confederate earthworks at this location probably significantly disturbed the archaeological remains of the fort long before modern construction.

¹ These musket balls were .75 caliber. Confederate troops may have used musket balls in the vicinity, but they would not have been .75 caliber.

Two other areas were thought to have some potential for assisting us in determining the location of Van Bibber's Tavern. These were at the intersection of US 17 and 21, and about 1/2 mile up US 17 from that intersection (Figure 1, 4, and 5). This latter area was thought to be possibly where old Pocotaligo was actually located, according to one Civil War map (Figure 4). Regardless, the intersection area and the Civil War Pocotaligo site were not searched due to an inability to get land owner permissions within project field time, and also, because of the success in the main area.

Recommendations

Coosawhatchie Battlefield-- The skirmish at Coosawhatchie was a light action and even after the battle, only a small archaeological signature would have been left. Development since then has significantly reduced our ability to find artifacts associated with the battle at the town. We have confidence that, given time and money, we could locate at least one musket ball representing the battle, but the return on such an investment would not be great. Likewise, funding did not allow time for extensive archival research and there is a likelihood that additional time and funding would reveal additional historic documents pertaining to the battle and our understanding of what happened there. However, there is little doubt that the battle took place at or near modern Coosawhatchie and given the project goals, this is about all that can be done at Coosawhatchie.

One area of research that might be fruitful for the LCG would be additional survey time along the ridgeline north of Coosawhatchie where General Moultrie camped. On either side of I-95 there appear to be extensive forest areas with good potential for locating this camp. It is recommended that if a Phase II for this project is funded some portion of that phase be devoted to searching along this ridgeline. Finding Moultrie's camp would be useful and create another "stop" on the Revolutionary War trail.

Fort Balfour- We believe Fort Balfour has been found. The historic data and archaeological data strongly point to the area discussed above as being the general location of the fort. However, we also believe that searching across the road from the church may be worthwhile to gather additional archaeological data. While no exact number of Revolutionary War artifacts are necessary to "confirm" this site as being Fort Balfour, additional artifacts would lend weight to the argument. It might also be possible to locate some evidence of Vanbiber's tavern, thereby lending support for the work done to date.

Future Work—As good archaeologists we always recommend additional research. There is greater likelihood of finding archival data on Fort Balfour than for Coosawhatchie, and that is where we would recommend additional efforts, although additional effort for both would assist the LCG in site interpretation. The exact time when Fort Balfour was built would be useful to know, in addition to something about its construction. Brown's account states that a house was burned at the fort. This implies that the fort was constructed around a house as was done at Fort Motte, Fort Granby, and the fort at Orangeburg. This would be a valuable piece of information to know.

Another long term goal of the LCG is to conduct public digs at archaeological sites of the Revolutionary War period. The site of Fort Balfour has some potential in this regard. If the goal is for public participation, then the area near the church may be considered simply because there is a strong potential to find something of interest—most likely Civil War fortifications, but perhaps something of the Revolutionary period. Otherwise, additional work will be necessary to find the “right” site. We recommend efforts to find Moultrie’s camp (prior to the battle of Coosawhatchie), and searching for other Continental camps in the area, such as that near Sheldon Church, once the camp of Colonel Francis Marion’s regiment. Finding these camps might make excellent public excavation sites if they could be found.

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Project Artifact Catalog

Fort Balfour Search – Metal Detecting Catalog.

NUMBER	DESCRIPTION
01 001 001	US .58 cal. rifle-musket bullet (minie ball), fired.
02 001 001	Lead shot, fired, 17.2g (pistol or rifle ball, about .576”).
02 002 001	Carved fragment of minie ball skirt, 1.7g.
03 001 001	Carved musket ball, or canister ball (?), 19.7g.
03 002 001	Melted lead, 24.2g.
03 003 001	Lead shot, fired, 1.4g (buckshot).
03 004 001	Lead shot, unfired, .686,” 27.9g (.75 cal. British musket ball).
03 005 001	US .58 cal. Williams rifle-musket bullet, unfired, carved.
03 006 001	US .58 cal. Williams rifle-musket bullet, unfired, partially melted.
03 007 001	Melted lead, 38.0g.
03 008 001	US .58 cal. rifle-musket bullet (minie ball), fired.
03 009 001	US .58 cal. Williams rifle-musket bullet, fired.
03 010 001	Melted lead, 1.1g.
03 011 001	US .52 cal. Spencer bullet, fired.
03 012 001	CS .577 Pritchett (Enfield) rifle-musket bullet (minie ball), British mfg. with “57” in base, unfired.
03 013 001	US .58 cal. Williams rifle-musket bullet, unfired, missing base.
03 014 001	US .58 cal. rifle-musket bullet (minie ball), unfired.
03 015 001	Melted lead, 14.1g.
03 016 001	US .58 cal. rifle-musket bullet (minie ball), fired.
03 017 001	Melted lead, 30.0g.
03 018 001	Unidentified brass object.
03 019 001	Lead shot, unfired, .390.”
03 020 001	US .58 cal. Williams rifle-musket bullet, unfired, deeply cut.
03 021 001	Enfield rifle-musket lock screw washer, brass.
03 022 001	US .58 cal. rifle-musket bullet (minie ball), unfired.
03 023 001	Melted lead, 26.1g.
03 024 001	Lead shot, unfired, .681,” 28.1g (.75 cal. British musket ball).
03 024 002	British halfpenny, George II (?), well worn.
03 025 001	US .58 cal. rifle-musket bullet (minie ball), fired.
03 026 001	US .58 cal. rifle-musket bullet (minie ball), fired.
03 027 001	US .58 cal. rifle-musket bullet (minie ball), unfired.
03 028 001	US .52 cal. Spencer bullet, unfired, no cartridge case.
03 029 001	Percussion cap box finial, brass (Civil War).
03 030 001	Artillery shell fragment, 20-pounder Parrott(?).
03 031 001	Lead shot, fired, 19.8g (about .60 cal., pistol or rifle ball).

Coosawhatchie Battlefield Search – Metal Detecting Catalog.

NUMBER	DESCRIPTION
01 001 001	Book or box hinge, brass.
01 002 001	Back plate from small brass padlock.
01 003 001	“D” harness buckle, brass.
01 004 001	“D” harness buckle, brass.
01 005 001	US 1852 cent.
01 006 001	US 4.2” (30–pounder) Parrott shell sabot, brass, complete.
01 007 001	US 4.2” (30–pounder) Parrott shell sabot, brass, fragment.
01 008 001	Door knob, brass, 18 th /early 19 th century.
01 009 001	Lead alloy shrapnel ball (Civil War).
01 010 001	Thimble, brass.
01 011 001	Button, brass, South Type 9 (19 th century).
01 012 001	Button, brass, South Type 9, missing shank (19 th century).