

SEARCHING EAGLES ISLAND FOR ARTIFACTS RELATED TO HISTORIC RICE CULTIVATION AND THE GULLAH GEECHEE

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A large island, formed by the confluence of the lower Cape Fear and Brunswick Rivers, lies adjacent to Wilmington, North Carolina. Since the founding of the town in 1739, it has been known as Eagles Island, after attorney and plantation owner Richard Eagles. Eagles Island has seen continuous use and activities since then that include shipping of cotton and naval stores, ship building, and for much of its interior, rice cultivation, which played a large role in Wilmington’s economy during the 18th and 19th century. Made up largely of tidal marshes fed by Redmond and Alligator Creeks, the island also provided rich grounds for waterfowl hunting as well as recreation during the latter half of the 19th and 20th centuries. The Wilmington Morning Star (29 May 1875) even announced, “A rowing club for our city is the newest. Our suggestion made a few days ago has met with the endorsement of several gentlemen, great lovers of the many art of rowing, who appear to see more fascination in a long pull, a strong pull and a pull altogether...along the serpentine courses of Alligator Creek, in search of new worlds to conquer.”

Nearly 150 years later, members of Eagles Island Community Rowing can be found gliding along these same waters. As a member of the club and retiree of the NC Underwater Archaeology Branch (UAB), Mark Wilde-Ramsing constantly keeps an eye out for archaeological evidence along the banks while rowing (**Figure 1**). It became apparent at low tide that numerous features still existed, a vast network of floodgates, bulkheads, landings, and complex canal systems, tied to the historic growing of rice on Eagles Island. These sites were the work of an

enslaved African population, sought out and transplanted from the coastal regions of West Africa, where rice agriculture was a mainstay of the economy, to similar environs along the southern Atlantic seaboard centering in Georgia and South Carolina. Their knowledge and skill, as well as ability to live and work in a humid, mosquito-infected region, made this group critical to the success of rice cultivation in the Americas. Being confined to desolate environs predominated by tidal marshlands, the isolation and solidarity of rice workers resulted in distinct traits in language, religion, and lifestyle that combined African and English aspects to create the unique Gullah Geechee culture. There have been several important studies focused on rice cultivation and its people on Eagles Island including: an archaeological and historical examination of



Fig. 1: Reconnaissance of the Banks along Alligator Creek in a 22' Rowing Shell.

industry and business on the island by Robert Minford (2012), a student in ECU's Maritime History Studies Program; a study of its rice fields, hydrology, and erosion by Dr. James Kapetsky (2015); and historical research on descendants of the rice field workers by Eulis Willis (1993), the current Mayor of the Town of Navassa. Based on records available at the North Carolina Office of State Archaeology (OSA), however, there has not been a systematic cataloguing and reporting of the wooden features related to rice production that still exist on Eagles Island.

Coincidentally, Mark's neighbor is 'Osku' Backstrom, a marine scientist and faculty member in the Department of Environmental Sciences at UNC Wilmington. He specializes in coastal/marine surveys using remote sensing tools like side-scan sonar, which is able to acoustically 'map' different bottom types and structural features. The pole-mounted, shallow capability, sonar system Osku has designed seemed like an ideal underwater instrument to complement Mark's archaeological research. A plan was then formulated to see whether side-scan sonar could be used to identify some of the archaeological structures Mark had noticed while rowing in the area, in addition to other promising locations that were not visible above water at low tide.

The goal of this study is to take advantage of proximity and access for the purpose of inventorying extant remains of rice cultivation, specifically on the northern end of Eagles Island. The study area is bounded on the south by Redmond Creek, the Brunswick River on the west, Meares Cut canal on the east, and the Cape Fear River to the north. Transected by Alligator Creek, this area was heavily used for rice cultivation and today holds at least 18 distinct historic rice fields and canals, as seen through aerial photography (**Figure 2**) (Kapetsky 2015).

The study area has been divided into ten subsections with each presenting various challenges in terms of access and geography. The creeks and canals are often quite narrow, shallow, and full of obstructions, not having been maintained for a century or more. Over the past year, various means of available water transport were tested, as were sonar and positioning systems. Although frustrating at times, the results were encouraging and warranted moving forward with a study, designated the Eagles Island Rice District (EIRD), for the purpose of locating and cataloguing what remained of the rice field structures. A permit for this work was formally applied for and received from the UAB in September 2022 (#666 BWR 2022).

Investigations began in subsection EIRD#1, within which an unnamed creek flows from east to west into the Brunswick River. The creek's upper reaches feature manmade canals, which feed into former rice field marshes. The overall plan for each subsection starts with a reconnaissance visit at low tide to record visible remains. At a later date, a side-scan sonar survey is conducted at high tide, with particular attention to areas around and adjacent to recorded remains. The third phase consists of follow-up visual inspections at extreme low tide to investigate further previously recorded physical remains and suspect sonar targets.

The watercourses within EIRD#1 were first visited in a rowing shell in September of last year on a moderately low tide during which two sites were recorded: 1) an articulated wooden structure thought to be part of a rice gate, designated WCS#23; and 2) pilings driven across a narrow place in the creek, recorded as WCS#18. In October, a



Fig. 2: Study Area showing Eagles Island and EIRD#1, the focus of this study.



Fig. 3: Survey Setup with Pole-Mounted Side-Scan Sonar Transducer being ready to get deployed in the water.

second survey was conducted using a motorized skiff and a pole-mounted Starfish 990 kHz (**Figure 3**) with survey range minimized for maximum resolution. Sonar results indicated that at both locations, as well as an area near the mouth of the creek, a conglomerate of logs and debris was identified and suspected to relate to manmade evidence (**Figure 4 – right**). Lastly, in early November, a visit was made to the area in a kayak at dead low tide. The findings at the mouth of the creek were inconclusive; however, the additional timber-and-board structures coincided with rice gate WCS#23 and a clearer picture of WCS#18 was achieved as a result of the subsequent sonar survey, which proved successful in confirming archaeological remains related to rice cultivation (**Figure 4 – left**).

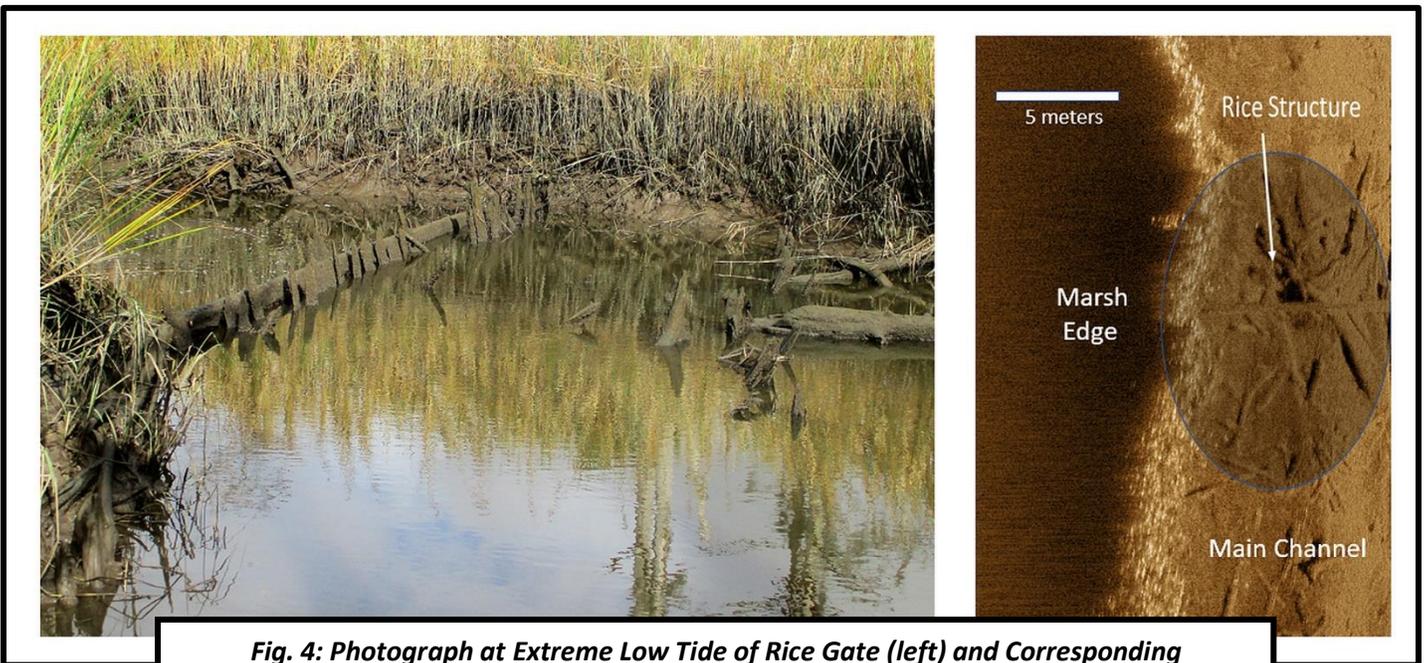


Fig. 4: Photograph at Extreme Low Tide of Rice Gate (left) and Corresponding Underwater Side-Scan Sonar Imagery showing Numerous Artifacts (right).

The findings in EIRD#1, as well as preliminary results from reconnaissance surveys in other portions of the study area, are very promising. They include numerous distinct structural remnants – artifacts of years gone by. Going forward, the plan is to complete survey and cataloguing work by early summer 2023, followed in the fall with a visit by Dr. Lynn Harris and students from the Maritime History Program at East Carolina University (ECU) to further identify, date (dendrochronology), and interpret specific types of sites. Ultimately, it is hoped that this work will stimulate additional archaeological study, historical research, and public outreach aimed at highlighting and retaining knowledge of the vital economic role rice cultivation played throughout the Cape Fear region and those generations of people, Gullah Geechee men and women, upon whose shoulders its existence and success depended (**Figure 5**).



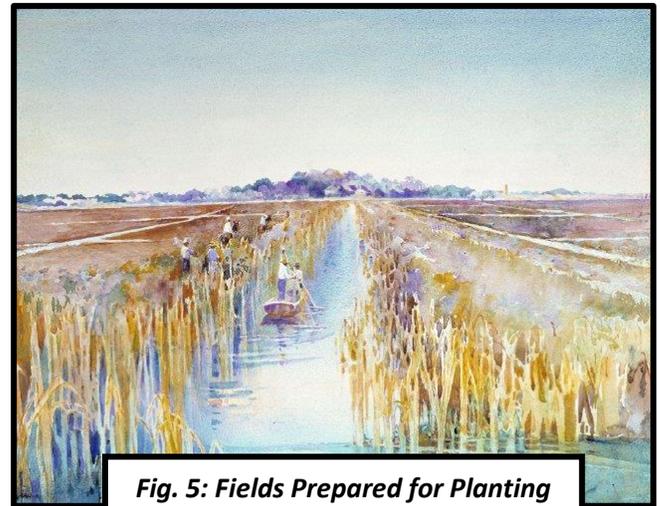
References Cited

Kapetsky, James McDaid, Ph.D. (2015) "The Remains of Tidewater Rice Farming as a Cultural Resource in the Lower Cape Fear Region." Presentation to the Gullah Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Meeting, Wilmington, NC (August 7).

Minford, Robert J. (2012) For the Love of Profit: Examining Traditional Capitalism on Eagles Island, North Carolina. Master's Thesis (Maritime Studies), Department of History, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC.

Smith, Alice R. Huger (1936) *A Carolina Rice Plantation of the Fifties: 30 Paintings in Water-Colour*. William Marrow and Company, New York.

Willis, Eulis A. (1993) *Navassa: The Town and Its People, 1735-1991*. Self-published, Navassa, NC.



**Fig. 5: Fields Prepared for Planting
(in Smith 1936:33).**



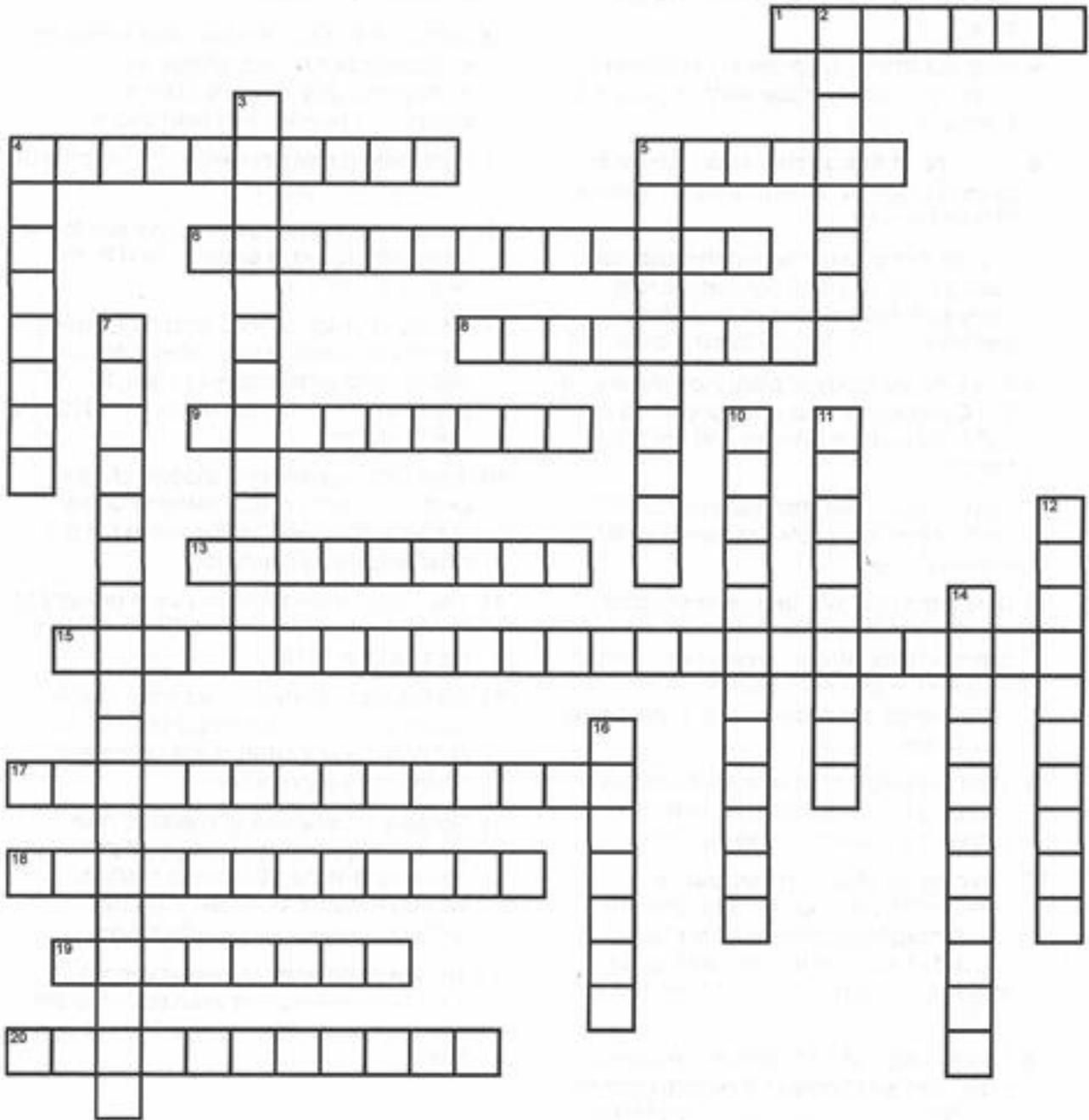
[S.3667 - 117th Congress \(2021-2022\): African-American Burial Grounds Preservation Act | Congress.gov | Library of Congress](#)

As shared by Cultural Heritage Partners and the Coalition for American Heritage, on December 23, 2022, President Biden signed into law the landmark and bipartisan African American Burial Grounds Preservation Act. Many historic African American burial grounds have been systematically neglected. The African American Burial Grounds Preservation Program will help identify burial grounds ahead of infrastructure projects and commercial development, thereby minimizing construction delays and avoiding unnecessary community heartache. These sacred sites, and the stories they tell, are an integral part of our American heritage. This legislation will assist descendants and communities in honoring and remembering their shared past by providing grant monies to identify, interpret, and preserve historic cemeteries. Details of the legislation begin on Page 2,954 of the fiscal year [2023 omnibus appropriations bill](#).

We are grateful to Congress and the President, and especially for the leadership of the late-Congressman Donald McEachin (D-VA), Senators Sherrod Brown (D-OH) and Mitt Romney (R-UT), Congresspersons **Alma Adams (D-NC)** and Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA), and the House and Senate Natural Resources committees and their staffs.

WEBINAR – Black Heritage Resources: Why They Matter (February 15th) will discuss the findings and recommendations of the Black Heritage Resources Task Force. Organized in 2020, the Task Force had two goals. The first was to compile and analyze data on SHPO practices with respect to identifying and managing Black cultural resources, implementing diversity initiatives, and consulting with Black stakeholders. The second goal was to provide recommendations to SHPOs on ways to strengthen and improve their objectives, practices, and endeavors related to racial diversity and inclusion. The majority of this session will be a discussion. It is open for attendees to ask questions and for the panelists to receive input on the findings and recommendations of the Task Force. Read more and register [on the SAA website](#) (\$).

Black History and Archaeology Month



For this issue of the newsletter, our puzzle celebrates Black History Month. The crossword features events, locations, material culture, seminal projects, and literature of history and archaeology related to both antebellum enslaved and post-bellum African Americans. Some of these answers may be more challenging than past puzzles, but not as difficult as to what was on Paul's bookshelf (apparently Tom thought that was really hard?). Answers will appear in the next issue.



Across

- 1 A housing type commonly found in African-American communities since the late 18th century. Wilson County has a large National Register District of this house style.
- 4 Most commonly recovered in enslaved contexts, a locally made earthen pottery in European forms
- 5 This type of African shell was often worn as decoration by the enslaved in memory of their homeland
- 6 Charles Orser documented the material basis of this common agricultural role many post bellum African-Americans performed in the South Carolina piedmont
- 8 A pioneering study of plantation slavery on this Caribbean island was conducted in the 1970s by Jerome Handler and Frederick Lange
- 9 State Historic Site that features four 19th century remnant enslaved dwellings at Horton Grove
- 13 During the Civil War and reconstruction, this Craven County independent community of African-Americans, most of whom were formerly enslaved, was archaeologically documented in the 1980s and 1990s.
- 15 State Historic Site of African-American boarding school founded in early 20th century by Charlotte Hawkins Brown
- 17 The genesis of Leland Ferguson's noteworthy book was his excavations at Middleburg Plantation, SC, that led to an expanded study of the archaeology of enslaved African-Americans from 1650-1800
- 18 County origin of 19th century enslaved cabin that was home to 7 people currently featured in core exhibit at the NC Museum of History
- 19 A pioneering archaeological study of 18th and 19th century enslaved African-American cabins at this plantation in Duval County, Florida, by Charles Fairbanks and four students in 1968. This excavation began an archaeological focus on New World plantations.
- 20 Sub floor pits that functioned for food storage, "hide-holes" for personal items, and in some cases, as shrines related to African religious practices

Down

- 2 A large cemetery of ante bellum and post bellum graves of African-Americans was documented at this State Historic Site in the early 21st century
- 3 19th century State Historic Site known for its descendant homecomings and archaeologically based enslaved community building reconstructions
- 4 Post Bellum town formed from the formerly enslaved of (3 Down)
- 5 These handmade pipes in European forms have been found in enslaved and Native American contexts
- 7 A famous study of acculturation focusing on handmade ceramics, other material culture, and architecture at these two SC plantations was conducted in the 1970s by Soil Systems
- 10 John Otto's pioneering student of 19th century material status patterns of the planters, overseers, and enslaved at this coastal Georgia plantation
- 11 The first enslaved Africans were brought to British Colonial America to this location by the Dutch in 1619
- 12 On February 1, 1960, what town saw four freshman African-American students from NC A&T stage a sit-in at a Woolworth's white-only lunch counter
- 14 Notable excavations of enslaved houses and industry buildings along this street were conducted in the 1970s and 1980s by William Kelso at Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's mountaintop plantation
- 16 The autobiography of Harriet Jacobs, a 19th century enslaved woman, forms the basis of a public tour at this State Historic Site



2023 DUES REMINDER It's that time of year again, and I don't mean when you realize your New Year's resolutions completely went out the window! No, it's time to renew your membership in order to stay current with the Society's latest news and events. Membership types include: Student (\$10), Regular (\$15), Family (\$20), Sustaining (\$25), Institution ((\$25), and **Life (\$500)**. **As of the new year, the cost of our Lifetime Membership has increased.** Please submit your dues payment to: Mary Beth Fitts, Research Laboratories of Archaeology, CB #3120, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3120. If you wish, you may also renew your membership online at <http://www.ncarchsociety.org/membershipoptions>.

WHERE WAS I? The photograph in November's issue of the newsletter was that of Nikwasi (Nequasee) in Macon County, NC. Within the Cherokee culture, the name translates to mean "center of activity." The mound itself has decreased in size since its construction around ca. 1000 A.D. Ancient mounds were common in what is now North Carolina when the first European explorers and settlers arrived. Representing an active Cherokee village until 1819, the large mound is all that remains today. It was officially listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) in 1980.



GRANT-IN-AID PROGRAM



The North Carolina Archaeological Society (NCAS) invites applications for The Whitey Graham Award (WGA) in support of research pertaining to North Carolina archaeology. The WGA is underwritten by the NCAS Endowment Fund, which was established in 2001 from the proceeds of the sale of the “Blue Banks” property near Greenville. The sale took place largely through the efforts of then-president Robert Graham. We owe him our thanks for making these grants possible! Applicants must be members of the NCAS (exemptions for public educators, as defined below, will be considered) and must also meet one or more of the following criteria:

1. An applicant must be: (a) a graduate or undergraduate student actively pursuing a degree in archaeology or a related field; (b) an individual enrolled in an internship program with a museum, a state historic site, an archaeological park, or a Native American group (with state or federal recognition); (c) an avocational archaeologist who is a member of the North Carolina Archaeological Society and has over time demonstrated a concern for the protection or study of archaeological resources within the state (including working under the direction of professional archaeologists); or (d) a public educator (e.g., school teacher or museum personnel). Collaborations between educators are encouraged.
2. An individual must apply for the award with a proposal that states how the grant will aid in the individual’s research relevant to North Carolina archaeology. Each proposal must include (a) a statement of research design (up to 2 pages long), (b) a budget showing how grant funds will be spent in pursuing this research, (c) a curriculum vitae, and (d) a letter of support from a professional archaeological mentor or advisor. The advisor is expected to take an active role in overseeing and/or guiding the research to completion and should explicitly indicate a willingness to do so in the letter. Public educator applications include all of the above but can substitute the following for the research design statement above: (a) an explanation of the educational goals and methods or activities used to promote public awareness of archaeology in North Carolina (up to 2 pages long).
3. Each grant award will not exceed \$500. The budget may include any direct expense in support of the proposed research, except for wages paid to the grant’s recipient. Examples of allowable expenses include travel (fares, mileage, and per diem), supplies, and fees for specialized services (photography, radiocarbon dating, drafting, etc.). Grant funds may not be used for indirect costs or institutional overhead.
4. Selection criteria shall include but need not be limited to: (a) the quality of the proposed research, (b) the likelihood that the research can be successfully carried out in a timely manner, (c) the individual’s promise as a professional or avocational archaeologist, and (d) the degree to which the individual has contributed to the programs of the NCAS. Note that the committee reserves the right to make no award in any given year.
5. Normally, the term of the grant shall be for one year, subject to extension for an additional year. The recipient shall submit interim reports of progress and expenditures to the Committee’s chair at six-month intervals from the initial date of the grant. A final report is due within six months after the grant’s term ends. This final report must include a description of the project’s research results as well as a detailed summary of expenditures made under the grant. If asked, the recipient of the grant will present the results of his or her research at a meeting of the NCAS. Each recipient is also required to submit an article on the grant-supported research to the NCAS Newsletter or to the Society’s journal, *North Carolina Archaeology*. Grant recipients should acknowledge the NCAS in any printed, electronic, or graphic material produced through the grant and in announcements at any public meetings, classes, or events to which the grant gives rise, as follows: *This (publication, project, etc.) was produced in part by a grant from the North Carolina Archaeological Society.*

The next deadline for receipt of proposals is November 1, 2023. Awards will be announced by December 31, 2023. Email all materials to NCAS Grant-in-Aid Program co-chairs, Dr. Randy Daniel (danieli@ecu.edu) and Dr. David Moore (dmoore@warren-wilson.edu).

CONGRATULATIONS, AIDAN! The NCAS Grant-in-Aid Program is pleased to announce that Aidan Paul was the 2022 recipient of the Whitey Graham Award. Mr. Paul is a graduate student at NC State University and has been awarded \$500 for his proposal, “An Archaeological History of Forbush Creek and the Piedmont Village Tradition-Mississippian Frontier.” Aidan Paul is mentored by Dr. Dru E. McGill (NC State University). Mr. Paul’s proposal requested funding to date a complicated stamped ceramic type presumably dating to the Mississippian period in the Yadkin River Valley.

SIUAN PROJECT FIELD SCHOOL

Have you ever wanted to participate in an archaeological excavation? And do so locally, near your own backyard? This course will give you the opportunity to do just that while earning six (6) hours of college credit and living in Chapel Hill. This year's Research Laboratories of Archaeology (RLA) field school, taught by Dr. Heather Lapham and Dr. Mary Beth Fitts, will take place during Summer Session 1 (May 17 – June 22, 2023).

Investigations will be based locally, continuing the RLA's long-standing [Siuan Project](#) begun in the 1980s to understand how Indigenous Siuan-speaking peoples living in what is today central North Carolina navigated new challenges and opportunities brought about by European colonization in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Field school students will learn the basic techniques of archaeological excavation and ethics as well as mapping, surveying, photography (including 3D photography), artifact identification, and data interpretation. Although some classroom and laboratory instruction will be given, most of the time will be spent in the field.

There are no formal prerequisites, but potential students must fill out a [Field School Application Form](#) by **MARCH 10**. Enrollment will be limited to about 12 students. Applicants will be informed as to whether they have been accepted into the course by April 1. Inquiries about the Siuan Project Field School are welcome and should be made to Dr. Lapham (hlapham@unc.edu) or Dr. Fitts (marybeth.fitts@unc.edu).

Learn Locally!

**ANTH 451:
FIELD
SCHOOL
IN
ARCHAEOLOGY**

**Application
Deadline:
March 10**

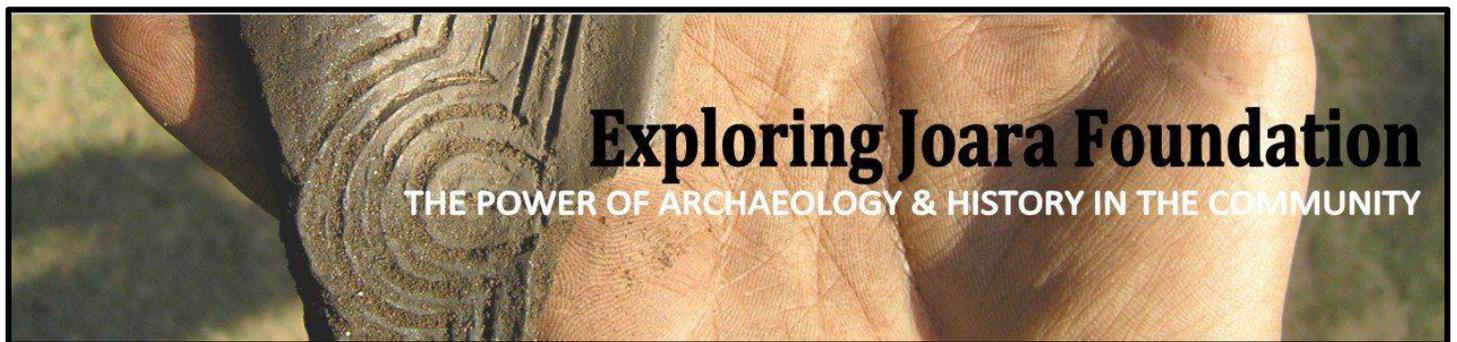
**Earn 6 Credits
Hours!**

**Summer Semester I:
May 17- June 23, 2023**

RLA
RESEARCH LABORATORIES
OF ARCHAEOLOGY

Contact Dr. Heather Lapham (hlapham@unc.edu) with questions  [rla_unc](https://www.instagram.com/rla_unc) 





EJF has announced its 2023 dates for “Dig Days” at the Berry site (Burke County, NC) and lab nights at the Wall Center for Archaeological Research in Morganton. Folks can get all the information and register for these opportunities at: <https://exploringjoara.org/>. Their website can also keep you updated on their lecture series and other events throughout the year.





HAPPY BIRTHDAY, NCAS!!!!



SAVE THE DATES:

- Dates:** **October 7th** (Saturday – Times TBD) – society meeting/program, catered lunch, evening reception, and birthday party
October 8th (Sunday – Time TBD) – tour of archaeological sites on Biltmore Estate to be led by Scott Shumate (Biltmore), transportation arranged by Scotti Norman (Warren Wilson College) will depart from the Gladfelter Building (Warren Wilson College) the morning of and return to the same location upon completion of the tour
- Venues:** Canon Lounge, Gladfelter Building, Warren Wilson College, Swannona, NC (Saturday)
 Biltmore Estate grounds, Asheville, NC (Sunday) [outdoor activity – plan accordingly]
- Program:** **TENTATIVE** – focus will be on western NC archaeological research with David Moore (Warren Wilson College/EJF) talking about Joara, Jane Eastman (Western Carolina University) & Brett Riggs (Western Carolina University) talking about their recent work at the Cherokee site of Watauga, and others. Craft vendors may also be on-site, sharing their wares and arts.
- Festivities:** **WORKING ON IT** – refreshments, cake, and entertainment (silent auction and raffle prizes), maybe music too... If anyone would like to aid in the planning and preparation of our nonagenarian milestone, please contact Linda Carnes-McNaughton (lfcmdoc@gmail.com)
- Lodging:** **TO BE DETERMINED** – the society is currently checking on local hotel room blocks and other options (like Airbnb and dormitories).



Southeastern Archaeological Conference

Congratulations, Patrick!

For his paper, “New Estimates of the Timing and Tempo of Population Change at Cahokia,” Patrick Druggan (Penn State) was awarded the Judith G. Knight Student Paper Book Prize at SEAC 2022 and, by doing so, also received one full-year (student) membership to NCAS, a set of recent past issues of our journal, and some very nice society swag.

Congratulations, Steve!

This past year, SEAC awarded their Lifetime Achievement Award to our very own Steve Davis for his many significant and sustained contributions to southeastern archaeology. Even in “retirement,” Steve continues to rack up the accolades!



mark  your Calendar

NC Geographic Information Systems Conference
Winston-Salem, NC (March 7-10, 2023)
<https://ncgisconference.com/>

Middle Atlantic Archaeological Conference
Ocean City, MD (March 9-12, 2023)
<https://maac10.wildapricot.org/>

Society for American Archaeology
Portland, OR (March 29-April 2, 2023)
<https://www.saa.org/annual-meeting>

Southeastern Archaeological Conference
Chattanooga, TN (October 25-28, 2023)
<https://www.southeasternarchaeology.org/annual-meeting/details/>

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NCAS Newsletter

Publication Schedule

All NCAS members should submit articles and news items to Paul J. Mohler (pjmohler@ncdot.gov) for inclusion in the Newsletter. Please use the following cut-off dates as guides for your submissions:

Winter Issue – January 31 Summer Issue – July 31
Spring Issue – April 30 Fall Issue – October 31

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