



North Carolina
Archaeological Society

Newsletter

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Historical Archaeology and Archaeological History: The 40th Anniversary of Excavations at Brunswick Town

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This June marks the 40th anniversary of the first scientific archaeological excavations at Brunswick Town, an 18th-century port located on the Cape Fear River in Brunswick County. Though many archaeologists and historians are familiar with Brunswick Town from reading about or visiting the site, very few are aware of the history and the significance of the excavations. The archaeological investigations undertaken in 1958 marked not only the beginning of the site as an historical park, but led to the establishment of an archaeology program by the State of North Carolina. Data from the site also were important in the development of the field of historical archaeology.

The story of modern archaeology at Brunswick Town begins in the early 1950s. Lawrence Lee was a graduate student in the History Department at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Lee wrote his Master's thesis on the history of

Brunswick Town, under the advisement of prominent North Carolina historian Hugh T. Lefler. Inspired by the writings of Cape Fear historian James Sprunt and by John Cotter's excavations at Jamestown, Virginia, Lee quickly recognized the potential for archaeological excavations at Brunswick Town and what they might reveal about its history. On December 7, 1951, at the annual meeting of the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association, Lawrence Lee presented one of the first scholarly papers on the history of Brunswick Town. He concluded his paper by stating, "Archaeology would reveal the form and layout of a colonial village unadulterated by later occupancy; foundations would reveal much about the architecture of the buildings, and of the nature of their construction; artifacts would tell us much of the everyday lives of the people. These findings, viewed as the remains of a type rather than of a single, isolated

community, would have more than local significance."

As it happened, former Superintendent of Historic Sites William S. Tarlton also realized the value of archaeology at historic sites. In 1954, Tarlton completed archaeological investigations as part of the restoration of Somerset Place, a 19th-century plantation located near Columbia, North Carolina. Working with Lawrence Lee, he convinced the Sprunt Family of Orton Plantation to donate the site of Brunswick Town to the State of North Carolina in 1955. Tarlton then formulated a two-phase plan for the development of the site into an historical park. The first phase included identifying and mapping as many of the building foundations as possible, and then correlating the physical remains of the ruins to their location as shown on a 1769 map of the town drawn by Claude Joseph Sauthier. The second part of the plan was to develop an area of the town for public visitation by restoring

streets to their original locations, clearing and excavating ruins, and marking the ruins with interpretive signs for visitors. Tarlton made arrangements for Lee to conduct the first phase of archaeological exploration and site development.

Lawrence Lee began archaeological investigations at Brunswick Town on June 9, 1958. With Sauthier's map as a guide, Lee and his two-person field crew began clearing brush, noting above-ground structural remains, and conducting small test excavations. This area was chosen as a starting point primarily because there were no earthworks related to Fort Anderson (a Civil War-period Confederate fort) on this portion of the site. It was also an area between two major natural features: a deep gully in the middle of the site and a low, swampy depression on the southern end of the site. The low, marshy area would eventually prohibit Lee and his crew from clearing and mapping ruins further to the south.

After noting a number of foundation ruins, Lee soon discovered a north-south stone wall with a semicircular inset, a unique architectural feature which is also shown on Sauthier's map of the town. The fortuitous discovery of this lot wall gave Lee the ability to integrate his reconstructed lot plan of the town and deed information with the physical remains as well as Sauthier's map. A total of 34 above-ground features were recorded by Lee during this phase of the project. Lee appeared pleased with his initial efforts in this small area of the site, as he later commented "along these streets we found, in varying degrees of preservation, the remains of every major [domestic] structure shown by Sauthier to have existed." Since he taught at the Citadel, Lee did not have the time to continue the full-time archaeology that would be required

at Brunswick Town, but Tarlton knew someone who could.

On August 1, 1958, Stanley South arrived to begin what would be a decade-long position at Brunswick Town as site manager and archaeologist. Since 1956, he had worked under Tarlton as site manager and archaeologist at Town Creek Indian Mound. South would later note that he was cautioned against the move by a colleague who "assured me that making this change in data bases would put an end to any hope that I might have for a career in archaeology. He assured me that I would find nothing of interest on historic sites." Working with Lee, South continued the systematic survey at Brunswick Town. Based on the number of above-ground ruins discovered between the deep gully and the low, marshy area of the site, Lee, South, and Tarlton made the decision to develop that area of the site for public visitation. The preservation of the Fort Anderson earthworks was also considered in this decision. After a brief ceremony on August 15, 1958, with Tarlton and local dignitaries present, Lee officially turned the project over to South.

Excavation of foundation ruins was part of the next phase in the plan for developing the site. From September of 1958 until May of 1968, South and his crew of local African-American fishermen/excavators tested and excavated many domestic structures, outbuildings, wells, and public buildings. These excavations focused primarily on the area designated for future public access. In addition to excavating structures on the southern end of the site, South continued to identify and test structural ruins in the northern part of the site. Eventually a total of 60 colonial-period architectural features were identified; only 23 were excavated. Since South's departure from the site in 1968,

only limited excavations have been conducted, as regulated by North Carolina Historic Sites' current preservation policy. These small-scale investigations have been primarily associated with improvements to the site, such as the development of a nature trail for visitors and the construction of a picnic shelter.

The excavations at Brunswick Town revealed much about the town, including the locations of structures on the landscape, architectural details of the buildings, and the material culture of its inhabitants. Based on a number of travelers' accounts, it was previously thought that the town was completely destroyed by fire, but excavations showed that only a small number of buildings in the southern half of the town, Russellborough, and St. Philip's Church were burned. The exploration of Brunswick Town was the first large-scale project that used archaeological evidence to confirm the accuracy of Sauthier's maps of North Carolina towns. The wealth of material recovered at Brunswick Town allowed South to publish numerous artifact studies, including a catalog of historic ceramics and a typology of 18th- and 19th-century buttons, which are still widely used today. Also formulated using data from the Brunswick Town excavations were mean ceramic dating, the Brunswick pattern of refuse disposal, and the Carolina Artifact Pattern, theoretical concepts in South's *Method and Theory in Historical Archeology*.

The success of excavations at Brunswick Town led to archaeological projects on other historic sites in North Carolina. Prior to the Brunswick Town excavations, archaeologists had focused only on famous historic sites, such as Fort Raleigh and Tryon's Palace. While he was site manager of Brunswick Town, South also conducted excavations

at historic sites at Asheville, Bath, Beaufort, Charlotte, Fayetteville, Fort Dobbs, Fort Fischer, Greensboro, Halifax, Hertford, New Bern, Swansboro, Wilmington, the birthplace of James K. Polk, and the Moravian communities of Bethabara and Salem. Many prehistoric sites in southeastern North Carolina, including the McFayden Mound in Brunswick County, also were tested and excavated by South during this time. South was also instrumental in establishing an archaeology program for the State of North Carolina.

There is still much to be learned about Brunswick Town. Even after 40 years, data from Lee's and South's excavations continue to enhance our understanding of Brunswick Town

and its inhabitants. Recent studies of colonoware, delftware tiles, olive jars and oil jars, the waterfront area, and a reanalysis of the artifacts from Nath Moore's Front were published in Volume 46 of *North Carolina Archaeology*. Additional studies are currently underway, including an examination of the smoking pipes found at Brunswick Town and a comparative study of domestic refuse from Russellborough and Tryon's Palace. North Carolina State Historic Sites insures proper management and preservation of Brunswick Town and its archaeological collections for present and future researchers. But, the primary audience for information about Brunswick Town, as well other historic sites, will always be the public. Lee's

and South's work at Brunswick Town set a standard for responsible fieldwork and reporting, scholarship, and science, while at the same time reciprocating the public's enthusiastic support of archaeology. These are responsibilities that no archaeologist should forget.

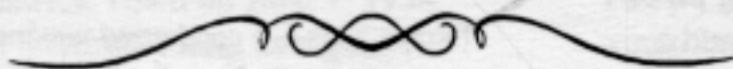
(Note: This is a condensed version of a continuing study on the history and archaeology of Brunswick Town by Thomas Beaman, Jr., Linda F. Carnes-McNaughton, John J. Mintz, and Kenneth W. Robinson. This research was originally presented at the 1998 Society for Historical Archaeology meeting in Atlanta, Georgia.)



"Excavation of the Judge Maurice Moore House, July 1962."

1998 NC State Fair

We are planning for the 1998 NC State Fair exhibit for October 16-25. If you want to sign up early to help man our booth located in the Kerr Scott Building, please contact Dee Nelms @ 919/733-7342 for available times. You will get an entrance pass for the day(s) you work. We need your support to make this work. Thank you.



NCAS Newsletter Publication Schedule

All NCAS members are encouraged to submit articles and news items to Dee Nelms, Associate Editor, for inclusion in the *Newsletter*. Please use the following cut-off dates as guides for your submissions:

Spring Issue	February 28
Summer Issue	May 31
Fall Issue	August 31
Winter Issue	November 30

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