



St. Catherines Island Online

THE ST. CATHERINES ISLAND FOUNDATION AND EDWARD JOHN NOBLE FOUNDATION COLLECTION

St. Catherines Island: Key to Georgia's Past

Fernbank Museum of Natural History is the new home to a world-class archaeological collection, *The St. Catherines Island Foundation and Edward John Noble Foundation Collection*. This collection is the product of 30 years of research led by Dr. David Hurst Thomas, Curator of North American Archaeology at the American Museum of Natural History. Artifacts and records from this work will be used at Fernbank for the creation of new exhibits and programs. St. Catherines Island is an unspoiled Georgia barrier island situated along the Atlantic coast in Liberty County, Georgia.

The St. Catherines Island research, and the collection produced by it, is very important. The results are as critical to understanding world history as they are to filling out the picture of Georgia's past. The work is best known for the discovery of a Spanish mission that had existed on the island from the 1570s to about 1680, long before James Oglethorpe established the English colony of Georgia in 1733. The mission, known as Santa Catalina de Guale, was the northernmost settlement in the Spanish realm of "La Florida" for more than a century. By revealing details of the region's earlier Spanish colonial period, we gain a better perspective on events that came later.

Equally important is documentation of prehistoric human activity on the island during the last 5,000 years. In fact, St. Catherines probably represents the most thoroughly studied ancient human landscape in the southeastern United States. Such a lengthy record reveals much about the way human societies adapt to changing circumstances, both natural and man-made.



Tidal marsh at St. Catherines Island.



Archaeological site testing at St. Catherines Island.
© American Museum of Natural History



Human image modeled in clay from mission Santa Catalina de Guale. © American Museum of Natural History



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Charles Colcock Jones, Jr.

HISTORICAL PROVING GROUND FOR INNOVATIVE ARCHAEOLOGISTS

Innovative approaches to archaeology at St. Catherines Island have produced many significant findings. In fact, a look at archaeological explorations of the island over the past 150 years reveals how the science of the human past has steadily improved. In many ways, this story of progress in archaeological research mirrors advances in modern science everywhere.

In the beginning, archaeology was often pursued as a hobby by educated, well-to-do gentlemen. Indeed, the first known archaeological interest in St. Catherines Island occurred before the Civil War when Liberty County antiquarian Charles Colcock Jones, Jr. (b. 1831 – d. 1893) visited the island and collected Indian artifacts. Although his collecting was unscientific by today's standards, Jones set a good example by recording the location of many finds up and down the Georgia coast and eventually transferring most of the artifacts to the American Museum of Natural History. There, his collection remains available for research even today. Jones also wrote one of the first reports on the archaeology of any state, entitled "Antiquities of the Southern Indians, particularly of the Georgia tribes" (1872).



Clarence Bloomfield Moore. Courtesy of the Harvard University Archives.

Native American burial mounds were the focus of the first organized archaeological expedition to St. Catherines Island. Working from his private steamboat, "the Gopher," a wealthy Philadelphian named Clarence Bloomfield Moore (b. 1852 – d. 1936) made many trips in the region to investigate hundreds of prehistoric mound sites. Between 1896 and 1897, Moore partially excavated seven burial mounds at St. Catherines. Although scientists find Moore's methods lacking today, the lavishly illustrated reports on his Georgia work provide the first well-documented account of excavation into ancient mound sites along the coast. Before Moore's time, ancient man-made earthworks in North America were the subject of much speculation. Many believed they were the work of an exotic, lost civilization. Moore's reports helped to unravel much of the mystery surrounding the mounds and they are still valuable to researchers seeking to compare different kinds of mound sites in different parts of the Southeast. Almost a hundred years later, several of the St. Catherines mounds partially dug by Moore yielded new information when they were reinvestigated by American Museum teams using modern techniques.

Following Moore's campaign, archaeological studies did not occur again at St. Catherines Island until 1959, when Dr. Lewis Larson conducted limited excavations, and then again from 1969–1971 when Dr. Joseph R. Caldwell continued to look at prehistoric sites. In the process, both of these archaeologists found tantalizing evidence of the Spanish mission site and their results helped narrow Dr. Thomas' successful search for it several years later. Caldwell, of the University of Georgia, also continued exploration of burial mounds. He was the first archaeologist to put the carbon-14 dating process to work on the Georgia coast and by doing so, he constructed a basic chronology of the last 4,000 years that is still valuable today.



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Remote sensing survey during search for mission Santa Catalina de Guale. © American Museum of Natural History

Further advancements in archaeological science were applied to pin down the 400-year-old Spanish mission site when the American Museum of Natural History began to look for it in 1980. Dr. David Hurst Thomas used sophisticated remote sensing technology, as well as computer imaging, to locate the likely sites of vanished mission buildings. Working across the suspected mission site, three methods were employed in the search. A proton magnetometer was used to measure differences in the local magnetic field, soil resistivity was measured to discover differences in the way electric current passed through the ground, and a ground-penetrating radar was utilized to measure underground electromagnetic “echoes.” Plots of results from all three methods gave the archaeologists targets for excavation that proved to be just what they were looking for—the Spanish church and friary ruins.

MISSION SANTA CATALINA DE GUALE

Archaeologists enjoy setting the historical record straight. While their evidence is often dusty and meager, it can also be a very powerful reminder of how things really used to be. And when archaeological findings are combined with written records, even more complete stories can be told. The discovery and study of a 400-year-old Spanish mission at St. Catherines Island brings overdue attention to the first chapter of Georgia’s—and North America’s—earliest colonial history. Furthermore, it provides an extraordinarily detailed view of life at the mission compound.

Research involving original Spanish records provides a good outline of mission Santa Catalina de Guale’s history, which spans the 150 year period before an English colony was formed in Georgia (see timeline). A small mission outpost was first established on St. Catherines Island in the 1570s by Franciscan friars operating out of St. Augustine. After 1587, the St. Catherines outpost essentially marked the northernmost coastal frontier of the Spanish realm in “La Florida.” However, Santa Catalina de Guale never enjoyed permanent stability owing to a number of native revolts, epidemics of disease, and changing policies of the colonial government. Arguably, the longest period of stability occurred between about 1605 and 1645, when relations with local Native Americans were relatively calm—but by then a pattern of gradual decline had set in. After the English established a settlement at Charleston in 1670, the end of the mission at St. Catherines was close at hand.



Mission church during excavation at mission Santa Catalina de Guale. © American Museum of Natural History



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Archaeology at the mission site exposed the footprints of three kinds of buildings: the iglesia (church), the convento (friary or living quarters), and the cocina (kitchen); and located the well for drinking water along with nearby Native American houses. Thousands of artifacts were found in and around these buildings, including pottery, food scraps such as animal bones, and imported Spanish bowls, beads and religious medals. There is much to learn from all this evidence at Santa Catalina de Guale, but a few findings stand out among the others:

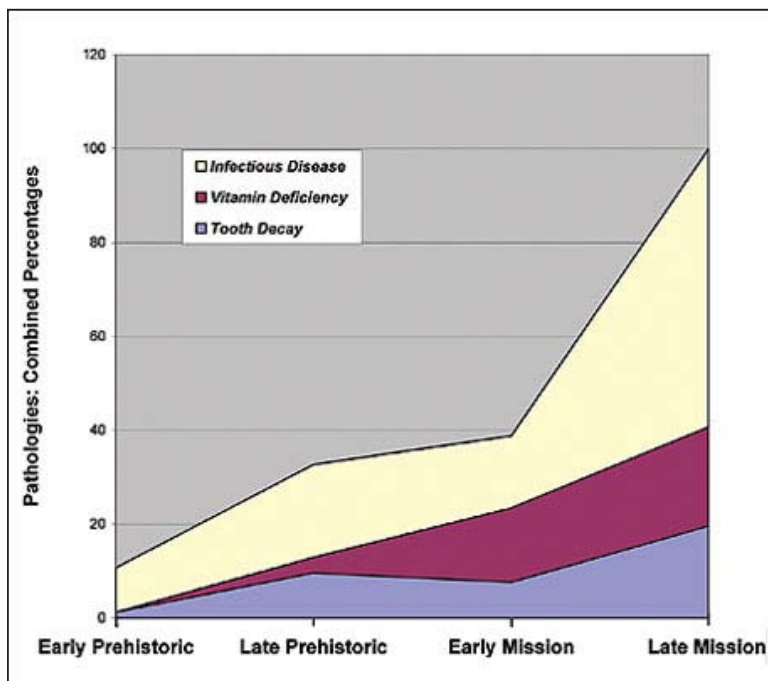
- The results demand attention to the important Spanish history of the southeastern United States.
- The work documents the oldest known church in Georgia—and possibly in the United States.
- Life at the mission was very different from life in the main Spanish settlements like St. Augustine, since compromises that accommodated Indian beliefs and customs were very important at remote outposts.
- Careful town planning, even at frontier settlements, was as important in the Spanish colony as it was for the English over a century later.



Spanish majolica plates under excavation at mission Santa Catalina de Guale.
© American Museum of Natural History

As Fernbank Museum develops new programs and exhibitions around *The St. Catherines Island Foundation and Edward John Noble Foundation Collection*, much more about this fascinating place will be revealed. Inspired by the collection, Fernbank Museum launched a new research effort in 2006—a search for the 17th-century Spanish mission of Santa Isabel de Utinahica.

GLOBAL RELEVANCE OF ST. CATHERINES ISLAND RESEARCH



Pattern of declining health conditions among St. Catherines Island and other coastal populations in Georgia and Florida, 400 BC–AD 1700 (after Larsen et al. 2001).

The best archaeological research reveals something useful about the lives of people virtually anywhere, and careful study of human skeletons from St. Catherines Island has done just that. Analysis of ancient bones, directed by Dr. Clark Spencer Larsen, has shown how the health of native people on the Georgia coast actually tended to grow worse over time. These findings are a potent reminder that an increasingly “civilized” existence does not come without risks to quality of life.

Skeletal remains of individuals living on the Georgia coast over the last 2,000 years reveal a consistent pattern of change. Overall health was relatively good among the earliest groups on the island who lived mainly by foraging for wild plants and animals. Problems with nutrition and disease really began to worsen once the Indians started to grow their own food (such as corn) and live in more crowded settlements. Infectious disease became prevalent after about AD 1300 because the new



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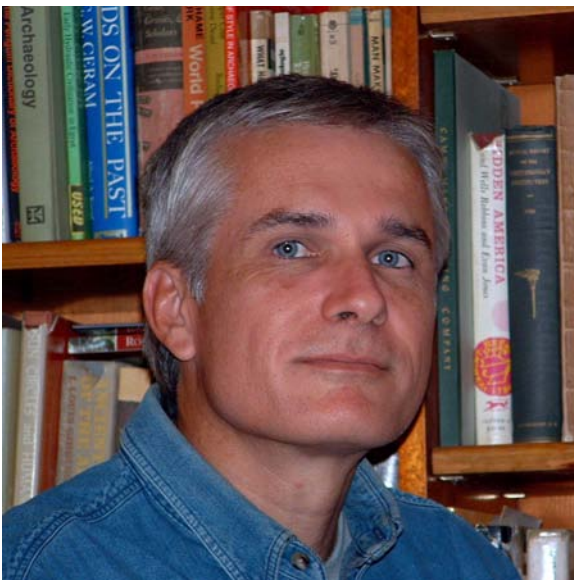
villages were less sanitary and the close living quarters allowed disease to spread more readily. Also, dental health declined significantly after local populations began to replace local plant and animal foods with non-native agricultural plants such as corn. The main culprit was the natural sugar in corn that caused tooth decay. On top of these challenges, the Spanish inadvertently brought new diseases to the region that ravaged local natives who had weak natural defenses. Similar problems have been observed around the world whenever the transition to a settled farming life occurs, and when colonizing societies move into new areas.

TAKING CARE OF THE PRICELESS COLLECTION

The bulk of *The St. Catherines Island Foundation and Edward John Noble Foundation Collection*—over one million artifacts—arrived at Fernbank in almost 900 boxes, each filled with fragile and valuable clues to the ways of long-gone cultures. It is the job of museum curators to organize the collection and take proper care of it. Curators also help design exhibitions and develop educational programs that explain the meaning of the artifacts, and they conduct new research that reveals even more about the people who made and used the artifacts.

While complete transfer of the St. Catherines collection to Fernbank Museum will take years, work has already begun to prepare its new home in Atlanta. Special shelving and boxes will protect the artifacts and a computerized list of all the items will be created so that they may be easily located and studied. At the same time, ideas are being developed for new exhibitions and educational programs. Eventually, the collection will be opened to study by visiting scholars. There is much to do but work with the new collection is exciting and rewarding.

MEET THE CURATOR



Dennis Blanton, Curator of Native American Archaeology.
© Fernbank Museum of Natural History

In the summer of 2005, Dennis Blanton became Fernbank Museum's Curator of Native American Archaeology. Hired only a year after the acquisition of *The St. Catherines Island Foundation and Edward John Noble Foundation Collection*, Blanton faced a daunting first task: sorting the collection's estimated one million artifacts which span nearly 5,000 years (ca. 3000 B.C.E. – 1680 C.E.). The artifacts arrived at the Museum in 900 boxes, all of which needed to be inventoried, sorted and preserved. While some people might have been overwhelmed by such an undertaking, Blanton's instinctive curiosity and impressive archaeological background allowed him to approach the task with confidence and enthusiasm.

Previously, Blanton was the director for the Center for Archaeological Research and an instructor for the Department of Anthropology at the College of William and Mary. He was also the director of archaeology at Shirley Plantation in Charles City, Virginia. Returning to Georgia, where he spent much of his youth, was a thrilling opportunity.



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“You have no idea what it means to me to come back to Georgia to work with this collection and present its history to the public, especially to Georgians,” Blanton said. “Georgia taught me archaeology, and now it’s great to be able to teach other Georgians about archaeology.”

When he was a child, Blanton said his dad would occasionally find Native American artifacts in South Carolina. A youthful Dennis Blanton wrote to the state archaeologist about his first discoveries when he was twelve years old. Not expecting a response, Blanton was delighted to receive a lengthy and encouraging reply, which cemented his passion for archaeology.

“I was smitten with being labeled a ‘junior archaeologist’ by him,” Blanton said. “A lot of people grow out of it, but I never did.”

Blanton went on to roam the South Georgia countryside on his own, often with the encouragement of teachers and college professors. Countless hours exploring the fields, rivers and marshes of South Georgia provided ample preparation for a productive career.

His passion for archaeology continues today and Blanton looks forward to the exhibitions and programming which will result from the findings at St. Catherines. Though he has made a great deal of progress, there is much work to be done. A handwritten catalogue of the items from the field came with the collection, and each item had to be carefully accounted for and entered into a new electronic database. Eventually, Blanton wants to expand the database to include digitalized images, field notes and background information. He aims to make the collection accessible to researchers and to the public, but at the same time to preserve the objects as they were found in the field.

“Some of them are literally biodegradable, so we have to make sure they don’t disappear. We’ve retained a conservator to make sure that we have the tools to manage the preservation of this collection,” he said.

The items include locally-produced daub (mud) wall fragments and handmade religious medallions that may have been transported from the Vatican. The majority of the collection comes from excavations in and around the once-lost Mission Santa Catalina de Guale, which were led by Dr. David Hurst Thomas of the American Museum of Natural History in New York. One of the first missions established by the Spanish, Santa Catalina (St. Catherines) represents a cross-roads of cultures and is the site of the earliest known church in Georgia, and one of the earliest in North America.

In order to unearth even more information about early Georgia and give novice explorers a taste of the process, Blanton leads Fernbank’s public archaeology program called *The Search for Santa Isabel de Utinahica*. The summer program, which features excavation sites about 100 miles inland from St. Catherines, has been a great success, providing “tantalizing clues that indicate we’re in the area of Spanish activity.” In some ways, Blanton said, the site is the perfect contrast to St. Catherines Island, because of its inland location and its status as a backwoods mission. “One goal of these excavations is that it would allow us to speak comprehensively about the whole southeastern frontier experience,” he said.

Blanton is proud of the acquisition of the new artifacts and has goals to create exhibitions that will enhance the scholarship and programming of the Museum: “I’ve had a ball. All of this bodes very well for the future of Fernbank’s archeology programs. The Museum staff is very supportive, and the public is excited and supportive. That’s what motivates me.”



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LEARN MORE

Selected Reading List

Jones, Charles C.

1999 *Antiquities of the Southern Indians, Particularly the Georgia Tribes*. University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa.

Larsen, Clark Spencer

2000 *Reading the Bones of La Florida*. *Scientific American* 282(6):80-85.

Moore, Clarence Bloomfield

1998 *The Georgia and South Carolina Coastal Expeditions of Clarence Bloomfield Moore*. Edited by Lewis Larson. University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa.

Thomas, David Hurst

1988 *St. Catherines: An Island in Time*. Georgia Endowment for the Humanities, Atlanta.

Worth, John E.

1998 *The Timucuan Chiefdoms of Spanish Florida, Volume 1: Assimilation, Volume 2: Resistance and Destruction*. University Press of Florida, Gainesville.

Useful Links

David Hurst Thomas and Mission Archaeology

<http://www.oah.org/pubs/magazine/spanishfrontier/snead.html>

David Hurst Thomas at St. Catherines Island (for kids!)

<http://ology.amnh.org/archaeology/tools/>

History of Georgia's Spanish Missions

<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/nge/Article.jsp?id=h-572>

Santa Elena (South Carolina) Archaeology

<http://www.cas.sc.edu/sciaa/staff/depratterc/newweb.html>

Mission San Luis, Florida

<http://dhr.dos.state.fl.us/archaeology/sanluis/>

Florida Museum of Natural History Archaeology

<http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/histarch/>