

Archaeology at the Johannes Kolb Site - 2004

2004 at the Kolb Site

When we first started our work at the Kolb site in 1997 we didn't have time to do a thorough search of the historic records. Instead we got a quick tour from the late Horace Rudicill, Darlington County's historian, and concentrated on the Johannes Kolb occupation. Once we got a couple of year's work done, however, it became clear that many of the historic people living at the site were present long after Kolb's demise. As we have often said before, it turned out that Johannes Kolb was only one of a long line of humans living on this sandy ridge by the river.

Mr. Rudicill had given us copies of land plats from 1914 (Figure 1) and 1849 (Figure 2) and a reconstruction of the Cashua Neck ownership done by historian T.E. Wilson (Figure 3) which showed the location of the site. This gave us the names of the owners in the respective years, and a framework for interpreting the site that would work well enough until we had time to do more detailed research.

In preparing for our first major summary report this year (still not done) we took a closer look at the documents. It turned out to be pretty interesting. First, although we know Johannes Kolb lived at the site there doesn't seem to be any extant proof that he owned it, or that his family ever sold it! There is a land plat in a 1751 Will that shows the site location (Figure 4) along with a note stating that it is where Johannes Kolb "now lives," and that the property title should be transferred to him upon payment of a debt. But there is no evidence he actually did so. Presumably this was taken care of, and the property passed into the hands of his children and grandchildren, but none of them is on record as selling it.

In fact the first time it is clearly transferred to anyone is in 1849, when Bright Williamson gave it to his son, Thomas C. Williamson. Bright Williamson was in fact as well as name, bright. His father moved to the area in the 1770s, and by 1803 a 25 year old Bright had opened a store near Williamson's bridge, and was transporting trade goods by flatboat from the coast. He started acquiring land at about the same time, and by the 1850's owned over 20,000 acres between Mechanicsville and Society Hill. There are dozens of deed references associated with him, and we looked at every one that seemed likely. First we looked for transactions with the Kolbs and known descendants, and then with those referenced as being on the "Pee Dee," Hurricane Creek, and so on.

It is possible we may have missed the crucial sale document. There are other explanations of course-maybe the title was never recorded by Kolb to begin with. Charleston was a long way from Darlington, and maybe he procrastinated and then misplaced it, or simply kept it on hand until it was needed. The Darlington County courthouse burned in 1806, taking with it the documents from the period between 1784 and 1806. Benjamin Kolb, the last of Johannes' male grandchildren in the area, disappears from the documentary record after 1795. His name is seen on a 50 acre tract directly across the river from the site on a reconstruction of Cashua Neck done in 1932 by T. E. Wilson. Lemuel Benton is said by Wilson to have bought that tract in 1795, though the transaction does not appear in the existing county deed records. Thus the idea that the records were never filed, or lost (either by the family or to the courthouse fire) has some support.

The name "Benton" is seen on the 1849 plat, within the tract being sold (Figure 2), so it seemed logical to think he may have obtained the other Kolb lands as well. A little research shows he married Elizabeth Kimbrough, the daughter of Hannah Kolb and John Kimbrough. She was thus Johannes Kolb's granddaughter. A scenario where she inherits the land and dutifully passes it to her husband, who transfers it to the young Bright Williamson quickly came to mind. But as stated above, the realities of the documentary record are less clear. The Benton's had four sons and four daughters, so by the third generation in this branch alone heirs had five different surnames.

Time would not allow us to follow out every possible lead. The only transaction found that clearly involves our tract was in 1849. After that the chain of title is well documented.

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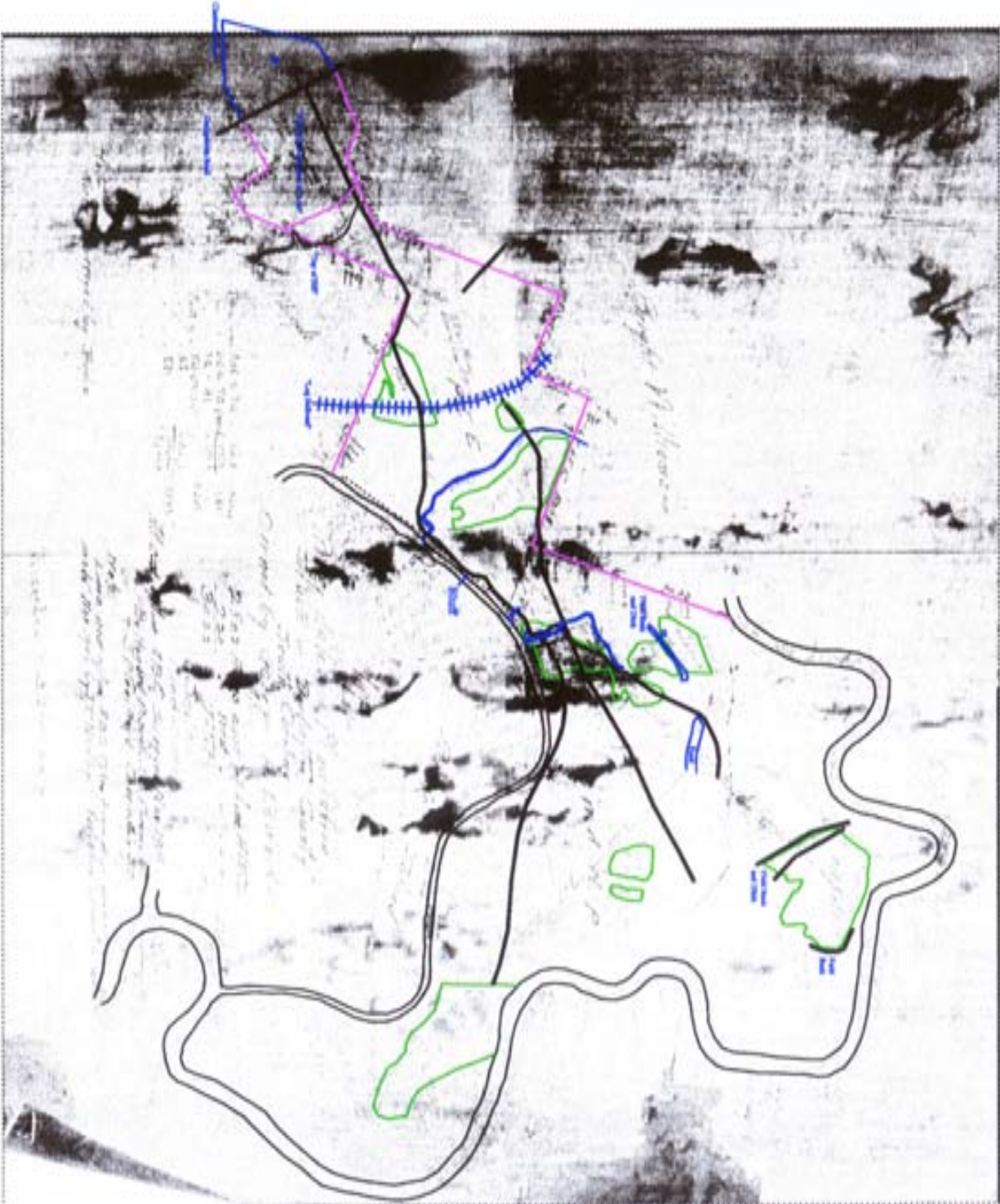


Figure 1: The 1914 Plat of Riverdale. The Williamson House is at the very top. Both versions of the original are in very poor condition so the property lines and landscape features (river, roads, fields, etc) are emphasized.

From an archaeological perspective the name of the property owner is almost irrelevant, because after the Kolb's none of the owners actually lived there. The lands Bright Williamson bought were plantations. The people who worked them were slaves. Thus the remains we are excavating are not those of upper status white families, but enslaved African Americans living in isolated quarters apart from, but under the supervision of their masters and overseers.

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Figure 3: T. E. Wilson's reconstruction of Cashua Neck land ownership.



Figure 4: The 1751 plat that accompanied John Ouldfield's Will.

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Archaeological evidence shows clearly that the site was occupied between about the 1780s and 1860s, essentially the entire Williamson ownership period. So the artifacts we find take on different meanings. A chandelier crystal is not a sign of wealth and opulent decoration by a white plantation owner, but instead may be a sign of divination practices among the enslaved. A nice porcelain teacup isn't the afterthought of someone with two or three twelve place settings to throw away when a newer fashion arises, but a cherished and valued possession representing a relatively large percentage of a person's net worth. A hole beneath the house floor might not be simply a root cellar for storing potatoes through the winter, but may also serve as a hiding place to keep valuable items from the prying eyes of the master or acquisitive neighbors.

Our "Running Fox" cufflinks may be the keepsake of a huntsman or groom, rather than the hunter (Figure 6). The archaeology of African Americans is a significant topic in the field of Historical Archaeology because it gives us an opportunity to address information that cannot be obtained in any other way and to look at the ways that the past affects modern life.

Our historic research led us down other interesting paths. In the 1870s Thomas Williamson's son Laurens E. Williamson traded the property to Darlington attorney Berryman W. Edwards for a store and a house in town. He passed it along to his son George in 1914. They called it "Riverdale." Briefly Mechanicsville was known by that name. George H. Edwards was also an attorney. Both had homes in Darlington, and neither seems to have lived at the site, or in the Williamson house. During the 20th century the area was known as Edwards' Swamp.

In an attempt to identify who was living in the buildings shown on the 1914 plat, and who generated the turn of the 20th century artifacts at the site we looked at the 1900 Federal census for the Mechanicsville Township. This enumeration district falls along the Pee Dee between Witherspoon Island and Robbins Neck. Often it is possible to reconstruct neighborhoods based on name proximity in the manuscript version of the census. Census takers generally went from house to house - after all if you were traveling around the back roads of rural Darlington County on foot or horseback skipping around is something you would avoid if possible.

Unfortunately it is not clear from the enumeration order who lived where exactly. Generally we can get clues as to who lived where by looking at people we know and bracketing. For example, if our site was between two known families, then we would be fairly certain that one of the



Williamson-Edwards-Helms House

Figure 5: The Thomas C. Williamson House (from Ervin and Rudicill, 1976 *Darlingtoniana*)



Figure 6: "Running Fox" cuff links, from a root cellar dating to the 1820's to 1840's.

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families in between was living at the site. But a combination of unfortunate facts intervenes. The wealthiest white landowners are all listed together, though we know they lived far apart. So bracketing is made more difficult. For the most part otherwise the enumeration seems to follow logically from household to household. Unfortunately most of the families were poor, Black, and non-landowners, so their names aren't shown on maps of the period, in other words. Without a datum point to tell us where to begin, we can't say who, exactly, lived at the site. We are only beginning this aspect of our research though, so if you know anyone that lived or worked out here, let us know. This is an area where anyone that wants to help can make a contribution.

The research did give us some clues that will help to set the stage for analyzing the excavation results. Although archaeology is probably the most intimate form of study that one can make of non-living subjects, for the most part we never have the slightest idea of who, precisely, lived at a site. So we have to establish a general "context" for considering the results. In 1900 the population of the Mechanicsville Township was almost completely African American. There were 366 families in the township. White families (64 total) made up only 18% of the total, and only 10% of the population. Nearly everyone was involved in agriculture. Only two Black families, headed by Anthony Lide and Elias Bacot owned their own land. Only 23 White families were landowners.

There was a sawmill at the now lost town of Lumber, as well as boarding houses, stores, and temporary housing for the workers and owner. In 1900 300 people lived there. At its peak it was the host to over a thousand residents. The late 19th century was a time of change for our society, and the sawmill town of Lumber – and the smaller version at Riverdale - epitomize this change. The South, which had relied upon agriculture requiring the cheapest of labor to make a profit, suffered as industrialization brought mechanical farm equipment to the fields. Each tractor replaced several humans. Tenant farmers who were landless found themselves in a downward spiral, barely surviving from year to year. Non-farm jobs were hard to find, and by the 1910s people were heading to the cities. Blacks especially headed North as the gains made during Reconstruction were replaced with oppressive segregation laws.

This is played out in the history of the Great Pee Dee Heritage Preserve. The 1849 plat shows x acres under cultivation. The 19th century saw a major change on the Pee Dee. As fields were cleared water run off increased, and downriver flooding became more and more of a problem. At mid century brick culverts and drains had been built, and drainage ditches were dug to protect the fields. Even so it is said that flooding took the crops once every five years.

With the end of slavery there was no one to maintain the drainage systems. Paying wages for the work was not possible for most landowners. Tenant farmers might protect their own fields if possible, but all of their efforts were required just to keep their heads above water so huge voluntary public works projects were unlikely. The problem only got worse, and by the turn of the century one crop in four might be lost. Tenant farmers were unwilling to take the risk and by the time the 1914 plat was drawn only about 35 acres were still under cultivation. Through the rest of the 20th century the land was used for growing and harvesting trees and as a hunting preserve. Today it is owned by the state and will remain a heritage preserve in perpetuity.

Agriculture is still important in Darlington County, but today nearly everyone involved earns wages for labor instead of working on subsistence or family farms. This reflects fundamental change in our national culture, as people have abandoned traditional agricultural lifeways and joined the capitalist economy. The archaeology of the 18th to 20th centuries at the Kolb site reflects these changes clearly.

In 2004 we will continue the excavations begun in 1997. As always, every unit we excavate will produce evidence of many periods of occupation at the site. But our efforts this year will be used to fill in the blanks in the sampling in areas that have yielded evidence from the 18th and 19th century occupations near the river bank. We hope that everyone in the community will join us in learning about this largely undocumented aspect of South Carolina history.