

The Archaeological Canoe Trail on the Ashley River

By Lynn Harris

An archaeology and shipwrecks canoe and kayaking trail has been established on the Ashley River from Bacon's Bridge at Old Dorchester State Park downstream to Middleton Place. This approximately six-mile tidal float trip affords captivating views of historic shipwrecks, wharves, old river houses, and modern waterside homes. Wildlife is abundant, especially wading and shorebirds like egrets, herons and wood ducks. Charleston's famous Middleton Place is located at one end of the trail and Bacon's Bridge, originally built by the colonial residents of Dorchester and now a state park, is at the other. The river is narrow and twisting with many overhangs. The tidal range is as much as four feet. Most of these wrecks are only visible at low tide. Paddling has to be planned around tides.



Figure 1: Paddling on the Ashley River Heritage Trail (SCIAA photo).

In 1774, an English traveler described Dorchester as “a pretty good sized town, upon Ashley River about 20 miles above Charles Town, and navigable all the way up to it...for vessels of 100 tons burthen.” Bacon's Bridge represented the “head of sloop navigation” and steamboats traveled up to and beyond Cedar Grove which was situated opposite Middleton Place and slightly upriver. The navigable waters of the Ashley River allowed watercraft to travel inland to conduct trade, to visit plantations, to reach the town of Fort Dorchester, and to mine phosphate. The historical sites situated along the banks of the Ashley River are an important part of the archaeological evidence relating South Carolina's settlement patterning and transportation network.

There are a number of possible reasons for the demise of the vessels littering these riverbanks. The upper reaches of the river was probably a convenient location to scuttle boats that were unserviceable. Reported historical usage of this river for “hurricane holing” might also account for a high number of damaged and abandoned boats. Another possibility is the gradual abandonment of vessels that were no longer useful due to changing economic conditions along the Ashley River. For example, the failing economic viability of Dorchester town, decreasing agricultural potential of lands adjacent to the river, and finally the slump of the phosphate industry.



Figure 2: Old motorized wooden boat lying on the banks of the Ashley River (SCIAA photo).

The architecture of the three vessels suggests that these shallow-draft, beamy boats were more practically utilized in an inland tidal context rather than offshore. It is possible that the tug was also used in the harbors, estuaries, and sounds of South Carolina. Sailing vessels and other tidecraft were probably towed by steam tugs such as this one. Archaeological evidence indicates that the majority of these wooden vessels date to the mid-19th century or onwards into the early 20th century. As this part of the Ashley River was a rich phosphate field during this time period, it is

very likely that the vessels in the upper reaches had some association with this industry.

The trail was created with the idea of integrating research with site management and public education. The Maritime Archaeological Site Canoe Trail forms part of the South Carolina Heritage Corridor. The maritime research, documentation of the wrecks, and design of the trail map was undertaken and funded by our SCIAA office with the volunteer help of Summerville residents, College of Charleston internship students, and a GIS specialist from the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources. All the sites lie on the riverbanks or in the marsh and represent an integral part of waterway history of the area which is a frequently neglected part of the educational message.

The intent of the trail is to combine recreational opportunities with heritage tourism and thereby boost the economy of the surrounding areas. It will represent a partnership between the state, private enterprise, and the local community. We envisage the trail as an opportunity to attract visitors primarily to the Summerville area. Old Dorchester State Park and many of the historic plantations on the Ashley River and local canoe companies have expressed an interest in using this trail. We also anticipate including it as part of our state public education program during our annual South Carolina Archaeology week in September and hope it will have similar utility for various Summerville cultural events. Tour guides will talk about the shipwrecks, their context within the maritime history of the state, and the abundant wildlife on the river. The inauguration paddle will be offered on the morning of July 26, 1997 leaving from Old Dorchester State Park at 8:30 AM. Please call Poll Knowland weekdays between 11 to 12 AM or leave a message at (803) 873-1740 for registration or more information.