

**REVIEW OF CHICORA ARCHAEOLOGY AT MITCHELVILLE**  
*DIG MITCHELVILLE SERIES 1*



HISTORIC  
**MITCHELVILLE**  
FREEDOM PARK | EST 1862

# ARCHAEOLOGY AT MITCHELVILLE BEGINS

Chicora Foundation & the Fish Haul Archaeological Site

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This report is the first chapter of many that reveal the story of archaeology work on Mitchelville, the first self-governed town of formerly enslaved people in the United States. **Dig Mitchelville**, the official archive of Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park exists to provide invested community members *free and public access* to the information researchers have uncovered about the people who lived in Mitchelville (and those that came before them) in a clear and consistent manner. This chapter, “Chicora Foundation & the Fish Haul Archaeological Site” tells the story of the first researchers to dive into the soil and champion the story of Mitchelville’s residents.

The first archaeological work done at the Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park was done in the 1980s at the request of the then property owners. (Trinkley 1986, 1990). In 1981, after a local contractor, John Crogan, purchased the land, he began excavating it for development. He and his supervisor Gerry Weckhorse quickly realized they were uncovering archaeology as they prepared the site for development. They knew the huge pieces of pots they were looking at were probably hundreds, if not thousands of years old, and it felt was much more important to have archaeologists come look at the site than develop it.

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John and Gerry stopped work and contacted the South Carolina State Museum to get advice about what to do. The Museum staff then contacts the Chicora Foundation, a local archaeological firm. The Chicora Foundation decided to donate their time and come and investigate the area as well as organize a huge group of archaeologists to volunteer their time as well.

In the Spring of 1982, archaeologists and local volunteers conducted the initial archaeological survey. In just a few days they uncovered hundreds of artifacts and dozens of features, or stains in the soil left behind by past people’s activities. They were expecting to find Native American artifacts, and maybe some Colonial or Antebellum as well. But the team also found many objects associated with the Civil War era, and the lead investigator, Michael Trinkley believed they had encountered something very special.



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Based off the initial excavations, archaeologists decided the site needed a large, full scale excavations to understand it. (Trinkley 1986). After years of preparation, the excavations took place in the spring of 1986 (Trinkley 1990; Trinkley and Hacker 1987). While getting ready for the next phase of work, archaeologists Michael Trinkley went to the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington D.C. and looked for Army documents relating to this area. It was then that he relocated an 1865 Army Quartermaster's map of Hilton Head Island showing the "Port Royal Army Encampment". This map illustrates Mitchelville in great detail.



Figure 1. (Right) Illustration of two Union (Federal) Army surveyors using a theodolite to make a map of Hilton Head Island for the Army Quartermaster's Office & (left) portion of the 1865 map of the Army installation on Hilton Head Island they made.

Combined with the archaeologists survey results, it became clear that Mitchelville era archaeological deposits were located within Fish Haul Park (to become the Historic Mitchelville Freedom Park).

In the 1986 excavations, the Chicora team excavated over two thousand square feet of the park area, locating at least four Mitchelville era homes. This was the first evidence to suggest



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that Mitchelville was a real place, not just an “experiment” in theory. The excavation blocks were placed in several areas across the modern park boundaries. One of these, involved nearly 950 feet of excavations. In total, over 25,000 objects were recovered by the archaeologists (Trinkley 1990). Chicora’s excavations found no evidence from the Planter era (called the Antebellum) when the Park area was a working plantation, and they believed it was likely a sea island cotton field prior to Mitchelville development.

The largest Mitchelville era “structure cluster” (or cluster of artifacts associated with a home) had two hearths. A hearth is the floor of a fireplace and can exist in an outdoor or interior situation.

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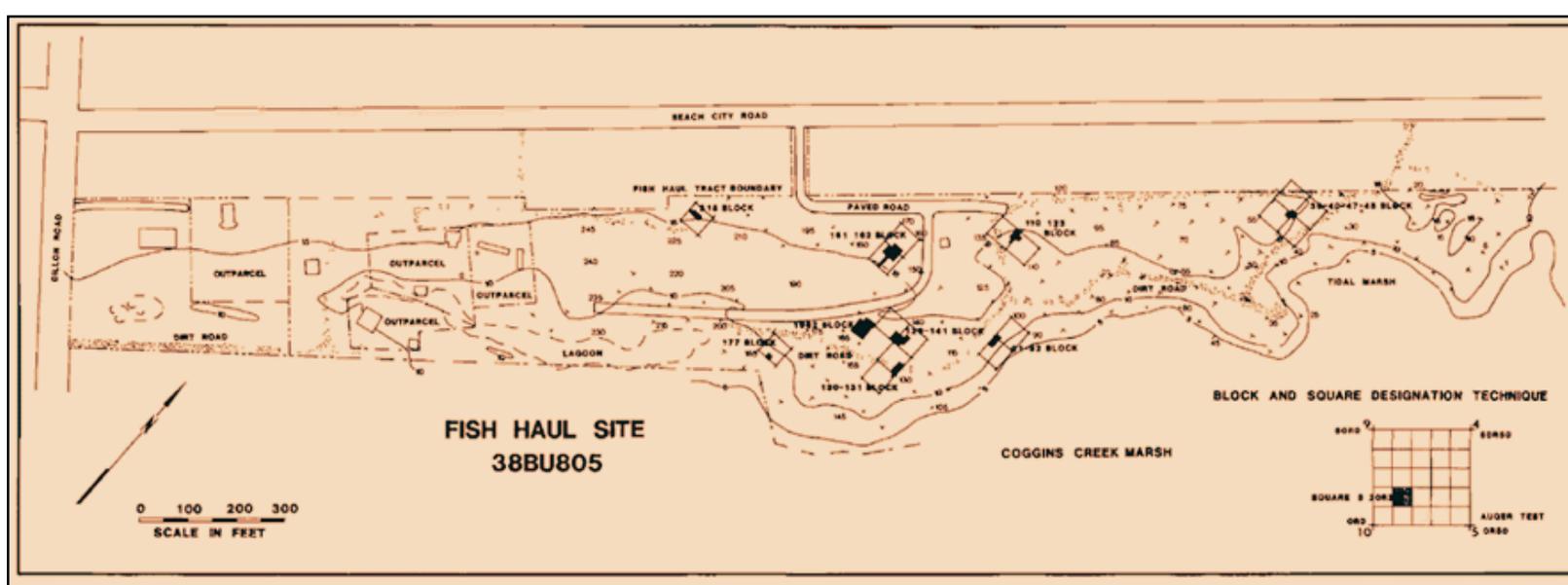


Figure 2. Map from the original Chicora Foundation report on their excavations at in HMFP.

The archaeologists examined artifacts from this structure cluster and found that the mean date of the pottery fragments from around the cluster was 1869. This was interesting, because that meant that ceramic bowls, plates, cups, mugs, etc. were made just during or after the Civil War. Instead, they were made both before, during and after the war years (or Mitchelville’s first years as a town). Archaeologists wondered if this meant Mitchelville residents were using table and kitchenware from the Plantation years as well as buying new things in town. This same cluster produced 16,000 artifacts; forty percent of these were



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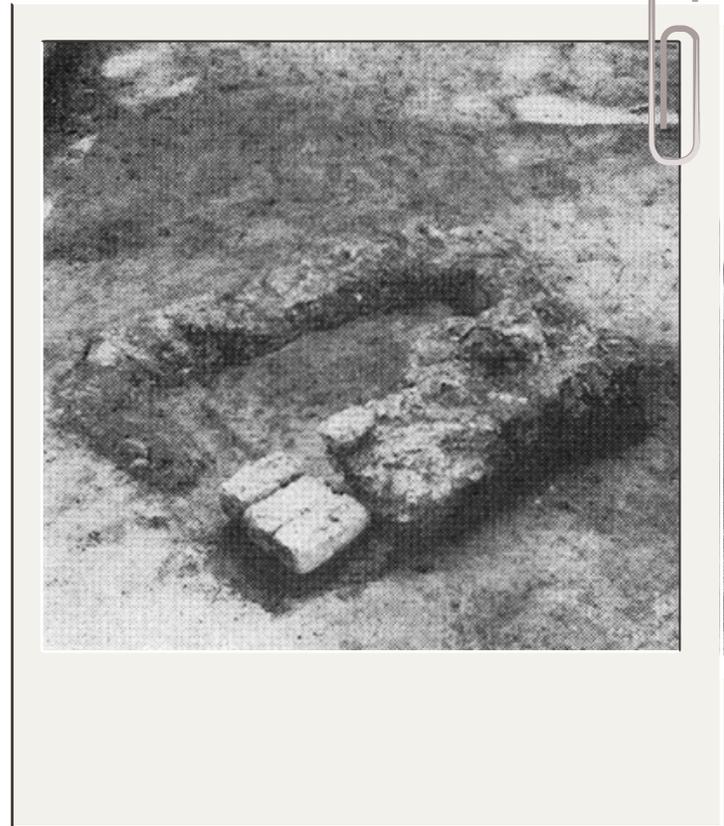
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artifacts used in the Kitchen, or for food preparation. A little over half were objects associated with architecture (like nails, hardware, hinges, etc). The last five percent of artifacts were furniture parts, ammunition, clothing buttons and clasps, personal objects, smoking pipe fragments, and other personal activities.

In this time period, archaeologists were engaged in investigating the differences in Black southern households in the Piedmont during and after enslavement. At these sites, unsurprisingly Black people living after enslavement had more material wealth than when they had been enslaved. Trinkley observed the same pattern of transition here at Mitchelville,

and concluded that the Mitchelville residents were materially more wealthy after enslavement than they had been before. Also, he concluded they were actively participating in a cash economy, buying new and more expensive things that they had access too during enslavement.

Beyond that, Trinkley said that although Mitchelville households were able to purchase more goods than they would have had access too before Emancipation, they were still overwhelmingly poor. He presented research showing how Mitchelville store owners (who were not necessarily Black or local) were up charging on goods on average between 108 to 557% higher than identical things sold in New York City at the same time.



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This first round of research in Mitchelville's residents helped set the foundation for more work to be done. Before The Chicora Foundation's work, Mitchelville was largely forgotten on island and sort of believed to be more myth than reality. But it was many years ago, and some aspects of the first round of results we know now to be incorrect

For example, Trinkley believed that Mitchelville mostly only existed during the Civil War and immediately after. He was able to find how many of the Mitchelville lots that made up the modern park were eventually lost during legal battles with Mitchelville residents and the previously plantation owner's children. Also, he thought perhaps many typically "African" practices that could be identified in pre-Emancipation Black households did not exist in Mitchelville. He concluded that perhaps the experience of living in Mitchelville was assimilating its African American residents into mainstream American culture and perhaps they were dropping some of their African cultural traits as they did so.

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Many of his conclusions have stood the test of time, and some have not. The work done by the Chicora researchers was extensive and set a high standard. Additionally, Chicora listed our site on the National Register of Historic Places as the Fish Haul Archaeological site and set the foundation for descendant community members to begin the work of preserving, promoting, and protecting the Mitchelville story.





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For more information visit [www.exploremitchelville.org](http://www.exploremitchelville.org) or call 843-255-7301.