

CONCLUSIONS

Research Questions

We initially identified five specific research topics that appeared to represent significant research goals that could reasonably be addressed using the data sets present at 38CH1693.

The first dealt with geomorphological issues concerning the site's location, the burial of the midden, and the dispersion of artifacts in the soil profile. The limited study revealed that the site was situated on a Pleistocene beach ridge or dune. The profiles at the site revealed three periods of landscape stability separated by periods of aeolian sand deposition. It appears that the Thom's Creek occupation was buried by sand deposited through wind action. The distribution of artifacts down the profile, however, is most likely accounted for by bioturbation. There appears to be no cultural material originating in the two buried soil horizons below the Thom's Creek occupation. Thus, while materials were found at considerable depths, all appear related to the Thom's Creek component at the site.

This study points out that given the correct circumstances, there is a potential for deeply buried sites in the coastal plain. While marine or fluvial burial is likely to result in the preservation of little context, aeolian deposits have the potential to preserve stratigraphy and cultural context. Archaeological deposits at Thom's Creek sites can be more complex than might be imagined and geomorphological studies hold the potential to help interpret these sites and their stratigraphy.

A second research goal focused on a more comprehensive zooarchaeological study of the Thom's Creek components than we had been able to undertake at past sites. We were able,

once again, to confirm that the use of ¼-inch mesh at these Thom's Creek sites with shell features and excellent faunal preservation would fail to provide a realistic representation of the species present. Although the problem of screen size and its affect on the faunal collection has been understood for nearly 20 years, relatively little archaeological data recovery has switched to ⅛-inch mesh.

Of course, as the screen size is decreased, the quantity of remains - especially difficult to identify fish remains - increases dramatically. This study was hindered by the abundance of small remains and the relatively low incidence of the more easily identifiable otoliths. While this suggests that the heads were removed and discarded at the catch site, it also resulted in a large quantity of material that could not be identified within the funding and time limits of the project.

Nevertheless, the study provides an excellent synthesis of Thom's Creek faunal exploitation. The study found evidence for seasonal use during the spring through late summer or early fall. The research also revealed that the abundance of deer was relatively low compared to fish. It may be that 38CH1693, during the spring and summer, focused on the collection of fish, especially relatively small fish that would be pushed up and down the smaller tidal creeks. The deer that was present at the site suggests intensive processing - perhaps another indicator that deer were in short supply. The study was inconclusive regarding possible selection in the field for certain cuts over others. While head remains (which are low in meat yield) are under-represented, leg and foot remains (also low in meat yield) appear to be over-represented.

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The assemblage is diverse, including rabbits, turtles, and other species that would be naturally found – and easily procured either during other activities or through traps – in the immediate site area. In this sense, the collection is reminiscent of other Thom's Creek sites.

A third research topic was the expansion of pollen and phytolith research into Thom's Creek sites. This work, too, was productive. The results suggested that the local environment was dominated by a mixed oak-pine forest that also contained hickory. These results precisely paralleled the ethnobotanical study that found the charcoal at the site – from both feature flotation and hand-picked samples – to also be dominated by pine and oak, with abundant evidence of hickory in the form of both wood charcoal and, especially, nutshell. The pollen work, however, also revealed that the site was in proximity to a wetland environment. This was anticipated by the catchment analysis that showed the site may have been located to take advantage of nearby spring-fed fresh water creeks.

The pollen found evidence of wild grape and, based on its abundance, it was suggested that the grape might represent an intentionally collected food. This is further supported by the recovery of grape seed in the ethnobotanical collections.

In contrast to the faunal study's suggestion of a spring and summer occupation, the ethnobotanical remains, especially the abundance of hickory nutshells, is suggestive of a late fall or early winter occupation.

A fourth research topic included good radiometric dating of the site. This was considered especially important since the site contained an abundance of a particular pottery (Thom's Creek Finger Impressed) that is both unusual and apparently confined to the northern extend of the Thom's Creek range. We were also concerned that too many Thom's Creek dates have relied on shell or that too few

dates were collected to realistically date the site. Consequently, we selected samples from four of the excavated features, ensuring solid contexts. We also limited the dating to a single hickory nutshell in each case. We hoped that this would avoid the concern that accidentally burned charcoal was being dated. The use of AMS dating allowed single fragments to be used to eliminate averaging and provide very tight date ranges.

The results of this work were dates that ranged from roughly 3,720 to 3,900 B.P. The dates suggest that 38CH1693 was used for a relatively short period of time during the middle of what is recognized as the range for the Thom's Creek occupation on the South Carolina coast. The site, therefore, is neither particularly early nor late.

A final area of specific research was to focus on the reported abundant worked bone at the site. We hoped that microscopic examination might expand research begun at the Lighthouse Point site (Trinkley 1980b). Unfortunately, the enthusiasm concerning worked bone was misplaced and the excavations produced only four specimens. These remains failed to offer any significant expansion on previous work.

Nevertheless, there were a variety of other artifacts produced and their analysis helps to interpret the site. For example, the site produced a relatively large quantity of sherd abraders and hones – many of which were likely used in the manufacture of bone items, even though these bone artifacts were not recovered. Our study – which must be recognized as preliminary – suggests that most were used in bone modification, with little indication that wood was being processed.

The largest artifact assemblage at 38CH1693 was that of pottery. The site provided the opportunity to provide a typological description of Thom's Creek Finger Impressed – which has been found in small quantities at a number of sites, all north of Charleston. In

addition, with the excellent radiocarbon dates available from the site, it was possible to compare the assemblage at 38CH1693 with assemblages from sites of approximately the same date range. Curiously, what we found is that the assemblage is varying with movement northward more than it is varying temporally. This opens an avenue of research not previously recognized or explored.

Other than the finger impressed materials, the assemblage easily fits the previous established typology for this ware (Trinkley 1986c). In addition, the pottery at 38CH1693, regardless of surface treatment or location on the site, appears to have been produced using very similar clay sources and techniques. This homogeneity at the site extends even to vessel form, with very little variability exhibited in vessel diameters.

Even the baked clay objects exhibit a paste that is essentially identical to the pottery. In all cases it appears that the paste is non-tempered. We believe that native clays were being used with little preparation. The result – for both pottery and the baked clay objects – is a sandy paste, but one that is not artificially tempered through the addition of specially selected sands.

Lithics, typical of Thom's Creek coastal sites, were scarce. No tools were recovered and the flakes found were all the result of reworking or resharpening existing tools.

Synthesis

Site 38CH1693 consists of several areas of shell features, but no shell midden. The features appear to represent discrete, single use episodes of meal preparation and discard. While shell pits were identified in at least two separate site areas, it is possible, given the radiocarbon dates, that the site was used many times, albeit each time for only a short duration.

The zooarchaeological and ethnobotanical remains suggest different seasons of use, with the faunal remains suggestive of spring-summer use and the ethnobotanical suggestive of fall-winter use. Neither study, however, precludes other seasons of occupation. It may be that the site, being periodically occupied, was visited throughout the year. Year round occupation seems unlikely given the low density of remains and absence of any structural evidence. Occupation, however, was sufficiently intensive to create open areas that promoted the growth of the weedy species found in the pollen study.

It seems likely that the proximity of fresh water springs may have been the critical attraction to the Thom's Creek people. Of course, the site was situated in close proximity to a broad range of habitats, allowing access to estuarine resources, as well as abundant hunting territory. All of the resources documented by the zooarchaeological study would have been available within one or two miles of the site.

Another, less obvious, attraction may have been an abundance of hickory resources localized in the pine-oak forest. The idea of an "island" of hickory mast resources has been suggested to account for the location of other Stallings or Thom's Creek sites such as Fish Haul (Trinkley 1986) and Bass Pond (Trinkley 1993).

However short the duration of site occupation, there was still adequate time for the occupants to use a large quantity of sherds to manufacture or repair bone tools (although few such tools were recovered). The abundance of hones and abraders stands in contrast to the very low density of lithics. This, however, is likely a phenomenon of resource availability. More curious is that the site failed to yield any shell tools – standing in considerable contrast to their abundance at shell rings. This suggests that whatever shell tools were used for, the activity was not taking place at 38CH1693.

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One of the most significant unaddressed questions is how 38CH1693 related to the more visible shell rings. One possibility is that if, as Saunders (2002) and Russo and Heide (2003) suggest the shell rings are “ceremonial” sites, 38CH1693 might represent a satellite settlement – representing what Thom’s Creek people were doing when they weren’t piling together masses of shell. If the shell rings were permanent habitations, as suggested by Trinkley (1980c), then it is possible that 38CH1693 represents a processing station or short-term camp away from the main shell ring settlement, periodically reoccupied during different seasons for a few days.

Curiously, in all of the Thom’s Creek research, sites such as 38CH1693 do not appear to have been identified, have not be recognized, or have not been investigated. Regardless, the work at 38CH1693 now adds another element to the Thom’s Creek settlement pattern and requires that we direct additional attention to finding and examining other examples.

Since 38CH1693 is in very close proximity to both the Stratton Place and Buzzard Island shell rings, it also illustrates the importance of additional shell ring research to document such mundane issues as pottery assemblages and radiometric dates. Without such information it will be very difficult to fully understand the place of 38CH1693 in the settlement framework.