

Research

The Mysterious Island Fort in Charleston Harbor: Breaking Ground at Castle Pinckney

By John Fisher

In August of 2019, I partnered with landowners and stewards from the Castle Pinckney Historical Society, Dr. Jonathan Leader, and Giles Dawkes of University College London to investigate Castle Pinckney on Shute's Folly in Charleston Harbor (Figure 1). Grants were provided by the Archaeological Research Trust (ART) at SCIAA and The Society for Post Medieval Archaeology (SPMA). This 2019 field season is part of a three-year internationally collaborative effort, in attempt to survey and document an at-risk National Register site.

The island of Shute's Folly has been used for many purposes throughout the years from a believed place of execution for pirates; to an orange grove; to the first installment of a fort during the American Revolution where General Benjamin Lincoln sank eight ships in order to create a barrier to block British ships from moving further into the harbor and the surrounding waterways. The final military use of the island, which is the focus of the ongoing survey, was the construction of Castle Pinckney (Langhorne and Lewis 1978; Petit 1969). Built in 1809 alongside



Figure 2: The 1821 pattern artillery button recovered from Castle Pinckney in the first excavation season of 2019 with 'A' visible in the sheild. (Albert 1976). (Photo by John Fisher)

Fort Moultrie, now a National Park Service site, Castle Pinckney was constructed to protect Charleston Harbor due to rising tensions with European powers. The fort was a second system two-tiered masonry fort built during a series of seacoast

fortification efforts and is one of the last of its kind that did not undergo serious alteration or dismantling (Lewis 1979). It was designated as a National Monument in 1922 by Calvin Coolidge, lost this protected status in 1954, and fell into disrepair (Langhorne and Lewis 1978). It is currently at risk to environmental and trespassing threats.

The fort was garrisoned from 1818 to 1819 by the First and Second Battalions of Artillery. A pattern 1821 artillery button was recovered from an exciting feature, (which will be presented in the next issue of *Legacy*), located in a trench dug by the team in August 2019 (Figure 2). Castle Pinckney remained largely unaltered until 1829, when the addition of a sea wall was recommended in order to strengthen the foundation, an issue that still plagues the site (*Year Book 1883: City of Charleston, So. Ca.: The Centennial of Incorporation:*



Figure 1: Castle Pinckney following a day of excavation in August 2019. (Photo by John Fisher)



Figure 3: Photo showing some of the prisoners from the first Battle of Bull Run housed at Castle Pinckney in 1861. (Photo courtesy of Library of Congress, <https://locn.loc.gov/2013651616>)

1883). Outside of this, the only other changes were that of a palisade and the emplacement of several 24-pound cannons in 1833 (Langhorne and Lewis 1978; Young 1938).

In 1835, the garrison was removed and transferred to St. Augustine due to the outbreak of the second Seminole War (Lewis and Langhorne 1978; Young 1938). The fort largely fell into disrepair until 1855, when Congress appropriated funds to repair the fort and add a navigation light. It was during this period that the fort served as Charleston's powder house until the outbreak of the American Civil War (Lewis and Langhorne 1978; Young 1938). Castle Pinckney would continue to serve a multitude of purposes during the American Civil War that are of interest to this project.

During the American Civil War, Castle Pinckney served as the home for the first Union prisoners of the war, captured at the Battle of First Manassas, also known as 'Bull Run' (Figure 3). It was during this phase that the fort became a source of armament for surrounding batteries. Their quickly outdated ordnance technology was of no use against ships like that of the iron clad navy. Due to this threat, many other batteries and forts were reworked with large earthworks and larger updated smoothbore and rifled guns, like that of

the Columbiad and Brooke Rifle. In 1864, Pinckney underwent these very efforts when it was reinforced and filled with sand to create a barbette battery that was comprised of three 10-inch Columbiads and one 7-inch Brooke Rifle (Figure 4) (*Year Book 1883: City of Charleston, So. Ca.: The Centennial of Incorporation: 1883*).

In 1865, the fort was abandoned by Confederate troops and then reoccupied by Union forces. Castle Pinckney would go on to serve as a prison once again for blockade runners and other enemies of the state. In 1878, the fort was transferred to the Treasury Department in order to build a lighthouse. The site was then filled in, much like Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie, in order to support the new intended use, thus creating a time capsule of sorts.

Surveyed by SCIAA's own Kenneth E. Lewis and William T. Langhorne (1978), Castle Pinckney had never been excavated until funding by ART and SPMA allowed the project to go forward in 2019. With the help of other local collaborative efforts, including the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources (SCDNR) and the College of Charleston's Dr. Scott Harris, the team was able to secure transport to and from the island. Unfortunately, due to Hurricane Dorian, the team was only allowed five full days for excavation. These five days, however, led to three full

trenches being started and a wealth of information being gathered as to the latter use of the fort as a lighthouse and finally the Civil War occupation period.

During this first season in 2019, the team was able to put in three trenches at key points inside the structure, the barracks, the magazine, and the 1809 parapet. All three of these trenches were successful in locating Civil War period artifacts and architectural remnants from early to late periods of the use of Castle Pinckney as a fort. The button mentioned above (Figure 2), a period pipe bowl fragment, and much more were recovered from deep excavations alongside key features, more of which will be covered in the next issue of *Legacy* following permission from the landowners and continued funding.

These efforts were of great significance to the understanding of the fort and early Federal seacoast fortifications. Thankfully the members of the Castle Pinckney Historical Society, a 501(c)3 charity, are focused on documenting and preserving as much as possible at the site. It is my hope and that of the team that this first season in 2019 and the forthcoming articles will demonstrate the significance of our internationally collaborative efforts here at CPHS, SCIAA, UCL, and South Carolina at large to understanding such a significant yet unexcavated site. Thanks to the CPHS, the Archaeological Research Trust (ART), the Society for Post Medieval Archaeology (SPMA), University College London, and several SCIAA staff the Castle Pinckney Project is off to a great start. Stay tuned to the next exciting edition of *Legacy* in July 2020, for the first season's full report.

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Figure 4: An Interior photo taken of Castle Pinckney in 1865 where earthworks, a 10-inch Columbiad, and a 7-inch Brooke Rifle can be seen in the background. (Photo courtesy of Library of Congress, www.loc.gov/item/2018666905/)

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Figure 5: Excavation at Castle Pinckney in August 2019 with University College London Student Gina Harris and Volunteers Lisa Buchanan and Larry Lane. (Photo by Giles Dawkes)