

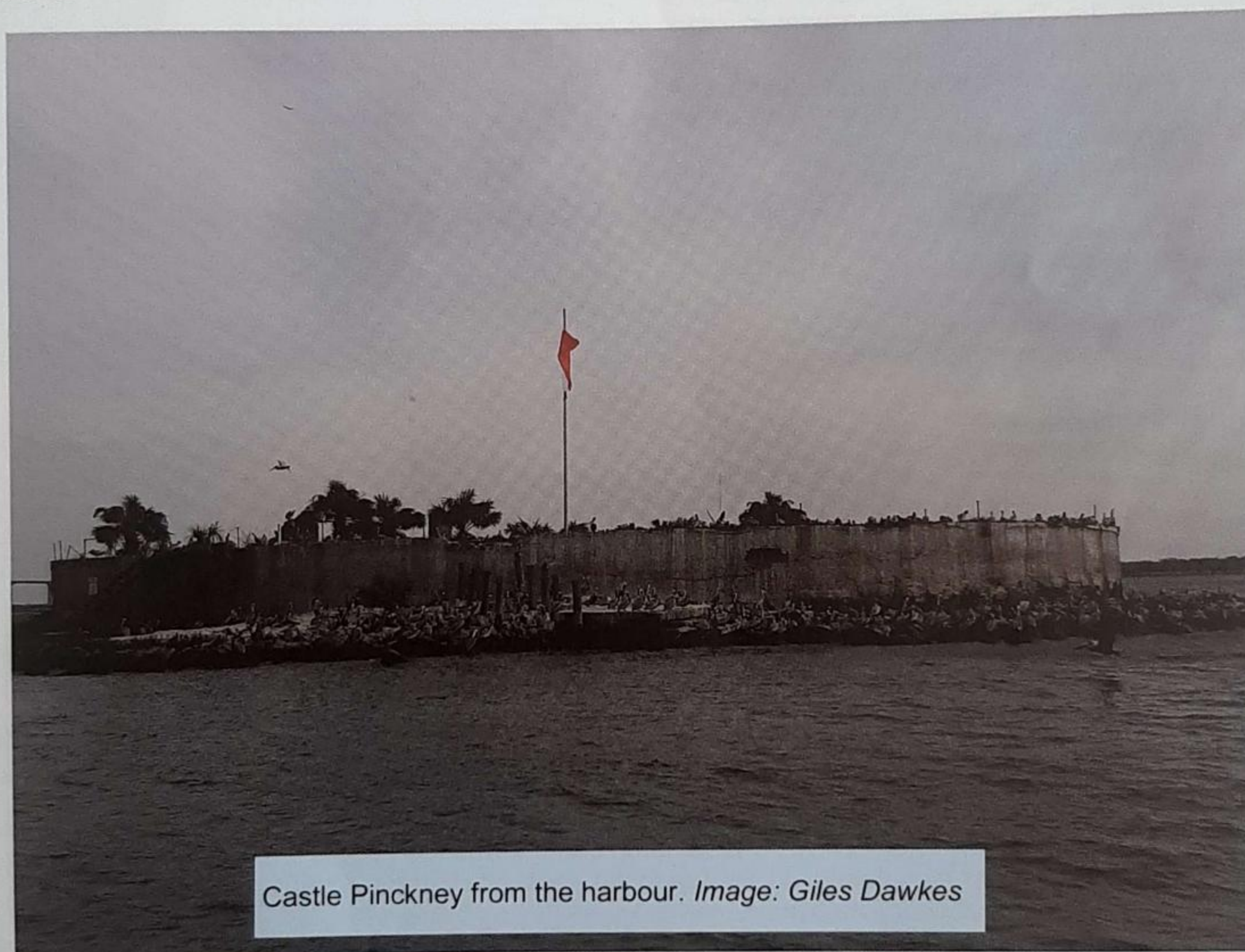
REPORTS

RESEARCH GRANT HOLDERS, 2018

JOHN FISHER, SOUTH CAROLINA INSTITUTE OF ARCHAEOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY and
GILES DAWKES, ARCHAEOLOGY SOUTH-EAST, UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF LONDON

From American Revolution to Civil War: The fort of Castle Pinckney, Charleston, South Carolina

The inaugural season of excavation at Castle Pinckney, Charleston, South Carolina, USA, was undertaken in August and September 2019 by staff, students and volunteers from South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology (SCIAA) and the University College London (UCL). This was the first of three-year planned internationally collaborative effort, funded by the Archaeological Research Trust (ART) and the Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology (SPMA) in an attempt to excavate, survey and document an at-risk American National Register site.



Castle Pinckney from the harbour. Image: Giles Dawkes

Castle Pinckney is a brick gun fort located in the harbour of Charleston, a colonial city founded by the British in 1680, which eventually earned the moniker the 'London of the South' due to its thriving mercantile trade particularly in slaves. The small island the fort was built on, Shute's Folly, had previously been used for a variety of purposes including a likely place of execution for pirates, an orange grove and an earlier wooden fort built during the American Revolution. The island is also close to where General Benjamin Lincoln sank eight ships in the harbour to deny access to British warships.

The final military use of the island, which is the focus of the ongoing survey, was the construction of Castle Pinckney. Built in 1809 alongside Fort Moultrie, now a National Park Service site, Castle Pinckney was constructed to protect Charleston harbour during a period of rising tensions with European powers. The fort was a second system two-tiered masonry fort, built as part of a co-ordinated campaign of seacoast fortification and is one of the last of its kind that did not undergo serious alteration or dismantling. It was designated as a National Monument in 1922 by Calvin Coolidge, although it lost this protected status in 1954 after falling into disrepair and continues to be at risk to environmental and trespassing threats.

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The fort was occupied until 1835, when the garrison was removed and transferred to St. Augustine due to the outbreak of the second Seminole War. The fort then largely fell into disrepair until 1855, when Congress appropriated funds for repair and it served as Charleston's powder house until the outbreak of the American Civil War. 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'. It was during this phase that the fort became a source of armament for surrounding batteries. Their outdated ordnance was quickly outdated with the appearance of iron-clad ships and most of the fortifications at Charleston were reworked with larger earthworks and larger smoothbore and rifled guns, like that of the Columbiad and Brooke Rifle. Castle Pinckney was updated in 1864, being reinforced and filled with sand to create a barbette battery of three 10-inch Columbiads and one 7-inch Brooke Rifle.

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. In order to raise the height of the lighthouse the fort was backfilled, unintentionally preserving the interior and creating a form of 'time capsule'.

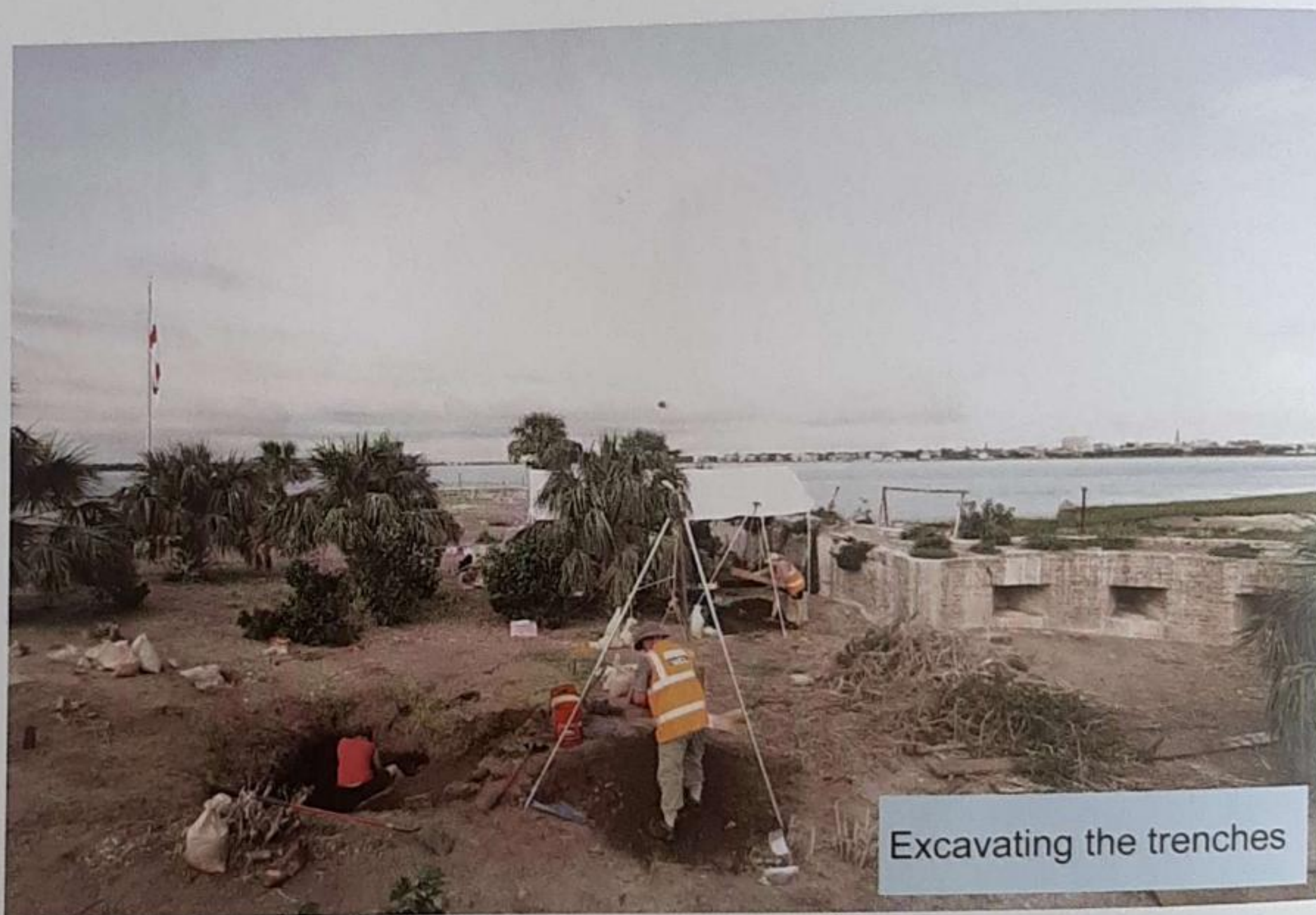
Although a preliminary survey had been undertaken in the 1970s, Castle Pinckney has never been archaeologically excavated until funding by ART and SPMA allowed this project to begin in 2019. We were especially fortunate to get the local help of the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources and Scott Harris, from the College of Charleston, who together provided 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 trenches being started and a wealth of information being gathered. The trenches were targeted to investigate the barracks, the magazine, and on the 1809 parapet, and all were successful in identifying Civil War period artefacts and structures.

One of the fort's garrisons known from the early nineteenth century was the First and Second Battalions of Artillery and a pattern 1821 artillery button displaying an American eagle and shield design with an enclosed 'A', likely belonged to a member of one of these battalions.

Through these efforts we hope to add greatly to the understanding of this fort in particular and to early Federal seacoast fortifications in general. We are especially thankful to the members of the Castle Pinckney Historical Society, the Archaeological Research Trust, the Society for Post Medieval Archaeology, and all the participating volunteers and students.

John Fisher and Giles Dawkes

An 1821 pattern artillery button recovered from Castle Pinckney. Image: John Fisher



Excavating the trenches

