# A REPORT ON THE EXCAVATIONS AT THE NATHANIEL RUSSELL HOUSE SUMMER, 1991

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This paper should be viewed as a rough description of the work completed as of August, 1991. This is not an analysis of the date recovered, but only an outline of information covering the project. Further analysis is at the discretion of Historic Charleston Foundation.

The purpose of this project was to monitor the excavations under and around the Nathaniel Russell House, 51 Meeting Street, Charleston, South Carolina, and salvage what artifacts and information that were uncovered. The soil was removed by James Meadors Construction crew in order to install a new climate control system for the house. The areas excavated were determined by the engineers and contractors, not by any archaeological methods except for a test square under the kitchen house (009). The workers who excavated the soil were not trained archaeologists and worked according to the specifications and time constraints of the contractors' plans; therefore, the data recovered are not in great detail, and statements concerning the data must remain extremely conservative.

Soil was removed by hand trowel beneath and by shovel outside the house. Five gallon dry wall buckets were used to carry the soil to be dry screened in a standard 1/4 inch mesh screen. The provenience was recorded as accurately as the work speed and style would allow. Mapping is, therefore, inaccurate. Trench locations were altered to accomodate changing needs and situations as determined by the contractors and engineers. Every effort was made to record as precisely as possible the locations of all excavations. No transit or other accurate mapping equipment were used, and all mapping was done using measuring tapes, which further limit the precision of the measurements. All measurements were taken in feet and inches in order to agree with the engineers' blueprint specifications.

Overall, limited resources put constraints on the work done on this salvage project. Lack of water pumps, mapping equipment, trained help, and good lighting all contributed to the limited strength of the data. Time constraints have also made it impossible for a proper analysis of the artifacts and other information to be completed at the time this paper was written. It is hoped, however, that some information can be gleaned from the work at

this site. Further analysis of the data recovered is strongly encouraged.

The work at the house can best be described by dividing it into three parts: The main house, kitchen house, and the outside trenches. Each will be discussed separately.

The excavation under the main house, which for our purposes will include the 1908 annex, was done to allow duct work and access way to be placed for the climate control system. The specifications called for soil to be removed to a depth of 36 inches from bottom of the joists and 24 inches wide. These dimensions varied due to unexpected conditions and worker estimation. Artifacts recovered are of unknown placement within these constraints. In some areas (002 and 005) the surface was scraped using rakes, and all artifacts were recovered without exact locations noted. All other excavation was done with a hand trowel.

The soil beneath the main house was a uniform yellow orange sandy loam with very little organic composting in evidence. In 005 the soil was stained black by coal that was apparently stored there. No recent soil disturbance below six inches was discovered, although considerable surface rutting due to previous work was seen throughout. The soil surface undulated, sometimes touching the joist bottoms in some areas and in others the surface was as much as 40 inches below the joists. Except in 002 and 005, the untrenched areas remain as they were found. In 002 and 005, the surface was removed to a depth level with the top of the concrete retaining wall. In 002, less than 10 inches was removed throughout, but in 005 up to 30 inches were removed in some sections. All soil removed was dry screened and the backfill removed.

The artifact density in this area was comparatively light, with an average of approximately 3 to 5 artifacts per cubic foot of soil, most of which was architectural (57%) or organic (20%). Much of the bone was on the surface of 002 and 005, but a light scatter was found buried in all of the trenches. All of the artifacts buried below 6 inches were scattered evenly and no clusters of artifacts were reported by the excavators. The domestic artifacts were not particularily rich, most being plain white ceramics,

bottle glass and very few table glass fragments. Of notable exception to this were the leather shoe fragments found near the surface in 003. Another artifact of interest is a bone ornament found in 001TRA.

The architectural artifacts appear to consist of objects related to the existing structure. Slate, brick, and nails are very common along with some plaster. I found no reason to suppose that these artifacts originate in a previous structure.

Generally the artifacts point to the soil as being fill brought in during construction. Early maps of this area indicate that the ground was low and fill would be needed for any substantial construction. Other than the surface scatter of debris, the other artifacts were either brought in with the fill dirt or were left by construction. Stratigraphy seems to confirm this. At the intersection of 001TRA and 001TRB, soil was removed to a depth below the bottom of the foundation (see profile E). No builders trench could be seen, and there was a thin line of carbon stained soil separating the upper yellow/orange from a yellow sandy loam with many large orange concretions. This lower layer appears sterile. I interpret this lower level to be the original soil level, or possibly an earlier stage of fill, not related to construction. The thin ash lens may be evidence of a burning of growth on the lot before construction, but it is not thick enough to indicate the burning of a previous structure. The upper layer of fill was brought in during construction, bearing some previously deposited artifacts from elsewhere along with construction debris from this site. It could be viewed that the entire crawl space of the house is a builders trench. Accurate excavation around other sections of the foundation would have to be done to determine if these statements are true.

The only evidence of activities occurring since the construction of the house by its occupants is on the surface of the soil in the more easily accessible parts of the crawl space, such as 002,003, and 005 where coal appears to have been stored and some kitchen bones and other garbage were disposed of. Modern repair and construction debris are common on these areas as well.

It should be noted that a large number of intact bricks and large brick fragments litter the basement area. These bricks all seem to be from the existing house and the pipe running across 003. The foundation has had many sections removed in the past, with more being removed by the Meadors crew. All intact bricks were saved. The large pipe running through the basement is no longer in use. It may once have functioned as part of the house, but its purpose and origin was not determined within the scope of this project.

Overall, limited use of these areas by the residents is apparent, with most of the data recovered appearing to be related to the land fill and construction processes.

The 1908 annex also showed very little other activity beyond its construction. Most artifacts related to the construction of either the annex or the main house. Soil color and texture were very similar to that of the main structure. One interesting find in this section was the cistern (pictures #19,20, and 21). It is a closed chamber on the north side of the modern kitchen with a manhole access near the outside door. This was uncovered when the floor was removed. The tank still holds water, but it contained no artifacts. The cistern was not damaged in any way by the work.

The kitchen building crawl space was very different from the main house. Excavation in this area consisted of an entrance pit to allow access through the southwest archway, done with trowels, and a general leveling of the soil beneath the building using rakes. All soil was dry screened using a standard 1/4 inch mesh. The location of the surface artifacts was lost in the raking process, as well as the depth of the artifacts found in the entrance pit. Also related to this area was an L shaped external trench running from the archway west to 011 to a depth and width of 36 inches below the outside soil surface. The external trench was dug with shovel, and the pit in 011 was dug with hand trowel. The soil in the external trench was a typical humus, top soil, interphase, sub soil stratigraphy with the water table defining the boundry between the interphase and sub soil at a depth of approximatel

30 inches. A row of subsurface bricks was found running parallel to the kitchen 14 inches from the wall and approximately 6 inches down, laying horizontally. This is probably a disused garden boundry. Artifact density was medium in this trench, with the soil being very disturbed to approximately 20 inches.

The pit in O11 had a soil color much like under the main house with a light scatter of artifacts and some quantity of lime in chunks.This is not a privy and is likely fill and remnants of mortar making during construction. This was used to support a concrete slab, and the fill seems appropriate.

Beneath the kitchen house (009) in the entrance pit, the artifact scatter was very dense and the soil a rich black loam. The artifacts were largely of a kitchen midden type...a high concentration of bone, bottle glass and kitchen and table ceramincs (53%). There was also a large amount of construction debris. In the entrance pit, a grey mortar and rubble layer at approximately 30 inches deep and 1/2 inch wide was present and tapered off to the north. The top 12 inches of soil appeared to have been disburbed in most areas, probably owing to the installation of extra support rods and joists installed recently. No other disburbed stratigraphy was seen in the entrance pit, and the bottom of thr artifact bearing soil was not found.

The surface scatter of artifacts was also very dense, consisting largely of brick, ceramics, and bones (81%). Much of the surface artifacts appear to have been brought up by the surface disturbance caused by the support installations.

The density and apparent depth of the artifacts led me to dig a 5 foot by 5 foot test square (at N05-10-E00-05 with the 00 datum being the southwest corner of the crawl space. See blueprint copies) I thought that further construction under the kitchen may make future archaeological study here impossible or inaccurate. Proper analysis has not been possible due to monetary and time limitations. Accurate soil maps were difficult under the poor lighting, but the provenience of the artifacts is solid, and I encourage others to analyze thoroughly the material from this square.

The square was dug by zones and levels. A zone was defined as a distinct soil change and a level was 3 inches, unless precluded by a zone change. There were 4 zones and 11 levels. Zone 1 had 4 levels with the final level being 4 inches thick in order to include the transition to Zone 2, which had only 1 level. Zone 3 had 4 levels and Zone 4 had 2. At the intersection of Zones 3 and 4, the water table was struck and all further excavation was under standing water, for lack of a pump. The artifacts and dark soil continued past Zone 4, level 2, but further excavation became impossible. A wet summer may have worsened the situation. A dry season could allow further work. A core sample was taken using a 1.5 inch PVC pipe. It indicated that the artifacts and dark soil continued for 1.5 inches and was above at least 14 inches of yellow clay mottled with orange. The foundation wall continued below Zone 4, level 2 but it could not be determined to what depth it continued.

The only possible feature was found in Zone 1, level 2 (see profile F). It contained lighter soil with decayed mortar and brick fragments. This probably related to a fairly recent construction, possibly the newer supports, which were set in cement to a depth of 14 inches.

Without going into a detailed analysis of the square, it was apparent that the area under the kitchen was used alternately as a storage and disposal area. The rich soil and density of kitchen debris makes this obvious. Large amounts of coal were found from Zone 2 to Zone 3, level 4, with a light scatter of coal throughout. The coal was found in large blocks of several pounds and appears to have been piled here for storage until use. Kitchen artifacts were also found in these levels, although not in as great a density as in the coal free layers.

I regret further analysis was impossible, but I hope some information was preserved, and further work on these artifacts can be done. I strongly encourage further research when possible. If further work is done, it must be remembered that the stratigraphic maps are in fault due to poor lighting, and there may have also been features missed due to water.

Overall, the kitchen house basement is fairly clear in some of its uses. Disposal of kitchen waste in structures such as this is common during this period, and coal was used for heat, and storage beneath structures was common. The work planned by the engineers should not destroy or damage any more than the entrance pit and at most, 12 inches of soil in other areas. It will, however, obstruct the area and may prevent future work. It is hoped that the data recovered from this square proves useful to future researchers.

The excavations in the driveway and parking lot were not discussed with me until the work had begun. I was, therefore, forced to salvage what information I could without being prepared. Work was carried out at great speed by a crew of up to 25 workers digging with shovels and pick axes. The speed of work and volume of soil made screening impossible. I did my best to search the back fill and instruct the untrained workers to alert me to things of interest. Mapping was often reduced to estimation, due to the volume of data coming in at once, and stratigraphy was taken after work, just before sunset, without help. One hundred feet were plotted accurately as well as sections from other parts of the trench. As foundations were uncovered, I tried to photograph and measure what I could before they were destroyed. It must be remembered that all of the data I recovered was taken under poor conditions in great haste. There was no alternative.

As stated before, no precise provenience was determined, and the soil was not screened, but a large number of artifacts were recovered. Most that were saved were domestic or bone, but there was a large number of architectural remains found that were not collected due to time and resource considerations. Most artifacts appear to be related to the standing structure, although loss of context prevents more specific linkage. The soil was already disturbed in the central section of the eastwest trench down to 24 inches due to a great number of pipes and conduits laid before the current work. The trench was to have been 36 inches wide and 36 inches deep according to plans, but this was altered due to the uncovering of a sewer system. The actual width and depth of the

trench varied from place to place. (See blueprint for approximate location.) The trench in the parking lot ran as planned.

Several structures of interest were uncovered during the excavation. The principal feature of note was the aformentioned sewer pipe. It is a hand laid brick pipe using a classic keystone arch for support with at least 3 catch basins of brick and stone. The pipe runs parallel to the standing structure and is graded towards the street. The two catchment basins furthest from the street are of a simple design whereby water is slowed by entering a rectangular tank where the sediments drop to a level below the pipe entrance. The last catchment before Meeting Street (presumably the last before it joined a larger system) is more complex. Water drops into a rectangular basin as described before, but instead of a pipe for the outflow, a vertical slate slab cuts off the flow and only allows a trikle of water over its top where it fills a second chamber before it can drain through the outflow. Each basin has a removable stone slab on top for cleaning. The entire system was left as found and will be restored at a future date. Further study should be done at that time as a detailed examination was not in the scope of this project.

Six other brick structures were found in the trenches. Three straight wall foundations and a curved row of bricks were uncovered in the north end of the eastwest trench (see sheet C-1). Each appeared contemporary with the house and probably relate to a stable or outbuilding complex. The curved wall's purpose could not be ascertained. Two sections of wall foundation are still attached to the house, with the third possibly connected as well.

In the southwest end of the trench, a wall foundation was uncovered that appears to have once been attached to the property line wall. Also in this section a corner to a foundation was uncovered, but left undisturbed. This appears to be part of a free standing structure that may have remained unimpacted since its destruction. Caution should be exercised in regards to any work in this area in order to preserve this structure. An aluminum bar was placed at the corner that was uncovered. The C-1 sheet gives its approximate location.

None of the stated foundations was destroyed, although some bricks were removed to accomodate the conduit.

The artifacts in the eastwest trench are typically domestic and architectural, with no particularly outstanding or unusual pieces, although the quantity was great. The northsouth section yielded very similar artifacts as well as a horse shoe and two possible barn door style hinges. A detailed analysis of all artifacts is encouraged.

The overall impact of the excavations both outside and underneath the structure is not as great as it initially appeared. None of the trenches was wide enough to severely damage future investigation except for the driveway trench. This trench, however, altered soils that appear to have been disturbed repeatedly at least since the turn of the century, so little was lost that was not already damaged. What foundation sections found in this trench that were removed was only 4 to 8 bricks. Most of the soil under the house remains intact and the main alteration is limited access, which may serve to protect the site.

It should be noted, however, that it was only good fortune that prevented a terrible loss of historic information. It is prudent in historic areas such as peninsular Charleston to engage archaeological consultation or testing before planning is completed.

In summary, this project was successful in recovering and preserving artifacts uncovered by general contractors. The artifact locations were recorded as accurately as possible under the circumstances, and unnecessary damage was prevented in the excavations. Analysis of the artifacts recovered should be completed.

PHOTO LIST

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| #1 - #8 | Eastwest trench profiles |
| #9 | Curved wall |
| #10-#12 | Southwest wall continuation |
| #13-#14 | Northsouth trench profile |
| #15-#16 | Patio wall continuation |
| #17 | Corner of undisturbed structure |
| #18 | Access to 001 |
| #19-#21 | Cistern |
| #22-#35 | Eastwest trench profiles |
| #36-#41 | Northsouth trench profiles (sections) |
| #42-#45 | Northsouth wall sections |
| #46 | Corner of undisturbed structure |
| #47-#55 | Eastwest wall sections |
| #56-#73 | Sewer Line |
| #74-#82 | Overall shots |
| #83-#84 | 001 |

See blueprint copies and soil profiles for further details.

Please contact me, Charles F. T. Andrus (Fred) at (803) 766-3783 or 11 North Hampton Drive, Charleston, South Carolina 29407, if further information is needed. I will gladly help pursue any further research and will share my personal notes if needed.

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