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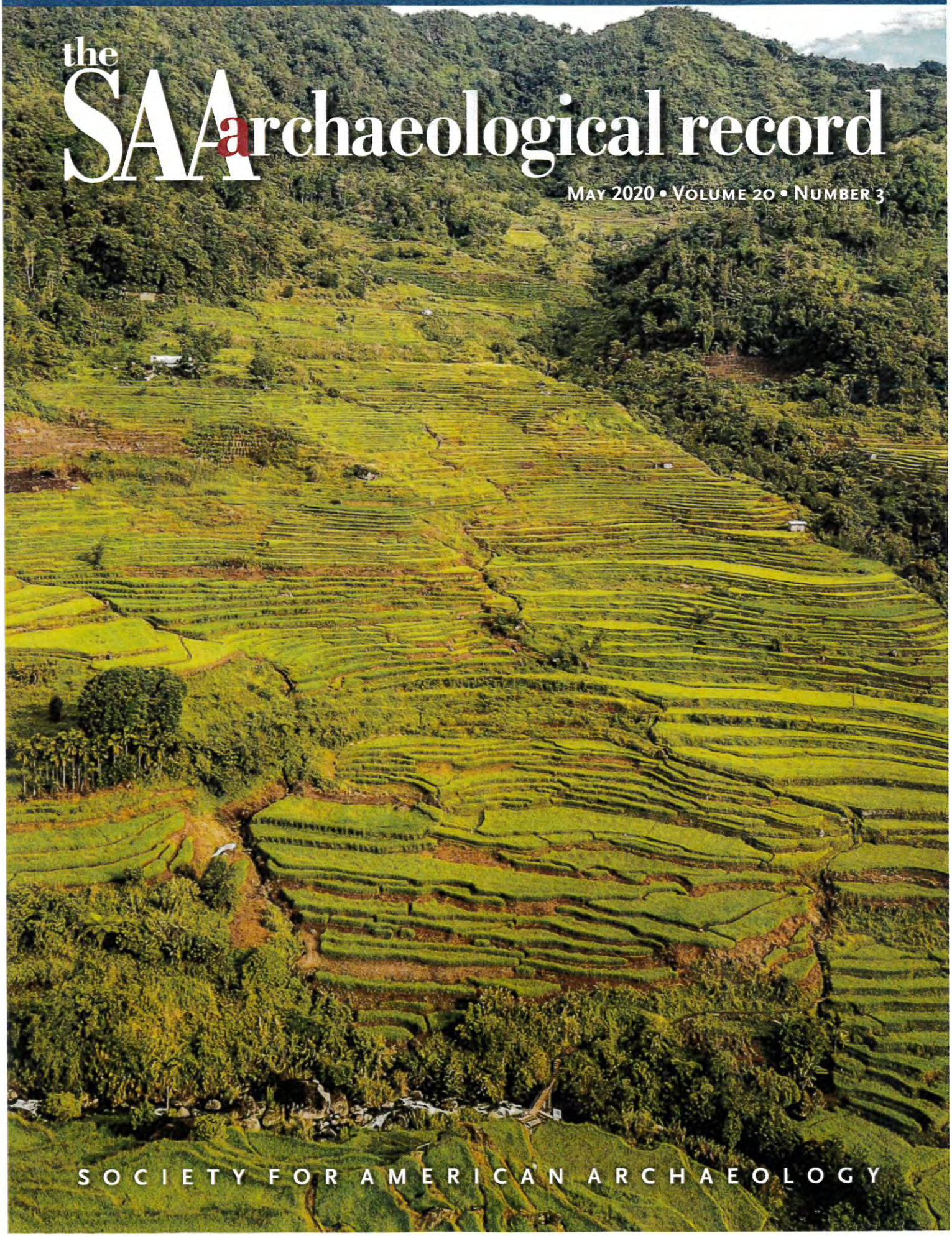

SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

the SAA archaeological record

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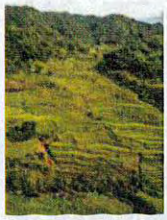

On the cover: The Nagacadan Rice Terraces, in Kiangan, Ifugao. One of the five terrace clusters listed in UNESCO's World Heritage Sites, Cultural Landscape Category. *Photograph by Bhong Tawana.*

FULL CIRCLE

HOW CHARLESTON'S EARLIEST DEFENSES MAY HELP PROTECT THE CITY'S ARCHAEOLOGICAL RESOURCES FOR THE FUTURE

Katherine S. Pemberton

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Charleston, South Carolina, is a unique American city with a fair share of "firsts." Founded in 1670 and located on its present site by 1680, Charles Town quickly became the only English walled city built in North America. Some 250 years later, Charlestonians enacted a pioneering preservation zoning ordinance that created the nation's first official historic district and a powerful Board of Architectural Review. These two entries in a large volume of city "bragging rights" are especially meaningful today as Charleston attempts to navigate its way toward the enactment of a local archaeological protection ordinance. Advocates are keenly aware that in this regard we are no longer blazing the trail but playing catch up.

It's not that we haven't tried. Charleston is blessed to be home to some of the most accomplished historical archaeologists in the country, working for nonprofit organizations, in cultural resources management, and in academia. Martha Zierden, curator of historical archaeology at the Charleston Museum, is an acknowledged leader in American urban archaeology and has overseen and collaborated on scores of archaeological investigations in the Charleston area. These have included public, commercial, and residential sites, in both urban and rural settings. Charleston's archaeological projects have been sponsored and financed by local nonprofits like the Charleston Museum and Historic Charleston Foundation, city and county governments, and even private property owners. A handful of these significant investigations in downtown Charleston were the result of regulatory requirements, but the vast majority were voluntary.

Even though archaeologists had called for the protection of the city's underground resources as early as 1982 (Zierden and Calhoun 1982) and the city's incredible archaeological potential was well established, Charleston failed to enact any local protections for archaeological resources even as other historic American cities took action beginning in the late 1980s. The city of Alexandria, Virginia, enacted a pioneering ordinance in 1989 that created a strong, professional, and highly visible city archaeology program funded by the city. Today, Alexandria routinely reviews large-scale projects for archaeological potential before work can begin, and the city builds support for their work by educating their citizens about the value of archaeology. St. Augustine, Florida, enacted an archaeology ordinance in 1987 and hired its first city archaeologist in 1990. Like Alexandria, St. Augustine's program has knit the expectation of archaeological review into the city's preservation ethos and has turned city-led archaeological excavations into public events that draw visitors and residents alike, asking questions and pondering what artifacts might next emerge from the site. While it is still somewhat rare to have such robust archaeological programs based on local ordinances, cities across the country have put some level of archaeological protections on the books while Charleston has been planning and waiting.

A decade after archaeologists had first called for protections, Charleston's city planners acknowledged the need for an archaeological ordinance in several planning documents. Finally, the city's 2008 Preservation Plan made the strongest argument yet that an ordinance was needed and long overdue.

So—why the delay? Despite years of talk, a coordinated push for an archaeological ordinance for Charleston hasn't been well timed or well received. There were perpetual fears that any restrictions on developments and developers would harm the local economy. Lawmakers feared overburdening property owners within the historic district who already had to satisfy the Board of Architectural Review. There were occasional hiring freezes within city government, and there always seemed to be a lack of funds to implement an archaeological program. Ironically, residents were largely unaware of the lack of an archaeological ordinance, many expressing surprise and dismay when learning that there were no local protections in place. They would point to the excavations by

Zierden and others that they had read about in the newspaper, unaware that the work was done voluntarily.

When all was said and done, there was a lack of political will to push through an ordinance, and most residents did not have archaeology on their personal radar. Archaeological resources have been quite literally out of sight and out of mind in the historic city of Charleston. In the past few years, however, support has increased for an archaeological ordinance. And it wasn't formal recommendations or planning documents that made the difference. Rather, it has been the excitement generated by some highly visible archaeological digs, the ever-increasing pace and scale of development, and the subsequent public awareness that something needs to change.

In 2004, architects undertaking the restoration of Charleston's city hall (constructed in 1800) asked Charleston Museum archaeologist Martha Zierden to conduct excavations in the basement in order to mitigate construction impacts. That project uncovered fascinating information about the city's colonial beef market. An added, somewhat unexpected outcome was that the project clearly fascinated then-mayor Joseph P. Riley Jr., who made daily visits to the site for updates. Writing just before he left office in 2015, Mayor Riley noted that this type of investigation had opened up "the record of the whole population, rich and poor, painting through archaeology a more accurate picture of a bustling, teaming, complex settlement" (Zierden and Reitz 2016:xiii). The mayor had become a true fan of archaeology and an important ally.

One year later, at the urging of historians, preservations, and archaeologists, Mayor Riley appointed a group to study and interpret the history of Charleston's early fortifications. Charleston's early period as a walled city had long been a somewhat forgotten chapter in the history of a city more commonly defined by its antebellum past. However, renewed interest and research into the early fortifications were spurred by the restoration of the Old Powder Magazine (circa 1712) and Historic Charleston Foundation's move into a new headquarters building at 40 East Bay Street in 1997. The Foundation's building sits directly atop the southeast corner of the walled city and the masonry remains of Granville's Bastion. Research into Granville's Bastion and the other fortifications led to the discovery of a wealth of archival materials and a reexamination of historic maps like the Edward Crisp map of 1711 (Figure 1). Charleston historians also began collaborating with scholars like Geoffrey Parnell, former Keeper of History at the Tower of London, who noted in 2005, "It is clear that even in archaeological and academic circles the story of Charleston's defences is not known. This seems unfortunate, for apart from the defences that surrounded New York, which were largely the work of the Dutch, no other seventeenth-century English settlement, in what is now the United States, exhibited a continuous bastioned trace. In this respect Charleston is unique" (personal communication 2005).

From a flurry of new research there emerged a more complex and fascinating story of early Charles Town. Work on a professionally designed fortification plan began here in the last few years of the seventeenth century. From the 1690s to the 1730s, walls of brick and of earth encompassed roughly 60 acres of high ground on an otherwise marsh-riddled peninsula. Eventually enclosing a 1.5-mile perimeter, the walled city of Charles Town protected the inhabitants of the new English colony against potential naval assaults by French and Spanish forces and against possible landward assault by hostile Native Americans. Because of development pressures to expand the town, the earthen walls along the north, west, and south sides were dismantled by the 1730s. The masonry harborside fortifications, however, remained intact until the 1780s. Even though some key parts of the early defenses—such as the Old Powder Magazine—remain, Charleston's fortified beginnings faded over time within community memory. More than just an interesting historical footnote, however, these walls and fortifications were foundational, directing the early growth of the town and influencing its urban density and architecture (Saunders 2002). We knew that a more thorough understanding of the walled city could only be achieved through additional research and archaeological investigation.

With this in mind, the mayor's Walled City Task Force was composed not only of historians and preservationists but also archaeologists and representatives from Charleston Water Systems and other city agencies whose work involved logistics and excavation. The group realized early on just how important archaeological investigations would be to the project. It turned out that the public excavations of the walled city defenses would also spark an unprecedented interest in the city's overall archaeological resources.

Public archaeology at South Adger's Wharf in 2008 and 2009 were the first of several archaeological investigations conducted by the Walled City Task Force. Initial explorations in 2008 of the Tradd Street redan (an arrow-shaped fortification) began with the discovery of a 1785 plat of the area showing the eastern curtain line intact, and the outline of the projecting redan that had been recently demolished. Located at the foot of Tradd Street, South Adger's Wharf is today a cobblestone street in the heart of the historic district. In 2007, those cobblestones had been temporarily removed, presenting a window of opportunity for a quick excavation.

Figure 1. "A Plan of the Town & Harbour of Charles Town," showing the location of Charleston near the confluence of the Ashley and Cooper Rivers, from "A compleat description of the province of Carolina in 3 parts : 1st, the improved part from the surveys of Maurice Mathews & Mr. John Love : 2ly, the west part by Capt. Tho. Nairn : 3ly, a chart of the coast from Virginia to Cape Florida," Edward Crisp, circa 1711. The Crisp Map is the earliest view of Charleston's walled city, showing corner bastions, triangular redans, and other batteries and outworks. This map is part of the collections of the Library of Congress, Geography and Map Division (https://www.loc.gov/item/2004626926/).

Figure 2. Redan excavation 2008 field crew (from left to right: Blair Stec, Martha Zierden, Andrew Agha, Eric Poplin, Jimmy Lefebre, Ron Anthony, Nic Butler, and Katherine Saunders Pemberton). Photograph courtesy of Karen Emmons.

At the urging of the task force, Mayor Riley provided some funding for excavation and documentation. The team worked for two weeks in January 2008 to expose the north face of the brick redan, as well as a number of other features (Figure 2).

Based on the success of the first dig and the incredible level of public interest it generated, the Walled City Task Force sought permission to continue excavations the following year, tracing the footprint of the redan into an adjacent parking lot. This month-long project in June 2009 exposed the remainder of the fortification's footprint and allowed time to excavate to the base of the wall and record its foundation. It also presented an opportunity to examine many issues and components of urban life such as land filling and the evolution of Charleston's colonial waterfront, from a place of defense to one of active trade (Butler et al. 2012).

From the beginning, these highly visible excavations generated excitement and interest among tourists and residents alike. The task force found that it needed to install informational panels on-site and coordinate a corps of volunteers who could talk to the many visitors clamoring for information. Hundreds visited the site, newspaper articles were written, and news crews sought interviews and information. Amazingly, at the conclusion of the first excavations in 2008, many residents were upset that the site was being backfilled. Unable to "glass it over" as was suggested, the task force provided permanent interpretive panels at the site and outlined the triangular redan in brick, and the Charleston Museum expanded their walled city exhibits (Butler et al. 2012).

Smaller excavations, lectures, and events by the task force have followed over the years. Each new discovery has been reported enthusiastically by the Charleston *Post & Courier*, and the public remains fascinated by the Walled City Project as well as other exciting archaeological discoveries around the city.

This uptick in interest has coincided with an increase in development in the city of Charleston. The regional population is growing three times faster than the U.S. average, and an estimated 26 people move to Charleston each day. Tourism is also on the rise, with 6.9 million visitors having come to the metro area in 2017, a 26% increase from the year before. The subsequent construction of large new hotels, apartment buildings, and offices in the historic downtown follow the clearance of large parcels of land and the destruction of archaeological resources there. For the first time, residents and politicians seem to recognize what is at stake for Charleston's archaeological resources. The push for an archaeological ordinance seems to finally be on track.

Maybe our colonial fortifications can help us to protect this old city once again. Stay tuned.

Note

The Charleston Museum's archaeological reports are available online at https://www.charlestonmuseum.org/research/archaeology-reports/. The mayor's Walled City Task Force blog and website is here: https://walledcitytaskforce.org/. An online petition advocating for Charleston's archaeological ordinance can be signed here: https://www.change.org/p/mayor-tecklenburg-pass-an-archaeological-ordinance-in-charleston.

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