

Willtown: Past and Present

By Drew Ruddy

It was a beautiful afternoon on April 27, 1969, when we lowered our anchor to the bottom of the Edisto River about midway along the bluff at Willtown. Jim Batey, Steve Howard, and I descended into the tannic-stained water to the exhilarating discovery of artifacts dating throughout the span of the 18th and 19th centuries. As South Carolina had only months before enacted the first Underwater Antiquities Law, we reported the find to officials. By June, under the auspices of Dr. Robert L. Stephenson, we received a one-year salvage contract to recover artifacts and record data from the site. At the end of our year's endeavor, both the state and salvers had a collection of artifacts, and we provided field drawings to Dr. Stephenson.

English settlement in the Edisto region began in the 1680s, largely by Presbyterian Dissenters escaping turmoil in England. It is uncertain whether the original town site called London was actually on Willtown Bluff or on nearby land, but by the 1690s a town called alternately New London or Willtown was being established. Although its size and stature are a matter for further research, Willtown was a frontier community and one of the few English settlements of note outside of Charlestowne.

The area witnessed such historical events as nearby destruction in the 1686 Spanish raid which destroyed Governor Morton's home only miles away; attack by Yamasee Indians in the 1715 uprising; and the 1739 Stono slave uprising in which the major battle, involving Willtown militia, was fought a short distance away.

By the mid-18th century, with the Indian frontier moving ever westward and the rice culture flourishing, the town began to atrophy and the area was developed as plantation lands. In 1863, Union gunboats ascended the Edisto in a raid which liberated more than 150 slaves from the area. During the raid, the small armed tug *Governor Milton* was grounded and burned near Willtown.

Many years have passed since our first diving efforts at Willtown, and now the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology has a well run underwater program. In 1997, through conversations with SCIAA staff members Lynn Harris and Carl Naylor, it was agreed that with their guidance, I would complete a report on the underwater site at Willtown. During this season, we have returned to the site and laid an approximately 400 meter datum line along the length of the bluff to provide a reference for mapping and photographic recording. SCIAA staff Lynn Harris, Carl Naylor, and Joe Beatty provided bottom contours using a fathometer. A site map is being prepared by engineer Elbert Hodges. Small samples of artifacts were taken to coordinate current site dynamics with those noted in 1969-70. Artifacts in both the SCIAA collection as well as private collections have been photographed, and an analysis is being prepared. In addition to his assistance as a diver, Steve Howard has done much computer work to prepare photographs for the published report.



Figure 1: SCIAA personnel mapping underwater topography of riverbed with fathometer on the Edisto River near Willtown Bluff (SCIAA photo).

Ironically, Willtown, the original county seat of Colleton County, is again in Charleston County. In keeping with Colleton County's historical roots, a display of Willtown artifacts has been established and can now be viewed in the Colleton County Museum in Walterboro. As the Willtown underwater report nears completion, we would welcome any additional data which may be provided by hobby divers who may have dived the site. In early 1999, we hope to distribute our finished report, 30 years since those first dives and about 300 years after the birth of the colonial town.