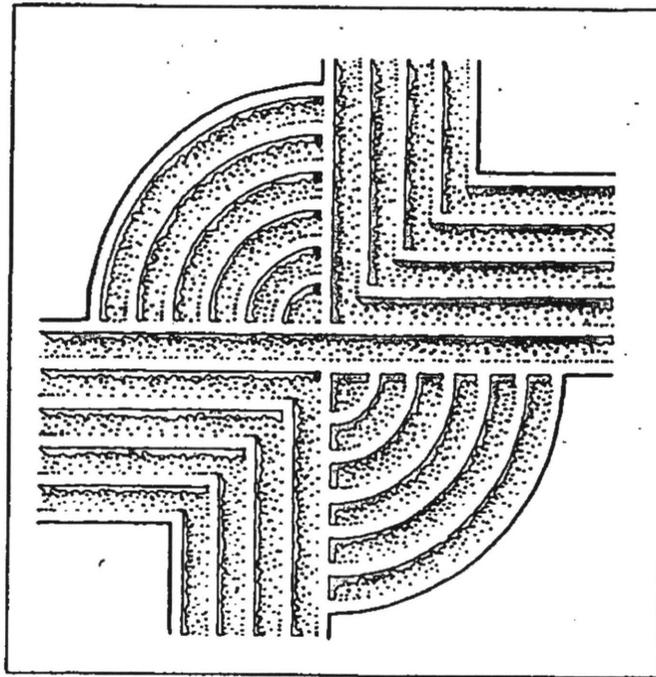


**A RICH MAN'S WEALTH: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND
HISTORICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE ELFE
PLANTATION [BERKELEY COUNTY, SC]**



RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION 7

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A RICH MAN'S WEALTH: AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND
HISTORICAL INVESTIGATION OF THE ELFE PLANTATION

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Chicora Research Contribution 7

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This paper discusses the mid- to late nineteenth century plantation of Thomas Elfe, the noted Charleston cabinetmaker, which is situated on Daniels Island in Berkeley County. This research is partially funded by a historic preservation grant, administered by the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, designed to nominate the site to the National Register of Historic Places (see Trinkley 1985).

Thomas Elfe acquired his 234 acre plantation on Daniels Island from Benjamin Burnham in 1765 (Charleston County RMC Deed Book D-3, pp. 310-317). While it is probable that the plantation was developed at the time of its purchase from Burnham, the surviving Elfe account book indicates that substantial refurbishing took place in the period from 1769 through 1770. Bricks, lime, and laths were purchased and a chimney was built (Webber 1934:96, 103, 105, 153, 157). Windows were glazed as late as January 1775 (Webber 1940:28).

The Elfe account book, which covers the period from 1768 until just prior to Elfe's death in 1775, provides considerable information on the workings of the plantation. In 1768 Elfe valued his plantation, its buildings, cattle, and horses at £1500. The five "working Negroes and three Children" were valued at £1000. Elfe's

assets totaled £25,370, so the Daniels Island plantation and slaves represented less than 10% of his total value (Rose 1934:147). I am able to document that Elfe employed an overseer beginning in March 1770, about the same time as the building activities, and that the overseer was paid £100 a year. Elfe apparently never lived on the plantation, as all household expenses were for his Charleston residence. The accounts indicate that fruit trees and seeds were purchased in June 1771 (Webber 1934:165) and that the plantation was producing fruit by August 1773 (Webber 1937:89). These dates suggest fruits such as peaches, plums, pomegranates, or figs may have been produced (Ridley n.d.). The plantation also produced "sundaries" (Webber 1937:158), lambs (Webber 1934:165), firewood (Webber 1936:155), calves (Webber 1937:56), cattle (Webber 1938:167), and beef (Webber 1940:25). Some of this was for Elfe's own consumption, although the bulk appears to have been sold. Household expenses indicate that Elfe bought, from other sources, virtually all of his corn and flour, and at least some of his beef (Webber 1939:26). The plantation, at best appears to have been a marginal investment. This was unlike Elfe, who Burton (1955:86) describes as "a steady dealer in real estate, with an eye for good investments."

At the time of Elfe's death (between November 28 and December 18, 1775) (Webber 1934:13), his estate was valued at £38,243.16.2 (Charleston County Probate Court Inventories 90A, pp. 116-120). Unfortunately, the inventory does not segregate items from Charleston,

Daniels Island, and Amelia, where Elfe purchased another plantation for his son, William. As the account book provides no evidence that the Amelia plantation raised livestock, it is probable that the "35 Head Horn Cattle (Calves Included) . . . , 25 Head Sheep . . . , 6 Head of Horses . . . , [and] 13 Head of Hogs" were all on Daniels Island (Charleston County Probate Court Inventories 90A, p. 116). Elfe's July 7, 1775 will suggests why he retained the relatively unprofitable Daniels Island plantation. In his will Thomas Elfe bequeaths to his wife Rachel "the Use and Occupation of my Plantation on Daniels Island during her Natural Life with all the Slave, Cattle, Sheep, Hogs, Horses, Plantation tools, Boats, Household & Kitchen Furniture that may be upon the said Plantation . . . [to hold] and enjoy the same during her Natural Life without any Waste" (Charleston County Probate Court Wills, v. 18, pp. 88-93). This life estate, in addition to his town lots, was to provide for his wife in her old age.

Rachel apparently left Charleston and lived on the plantation, because the 1790 Federal Census (Bureau of Census 1908) lists no males (which precludes a white overseer), one free white female, and 27 slaves. The reason for this move from the comfort of Charleston may be related to the Elfe family's strong ties to Great Britain during the Revolutionary War. Webber notes that "Rachel seems to have had Tory sympathies, and her son Thomas is on the confiscation list as is also William Elfe" (Webber 1934:15). Kuhur (1983:n.p.) observes that Thomas Elfe, Jr. avoided confiscation of his property through heavy

taxation. This taxation apparently lead to the sale of his Charleston holdings and his move to Savannah. Thomas did not return to South Carolina until 1800. A short article in the Royal Gazette of South Carolina contributes to a better understanding of both the Elfe sympathies and plantation. It reads,

On Friday the 24th ulto, a body of Rebels supported by some Continental Horse, made an incursion into St. Thomas's parish; a part of them came down to Daniel's Island and plundered the plantation of Mrs. Elfe, a widow, breaking down the fence and turning their horses into the cornfield (Royal Gazette of South Carolina, September 5, 1781).

So not only was Rachel Elfe a proclaimed British citizen, but the plantation continued to produce livestock, as evidenced by the fence and corn drying in the fields to be used as fodder.

Rachel Elfe died intestate sometime in late 1804 or early 1805, as the inventory appraisement of her life estate was filed on January 16, 1805. It included 26 slaves (eight less than listed on the 1800 census), plantation tools, and household furniture, valued at \$7528.74 (Charleston County Probate Court Inventory Book D, p. 142; Webber 1934:15).

The property was passed to her son, George Elfe, who held the land for the next 21 years. Based on the 1820 Federal Census

(National Archives 1958:115), it appears that George Elfe was not residing on the plantation, nor was a white overseer. The enumeration lists 18 male slaves, 22 female slaves, and seven "Free persons of Color under 14 years of age." Twelve individuals are listed as engaged in agriculture, while three were engaged in commercial activity. By 1830 there were only 12 slaves left on the plantation (listed as belonging to the estate of George Elfe). Of these, four were under 10 years, and three were over 55 years (National Archives 1944:192).

Prior to George Elfe's death the plantation had been sold to John E. Farr for \$3500 (Charleston County RMC Deed Book T-9, p. 103). Farr was in the process of purchasing a number of smaller parcels, such as the Elfe and Lesesne plantations, to form the 880 acre tract which was eventually subsumed into the 2938 acre Guggenheim property.

Although three structures are shown on the Thomas Elfe plantation by the Purcell plat of the Lesesne plantation, dated 1784 (Charleston County RMC Deed Book Q-5, p. 285), neither an 1814 plat (Charleston County RMC John McCrady Plat 6217), nor the 1827 Ravenel plat of Thomas Farr Capers' 880 acre plantation (Charleston County RMC John McCrady Plat Book 3, p. 57) show any structures in the vicinity of Elfe's original plantation. The Capers plat is particularly significant as it indicates that the original Lesesne plantation structures were being used as the plantation's hub. It appears that Elfe's dwellings were either in ruins or destroyed by 1827.

To summarize, the available historical record indicates that the Elfe plantation operated at least from 1765 until 1826, a 61 year period with a mean date of 1795. For most of that period the plantation was operated by an absentee owner, with Rachel Elfe living on the property for perhaps the 28 year period between 1776 and 1804. The plantation, however, did support between eight and 35 slaves at various periods and produced livestock for the Charleston market. During its history, the plantation was owned by a family of great wealth, prestige, and consequence. What, then, does the archaeological record indicate about this site?

The concentration of historic remains assigned to the Elfe plantation was first discovered during the 1979 Mark Clark Expressway survey. Subsequent surveys continued to indicate a scatter associated with darker soil in the fields. A series of 12 5-foot squares were excavated by Chicora Foundation in December 1984 to test site integrity, determine site boundaries, and obtain a more adequate sample of artifacts. These goals were successfully met, but the most interesting results are obtained from an examination of the recovered artifacts.

The initial archaeological observation involves the sparseness of artifacts and the failure to identify subsurface features. Artifact density ranges from a low of 1 artifact per 5.5 ft³ to a high of 1 artifact per 0.2 ft³. The excavation units were scattered through the area of heaviest artifact concentration and

although 300 ft² of site were excavated, no features were identified.

Of the 274 recovered ceramics, 69% are earthenwares, 6% are porcelains, and 25% are stonewares. The bulk of the earthenwares are lead glazed slipwares, undecorated creamwares, and delfts. No decorated creamwares were recovered and only three of the 10 pearlware sherds are decorated. A small, but notable amount of the earthenwares include lead glazed varieties such as Southern European ware. The porcelains are primarily underglazed blue Chinese porcelains and the stonewares include about equal amounts of molded white salt-glazed stoneware and utilitarian brown, gray, and Westerwald varieties. Two significant ceramic groups have not been considered: Colono-ware and Catawba (or River Burnished) pottery. Using the type definitions proposed by Wheaton et al. (1983), 85 sherds of Catawba pottery and seven sherds of Colono-ware were distinguished. If these are added to the ceramics, they would account for 25% of the total, earthenwares would account for 52%, porcelains for 5%, and stonewares for 18%. Of the 274 ceramics, 168 may be used to obtain a Mean Ceramic Date (South 1977) of 1751. A single sherd of undecorated whiteware from the surface provides a TPQ of 1820. If the creamware, pearlware, procelain, delft, and molded white salt-glazed vessel forms are examined, 37% are cup/bowl forms, 56% are plate/saucer forms, and 7% are serving/container forms.

If the excavated artifact inventory is classified into South's Artifact Groups, the Kitchen Group accounts for 85.2%, the

Architecture Group is 8.6%, Arms account for 0.2%, Clothing for 0.4%, Tobacco for 1.3%, and Activities for 4.3%. Including surface data, of course, changes the percentages, but does not affect the relative order of the various groups.

These data lead to several conclusions or speculations. Perhaps the most obvious is that the artifact pattern does not even approximate the Carolina Artifact Pattern (South 1977:107) or the Revised Carolina Artifact Pattern (Wheaton et al. 1983:277-278). It, however, does bear a strong resemblance to the Carolina Slave Artifact Pattern (Wheaton et al. 1983:277-286). This impression is reinforced by the abundance of Catawba ware and low proportion of porcelain. It is difficult to place these eighteenth century ceramics in a firm economic scale. Although Miller (1980) discusses only nineteenth century ceramics, he notes that undecorated ceramics were the least expensive until the introduction of whiteware. Consequently, the presence of only undecorated creamware is suggestive of a low economic scale. Miller is currently projecting his scaling into the eighteenth century and it may be possible within the next several years to more accurately study sites such as the Elfe plantation. Noel Hume (1969:13, 25) describes delft as a "modestly priced" ware and slipware as "comparatively cheap." Josiah Wedgwood noted in 1759 that white salt-glazed stoneware "had been made a long time and the prices were now reduced so low the potter could not afford to bestow much expense upon it" (quoted in Miller 1980:9). While there

are some items of expense, such as Black Baslat stoneware and blue transfer printed pearlware (Miller 1980:35), the bulk of the assemblage does not indicate great expense.

I must acknowledge, however, South's caution that status differences may be obscured in eighteenth century ceramics because of the mass production and wide distribution of British pottery (South 1972:100). South noted that shape, rather than type, may be a more sensitive indicator of status for eighteenth century sites (South 1972:99). At the Elfe site 55.6% of the tableware items identifiable to function are serving flatware (plates, saucers), 37% are cups or bowls, and 7.4% are other tableware shapes (large serving vessels). Based on Otto's (1984:69) work from Cannon's Point, this distribution falls midway between that expected for a slave and overseer's site.

The Mean Ceramic Date of 1751 is also intriguing, as it is 46 years earlier than the historic mean and about 30 years earlier than the Elfe purchase date. This situation, of course, is not unusual for low status sites where there appears to be a time lag between the date of manufacture of ceramics and the date of acquisition by the users (see Fairbanks 1974:79, 82; Otto 1984:61-63).

The archaeological data from the Elfe site suggest a low status occupation, remarkably similar to slave occupations from other eighteenth and nineteenth century sites. There are low status ceramics, an abundance of low-fired earthenwares, and something

approaching a slave artifact pattern. Yet the historical data clearly indicate that the site was owned by a wealthy Charleston family. One major consequence of this study is the dramatic illustration of the need to thoroughly integrate the historical studies into the archaeological research. A second consequence is the illustration, as Friedlander notes, "if historical research will really help a historic archaeologist, he or she might be well advised to do a lot of it (Friedlander 1983: 8).

There develop, then, several possible explanations for the observed archaeological data and their apparent conflict with the historical record. The first potential explanation is that the excavation units missed the Elfe house and were placed in a midden area associated with the slave cabins. This, certainly, is the most simple explanation: it satisfies the archaeological paradox while leaving the historical perception of Elfe and plantations intact. Yet, there would seem to be several flaws in this explanation. The surface data fails to indicate the presence of other occupation areas which might represent the main house, and the excavations were sufficiently dispersed to identify other occupation areas even if they were not visible on the surface. The 1784 Purcell plat exhibits a close correspondence with the ground scatter and supports the view that this site represents the remains of "Mr. Elfe's house" and the associated support buildings. Finally, a potential slave site (38BK208) has been identified about 700 feet to the north of

the Elfe plantation.

A second possible explanation is that the archaeological data reflect an extended overseer occupation of the site. This explanation assumes that such an occupation would serve to mask owner occupation with an abundance of middle status artifacts. There is, in fact, evidence for an overseer during the period from 1770 through 1775. Yet for 28 years Rachel Elfe definitely lived on the plantation, and it is possible that George Elfe also lived there for an additional 10 years. This explanation presumes that the mixing influences of overseer artifacts would completely mask the occupation of Rachel Elfe, an unlikely situation on its face. Additionally, the historical record indicates that Elfe's overseer was paid £100 a year. Land (1969:66) suggests that this was a good salary (sufficient to support even a planter) and therefore it is not likely to yield particularly low status archaeological evidence.

A third explanation is that the plantation, never representing one of Elfe's major investments, was rather spartan during his lifetime. There is no evidence that Elfe ever resided on the plantation for any length of time. At best it may have served as an occasional retreat. The plantation accounted for only 10% of Elfe's value in 1768 and provided little income and perhaps even less profit. All of this suggests a relatively small house with few furnishings. Elfe's wealth was apparently contained within the city walls of Charleston.

Friedlander contributes to this view, noting first that

the "plantation" in both the colonial and antebellum periods had a considerable range in size and grandeur depending, partially, on "the relative importance of the tract in the planter's portfolio of lands" (Friedlander 1985:2). Further, there would appear to be no absolute correlation between status or wealth and the "plantation." Friedlander observes,

[a] plantation could also mean something in the order of Cedar Grove, Onslow County, North Carolina. Although owned by the wealthy and prominent Howard family, the settlement complex at best probably included a fairly simple farmhouse, outlying kitchen, and associated farm buildings - stable, barn, corn crib and the like. While we may not think of these as plantations, it is important to remember that the contemporaries did (Friedlander 1985:3).

Later, when Rachel began living on the property, the Elfe fortune was reduced by the Revolutionary War. Not only was the Elfe family's allegiance to the King politically disadvantageous, but it may well have been economically ruinous. Taylor (1932), from a study of wholesale commodity prices at Charleston during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, observed that exports were bringing low prices, but imports were expensive. Specifically he notes,

[p]rior to the period with which the study begins [1798], Charleston had suffered from seriously declining prices, especially for the years following 1787. This was particularly true of prices for local products which, having reached a high point in October, 1786, had fallen over 45 per cent by December, 1791. Imported commodities, on the other hand, had reached their low point in 1789 and had shown considerable recovery by the end of 1791 (Taylor 1932:851).

Rachel Elfe may have found it difficult to maintain an affluent lifestyle faced with low local commodity prices and high import prices following on the heels of the political and economic turmoil of the Revolutionary War.

The declining Elfe fortunes, translated into archaeological evidence, might be seen by the use of old style ceramics (being unable to obtain new, expensive styles), and the common use of Colono and Catawba (or River Burnished) ware vessels for food preparation (and perhaps even food service). Admittedly, the abundance of cup and bowl forms is not so easily explained, unless it is assumed that the Elfe wealth declined to the point of near impoverishment. Rachel Elfe's declining health may have necessitated the preparation of soft foods, or we may simply know too little about colonial foodways

to accurately judge the implications of this collection. The low quantity of architectural remains may relate to either the spartan nature or to abandonment and salvage of architectural items (see White and Kardulias 1985:74). The high Activities Group may indicate simply that the buildings, prior to their demolition or collapse, were put to other uses (Friedlander [1983:7] suggests a similar scenario).

This third explanation, which involves an understanding of the plantation's original use and importance to Elfe, the economic and political effects of the Revolutionary War and the ensuing years, and the vagary of the archaeological record, appears most reasonable. This explanation obviously is based on a very small archaeological sample, but it begins to examine and explore plantations and status from relatively uncommon perspectives. Plantations were different things to different people in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While they may have been built on the backs of slave labor, they were not always built on the cash crops of rice or cotton. Nor were all plantations equally successful, although this point is usually acknowledged. Likewise, both real and apparent status was dependent on a variety of factors and may be incompletely reflected or distorted in the archaeological record.

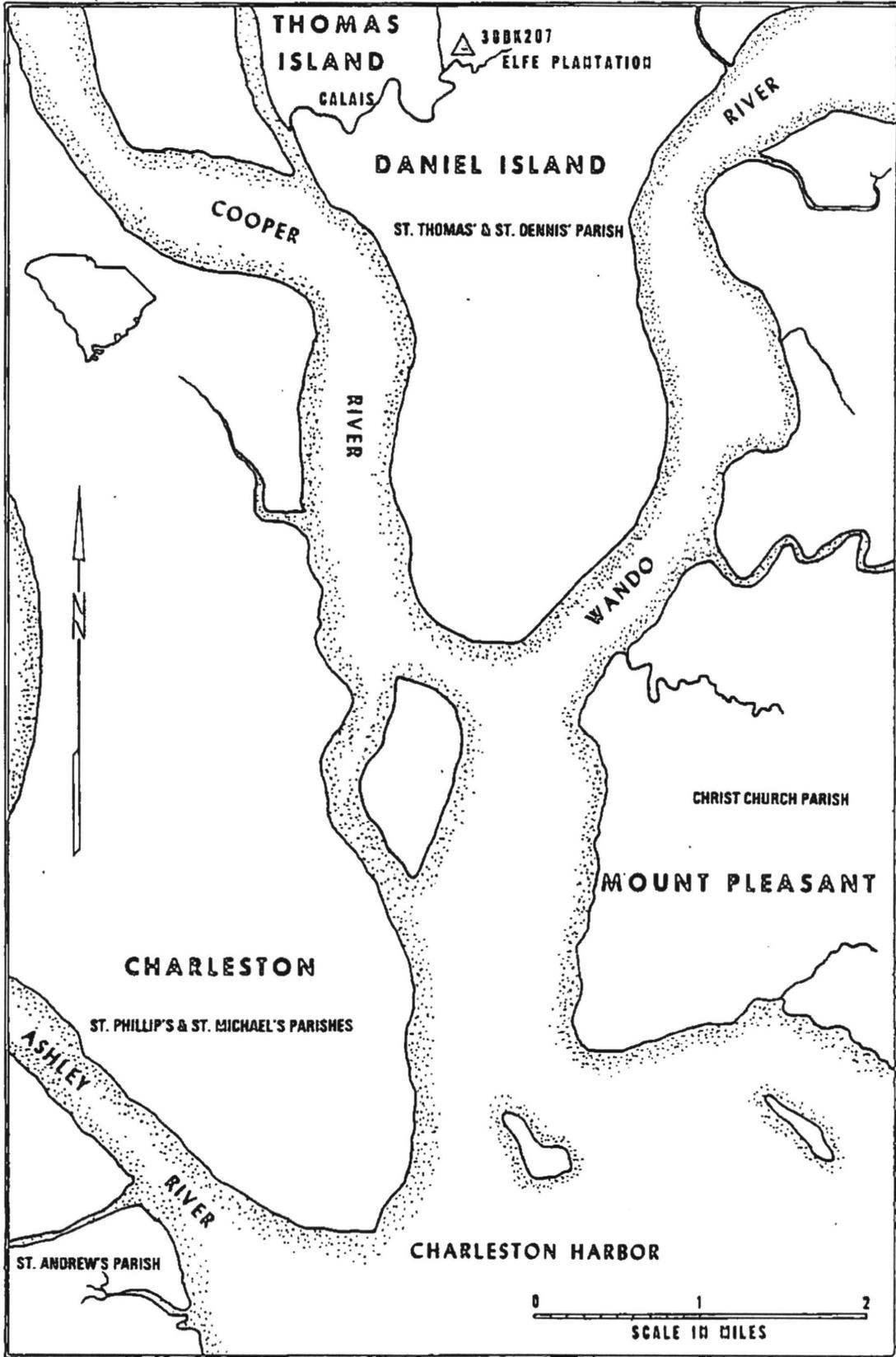


Figure 1. The Charleston area, showing the vicinity of 38BK207

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