

The Saluda Factory: Forgotten History of the Riverbanks Botanical Park



Chicora Foundation, Inc.
1996

© 1996 by Chicora Foundation, Inc. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transcribed in any form without permissions of Chicora Foundation, Inc. except for brief quotations used in reviews.

Chicora Foundation, Inc.
P.O. Box 8664 ■ 861 Arbutus Drive
Columbia, South Carolina 29202-8664
803/787-6910

Columbia's world renowned Riverbanks Zoological and Botanical Park is best known for outstanding work with endangered species and beautiful gardens. But there is another side to the zoo — a history of which few people are aware.

As you cross over from the zoo to the botanical park, the first thing you may notice are the remains of a bridge which spanned the Saluda River. This bridge was burned by Confederate troops as they retreated from Sherman's advance on Columbia and today the only remains are the two supports in the river and those on either side along the bank.

On the southern bank of the Saluda River, below the botanical garden, are the ruins of the Saluda Factory. During its time it was the largest cotton mill in South Carolina, perhaps in the South. In spite of economic setbacks, it represents an exceptional industrial undertaking. It also forecast South Carolina's eventual dependence on textiles. Today, as you visit the botanical park, you see only a few of the many ruins associated with this site, including a portion of the mill race and power head, as well as several of the buildings.

This booklet will help you understand these historical treasures — and the roles they played in the development of Columbia.

The Early History of The Saluda Factory

We often hear that "cotton was king" during the antebellum history of South Carolina. But it is important to realize that prices fluctuated dramatically and much of the wealth and prosperity of the cotton planters was illusionary. Economic mismanagement, war-time inflation, and wild speculation resulted in cotton prices between 1817 and 1818 of around 30¢ to 32½¢ a pound. The financial collapse of 1819 plunged prices down to the pre-war levels of around 14¢ and brought ruin to a number of planters who had expanded on the heels of high prices.

The 1820s saw prices in the range of 11¢ to 18¢ which caused great distress among the planters. Prices rallied for a short period before the market began to slip once again and during the late 1820s and early 1830s the rises dipped as low as about 9½¢. Recovery began about 1833 and the result was a frenzied period of speculation on land, cotton, and slaves.

It was during this period of low cotton prices that the first Saluda Factory was constructed on the Saluda River at Beard's Falls. Although the exact



The creation of the Saluda Factory was an effort to transform raw cotton into useful products, rather than export it to Britain or the northern states.

date has never been determined, it was apparently built sometime between 1828 and 1832. Perhaps the goal during this period of low cotton prices was to diversify by not only growing the raw material, but also producing the cloth. By 1834, a group of 30 Columbia planters, merchants, and bankers sought, and received a state charter reflecting

capital stock of \$60,000 and the privilege to increase the stock to \$500,000. The president of the company was David Ewart, while better-known Carolinians like Judge John Belton O'Neal, Congressman James H. Hammond, and local politician Franklin Elmore were all stockholders.

Even at this early date the Saluda Factory must have been impressive. It is reported to have been a three-story granite structure with 7,500 spindles. Thread is twisted on the spindles, which are wood or steel rods in a spinning frame, and then wound on a bobbin. The mill employed about 250 hands, almost all of whom were African-American slaves. The Saluda Factory required about 2,500 bales of cotton a year and could turn out upwards of 58,000 pounds of yarn and 2,000,000 yards of cloth. Power for the factory was provided by a dam which harnessed the water power of the river.

The factory produced primarily cotton yarn and osnaburgs, a coarse cloth used primarily for slave clothing.

By 1837 a article in the *Columbia Telescope* reported that the complex also included a grist mill, a tavern, a "Mercantile Store, filled with merchandise from all parts of the compass, a branch of the D. & J. Ewart and Company's of Columbia," several boarding houses for the supervisors, and houses for about 70 slaves. There was also talk of expansion, with perhaps the construction of a saw mill and iron foundry, as well as a blacksmith shop. In addition, it was estimated that the Saluda River could power five additional factories!

These grand plans, however, failed to materialize. Not only was the operation heavily undercapitalized, but the stockholders apparently sought to reduce additional investors, perhaps wanting to increase their own profits. Also plaguing the factory was the poor transportation network in this part of South Carolina. With no railroads and poor roads, the cost of getting raw materials to, and finished products shipped from, the factory was high.

As debts mounted, the company appealed to the South Carolina Legislature, asking for a \$50,000 loan. No state money, however, was forthcoming and, in December 1839, the factory was auctioned off, for the first of many times, to pay the company's debts. An advertisement for the sale in *The Charleston Courier* reveals that the company owned 189 acres surrounding the mill, as well as 64 slaves. "Improvements" included the cotton mill, a saw mill, blacksmith and machine shop, a hotel, the store, warehouses, boarding houses for white supervisors, and "cabins" for the slaves. The company's holdings were sold for only \$60,000.

The new company, operating under the name "Saluda Company," included only one of the 30 previous stockholders — Judge O'Neill. Among the new investors were many Columbians, including Benjamin F. Taylor, William P. DeSaussure, and Dr. Robert W. Gibbes. Boosted by an investment of \$100,000 it at first appeared that the new ownership would be a success. But by January 1845 the Saluda Company was again offered for sale. The advertisement reveals that the operation consisted of a granite building measuring 200 by 45 feet which was four stories high, plus an attic. Two water wheels, each 18-feet in diameter, provided power using a waterhead with a 16-foot fall. Also present was a granite picker house measuring 25 by 30 feet. A nearby size and drying house was built of wood. Also present was a machine shop. The mill included 80 looms with 3,912 spindles, four filling frames, three spinning machines, and three dressing frames and warpers. This was situated on 203 acres (slightly larger than reported in 1839), along with housing for about 200 hands.



All mills were dangerous, noisy, and unhealthy places to work. The laborers themselves are often "invisible" historically since we know almost nothing of their lives.

In spite of the progress made at the Saluda Factory, and all of the improvements, no buyer could be found. The production of the factory was fairly limited, with one account reporting the production of only a heavy brown shirting and what was called a "Southern stripe," a course colored cloth used primarily by African-American slaves. The company also added cotton bagging. Offered at the low price of only 20¢ a yard, they hoped to induce cotton planters to use it instead of hemp for bailing cotton. Cotton bagging never caught on and the

factory gradually turned to producing coarse yarn for the Northern market.

A new manager, J. Graves from New England, was retained. At first he intended to replace the African-American slaves with white operatives, but recanted and recommended that the number of slaves actually be increased. The existing stockholders pumped another \$100,000 into the purchase of over 150 slaves. Even with an entirely slave run factory, no profit could be made and in 1853 the company was forced into liquidation once again. The most readily disposed of assets, the black slaves, were sold off and the factory was essentially abandoned.

Gibbes and the Columbia Mills at Saluda

In 1855 the president of the essentially defunct company, Judge John Belton O'Neill, persuaded Col. James G. Gibbes and his brother, Robert W. Gibbes to purchase the factory for the incredibly low price of \$20,000. Apparently the stockholders were happy to receive even this small sum in return for their investment. The Gibbes, Columbia merchants, were crippled by the same lack of capital that the previous companies faced. In addition, they made the tragic mistake of investing yet more money in the failing enterprise.

The name was changed to Columbia Mills and Gilbert Reed was hired as the overseer of the operation. Large sums of money were invested in purchasing new equipment and within only a few years James Gibbes remarked sadly that he "could scarcely see where the money had gone."

William Gregg, the famous organizer of the Graniteville cotton mill, reported that he had advised the Saluda Factory operate "just as it was, and make the most of a mill that had cost \$250,000 and had been sold . . . for \$20,000. The warning was disregarded with the result that \$30,000 was spent fruitlessly." In fact, James and Robert Gibbes did not profit from the early operation of their new investment. Operatives were constantly sick and looms were idle. Cotton cost them 12¢ to 13¢ a pound, with operating costs adding from 4¢ to 5¢ a pound. Yet, the products (primarily osnaburgs) sold at only 17¢. At times they even had to go to New York to *buy back their own product* in order to have something to sell in their Columbia stores!

While slaves had been used, with some success, by the earlier companies, the price of slaves rose steadily in the decade prior to the Civil War, making their use less profitable, especially for the already crippled company. Consequently, Gibbes chose to use only white operatives. Even this, however, proved a problem since the white mill workers frequently moved from one mill to another, hoping for higher wages and better working conditions. Eventually James Gibbes entered into agreements with the owners of the Graniteville and Vaucluse mills not to

permit workers to move about, essentially locking the whites into a form of bondage.

It seems that only the coming of the Civil War saved James and Robert Gibbes from financial ruin. Suspecting that political conditions would continue to deteriorate, they sought to further diversify the mill, installing wool manufacturing equipment. Within months Columbia Mills was producing jerseys (knitted wool), jeans (these were not the "jeans" of today, but rather twilled cotton in both stripes and white), and plains (a kind of plain flannel cloth), selling for 20¢ to 40¢ a yard. For a while Columbia Mills was the only manufacturer of wool products in South Carolina. The expansion continued, allowing the output to soar to \$230,000 a year, using a labor force of about 250, many being women and children.

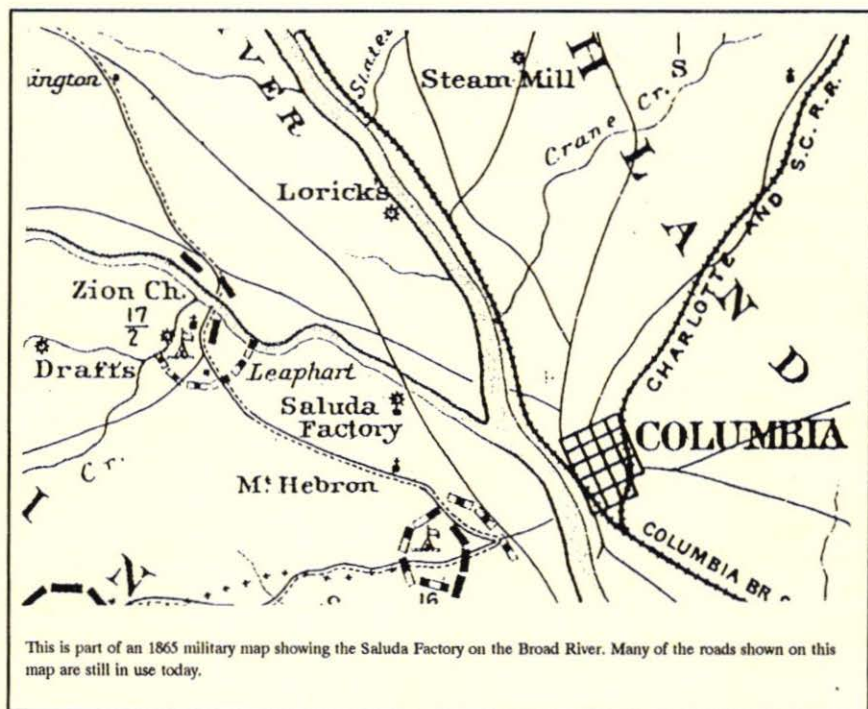
With the coming of the Civil War, the Columbia Mills and the Gibbes saw prosperous times. Advertisements encouraged people to patronize Southern industry and support the war effort. Gibbes established an enterprise to manufacture Confederate uniforms using the cloth he produced at Columbia Mills. His manufacturing plant took up the entire eastern side of the block of Main Street between Washington and Hampton streets. There about 35 tailors and upwards of 2,000 women cut and hand sewed nearly 50,000 uniforms which sold for \$25 to \$75 each. Cloth, when it could be obtained by Columbians, sold at upwards of \$40 for a single yard.

There are many accounts suggesting that James Gibbes' neighbors and friends were shocked at his profiteering. Since Gibbes was not only profiting from the mill and his factory, but also from selling luxury items which made it through the Union navel blockade, it is likely that resentment ran high. Robert Gibbes characterized the criticisms as "unjust, unkind, and un-Christian attacks," then justified his high prices by noting how much more he could obtain from the European market — hardly a comment likely to salve many feelings.

It was probably this wave of war-time resentment which encouraged them to sell the mill to Col. L.D. Childs of Lincolnton, North Carolina in 1862. Childs paid \$100,000 (probably in Confederate bills) for the mill. James Gibbes also sold Childs 800 bales of cotton at 17¢ a pound and agreed to serve as the agent for the mill's products, selling them in his Columbia stores. Within six months, the price of manufactured goods increased from 500 to 2200 per cent. Yarns which sold for \$1.25 brought \$10. But the prosperity of the mill's owner and its agent were not to last long.

The Civil War Years

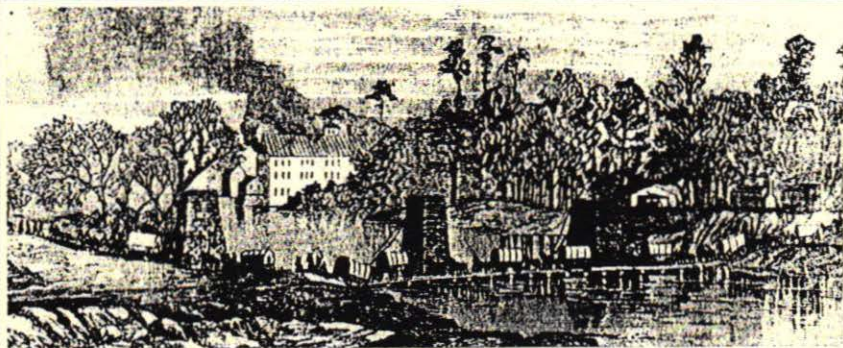
In mid-February 1865 General William T. Sherman's troops were marching toward Columbia. Sherman sent his Right Wing, under the command of



Major General Oliver Howard into Columbia from the north, having them cross the Saluda and Broad rivers. They found the Saluda River bridge had been burned by retreating Confederate troops and crossed the river instead on pontoon boats in the immediate area of the factory. One account reveals that as Howard's troops arrived at the mill they found the female operatives still running through the building, grabbing up as much of the cloth as possible.

One of the officers, Brevet Major George Ward Nichols, described the condition of the operatives and the village adjacent to the mill on February 17:

The residences of these people accorded with their personal appearance. Dirty wooden shanties, built on the river bank a few hundred feet above the factory, were the places called homes — homes where doors hung shabbily by a single hinge, or were destitute of panels; where rotten steps led to foul and close passage-ways, filled with broken crockery, dirty pots and pans, and other accumulations of rubbish; where stagnant pools of water bred disease; where half a dozen persons occupied the same bed-chamber; where old women and ragged children lulled lazily in the sunshine; where even the gaunt fowls that went disconsolately about the premises partook of the prevailing character of misery and dirt. These were the



This drawing shows the Union troops crossing the Saluda River with the Saluda Factory burning in the background. If you compare this to the map showing the mill and bridge remains you will notice that the artist put the mill on the wrong side of the river!

operatives, and these the homes produced by the boasted civilization of the South.

Apparently some portions of the mill were burned, although the nearby mill village slum was spared.

Late Nineteenth Century Reconstruction and Eventual Abandonment

After the Civil War, Childs had the mill rebuilt as a frame structure on the remnant granite foundations. John B. Palmer was brought in as the new manager and eventually Palmer and another investor, William Johnston, brought Childs' interest in the operation. A new charter was issued to the Saluda Manufacturing Company on March 3, 1874, revealing capitalization in the amount of \$300,000.

Between 1877 and 1880 an additional \$40,000 was spent to improve the water power at the site. A 900-foot dam of solid stone was built, backing up water behind it for four miles. The resulting water head of 14 feet turned a single 66-inch turbine to provide the power to the mill.

Although the new dam did not raise the water any higher than the previous dams, it was found to still be three feet more than authorized by either the original charter or the one issued in 1874. A law suit was brought to block the work. While the court decision favored the mill, it still significantly delaying construction. Additional problems were caused by floods which damaged the on-

going work.

An 1880 account provides us with some information about the mill and its operatives. A promotional piece published by *The News and Courier* reveals that about a hundred operatives were employed at that time, "ranging in age from 8 years up." They were still living in houses forming a loosely clustered mill village around the factory. The article reported that "these residences rent for from 20 cents to \$1 per week, and range in size from 1 to 10 rooms."

The final demise of the Saluda enterprise was brought by a late afternoon fire on August 2, 1884 which leveled the mill. The *Columbia Register* described the event:

Crowds of men, women, and children were congregated on the adjacent hills after exerting themselves to the utmost in rescuing goods from the fire, who with blackened faces, tear-dimmed eyes and crushed hearts, were watching the flames as they devoured the only means of subsistence which inhabitants of Saludaville had ever enjoyed or ever looked forward to.

Another newspaper account reported that Saludaville was the mill village which had grown up around the factory and that it was owned by William Johnson. The houses consisted "of comfortable double tenements of one-story each." About four hundred people, half of whom were children, lived in the village.

Even in ashes the Saluda Factory proved to be a problem. Although there was \$118,750 insurance on the mill, the loss was valued at \$150,000. Most of the insurance money was distributed to out of state parties and there was some rumor that the insurance companies considered disputing the value of the building. The process was drawn out over several years and this certainly was a factor in the failure to rebuild.

Another problem was the City of Columbia's plan to develop the Columbia Canal by the engineering firm of Thompson and Nagle of Providence, Rhode Island. The rights granted to this firm, along with the City's guarantee, effectively prevented the Saluda Factory from rebuilding, even if funds had been identified.

The Saluda Factory in the Twentieth Century

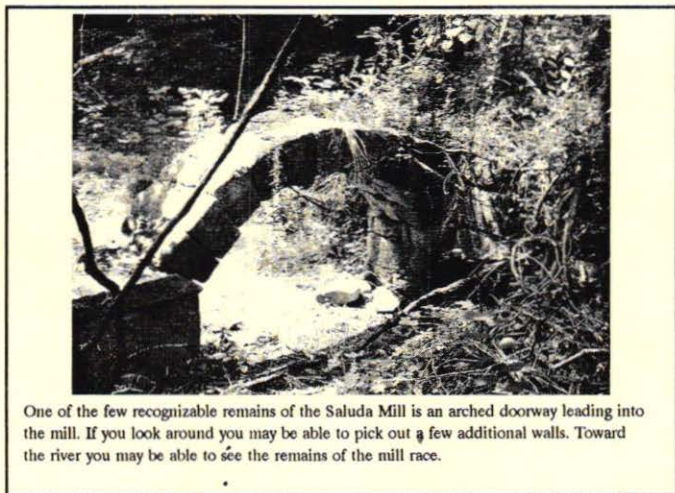
In 1901, only seven years after the fire, a newspaper article in *The State* reported that:

the bank below the dam is littered with wreckage and debris . .

. . . Further back on a hill top are "the quarters" where the operatives lived. The settlement is wellnigh deserted and the houses are tumbling down.

By 1936, however, "all that is left of this old factory . . . is the granite foundation on which the factory once stood. . . . only one house of the village [is] left."

In 1972 the Saluda Factory Historic District was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places. As justification, it was noted that the ruins were a significant part of the early history of textile manufacturing in South Carolina — the state's largest industry. The associated archaeological site associated with the mill village was recorded in 1969 and the mill site was recorded as an archaeological resource in 1972.



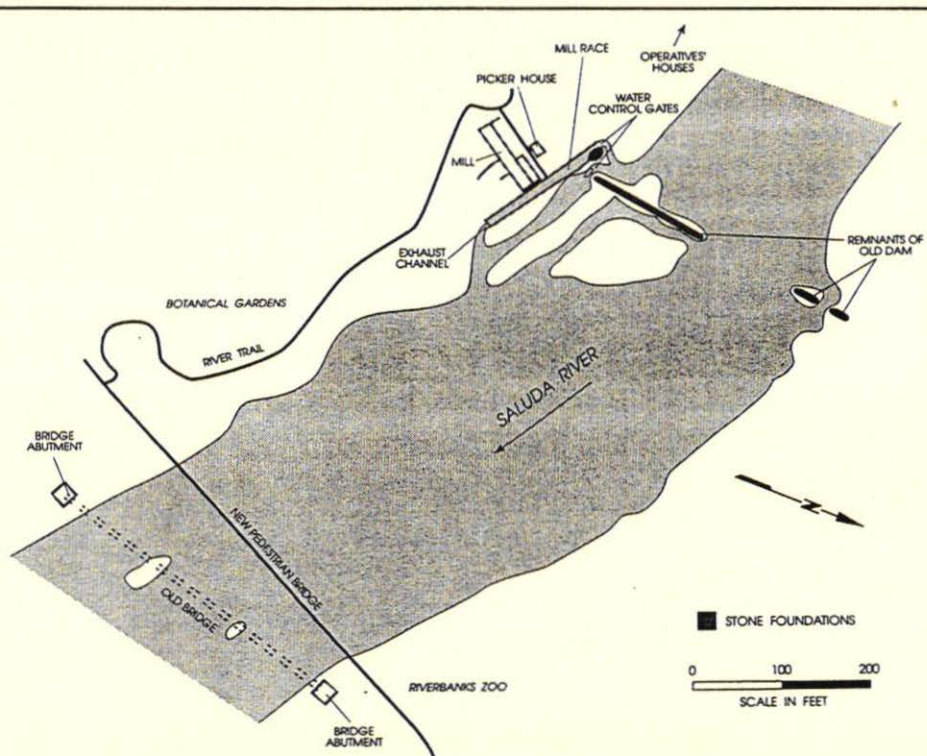
One of the few recognizable remains of the Saluda Mill is an arched doorway leading into the mill. If you look around you may be able to pick out a few additional walls. Toward the river you may be able to see the remains of the mill race.

For over a decade the mill was largely ignored. It wasn't until Chicora Foundation's 1989 investigations at the mill that clear recommendations concerning the site were developed. And it is only today that the Saluda Factory

is at least partially open to the public.

What You See When Visiting the Botanical Gardens

As you walk across the modern bridge connecting the Riverbanks Zoological Park with the botanical gardens, you will see the two islands in the Saluda River which were supports for the bridge built between 1828 and 1832, and burned by Confederate forces in February 1865. You may also be able to pick out the supports on each side of the river where the bridge terminated.



This map shows a little of what you may be able to see during your visit to the Saluda Mills site. As you walk over the pedestrian bridge linking the zoo to the botanical park the Saluda River bridge, burned by Confederate troops seeking to detain Sherman's troops, is to your left. The River Trail takes you to the factory ruins where you can still see parts of the mill, picker house, and mill race.

Upriver, depending on the water level, you may be able to see portions of the last dam, begun in 1877.

If you take the path along the river in the botanical gardens you will eventually arrive at a small observation deck in the heart of the mill area. Toward the river you will see the remains of the granite mill race. The water, blocked by the dam, was diverted into this race through a wood control gate. To your right, at the downstream end of the race, is where the water wheels or turbine would have been located, with water being exhausted through a smaller channel and eventually being emptied back into the Saluda.

The long, narrow mill building is located directly behind, or inland, from the location of the water wheels, so that power could be easily and directly transferred to the looms. The saw mill and grist mill were probably also situated along the water. To your left as you walk back toward the gardens is an archway which is a doorway within the mill building. Further to the northwest, or your right, are the remains of the granite picker house. It was here that the baled cotton was first sorted and machines, called pickers, were used to separate and clean the fibers of cotton and wool. From this building the cotton or wool would pass to the mill itself.

For More Information

If you would like more information about the Saluda Mill, South Carolina's textile industry, or the history and archaeology of the Richland County area, look for these books and articles at your local library or ask your librarian to get them for you through Inter-library Loan.

Saluda Factory

Lander, Ernest M., Jr. 1955. "The Ups and Downs of Saluda Factory." *The State Magazine*, April 10.

Trinkley, Michael. 1989. *Archaeological Evaluation of the Proposed Riverbanks Botanical Gardens, Lexington County, South Carolina*. Research Contribution 36. Columbia: Chicora Foundation, Inc.

Columbia and Richland County

Maxey, Russell. 1980. *South Carolina's Historic Columbia: Yesterday and Today in Photographs*. Columbia: R.L. Bryan Company.

Moore, John Hammond. 1993. *Columbia and Richland County: A South Carolina Community, 1740-1990*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press.

South Caroliniana Library. 1986. *A Columbia Reader*. Columbia: R.L. Bryan Company.

Trinkley, Michael. 1993. *Historical, Architectural, and Archaeological Survey of the Palmetto Iron Works, 1802 Lincoln Street, City of Columbia*. Research Contribution 109. Columbia: Chicora Foundation, Inc.

Mills and Mill Life

Beardsley, Edward H. 1987. *A History of Neglect: Health Care for Blacks and Mill Workers in the Twentieth-Century South*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

Browning, Wilt. 1990. *Linthead: Growing Up in a Carolina Cotton Mill Village*. Asheboro: Down Home Press.

Carlton, David L. 1982. *Mill and Town in South Carolina, 1880-1920*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

Trinkley, Michael, editor. 1993. *Life Weaving Golden Thread: Archaeological Investigations at the Sampson Mill Village, Greenville County, South Carolina*. Research Series 36. Columbia: Chicora Foundation, Inc.

What is Chicora Foundation?

Chicora began as a small, not-for-profit, public foundation more than a decade ago, with the lofty mission of preserving the archaeological, historical, and cultural resources of the Carolinas.

Today that means a wealth of innovative programs.

Like our school programs explaining Black and Native American history to children. "How-to" workshops for adults interested in preserving quilts, photos, and family Bibles. And our collaborative archaeology projects with leading business partners such as Kiawah Resort Associates, International Paper, Westvaco Development Corporation, and The Beach Company to explore both the history and prehistory of our region.

Chicora Foundation is the leader in showing that preservation is not only essential for us as a people, but good business as well. And we remain at the cutting edge of Southern studies with our monograph series, talks at professional meetings, and museum assistance programs.

How can YOU help? Please don't let our fragile heritage become extinct through gradual loss. Join with us in studying the past and teaching it to our future generations. Your generous financial gift to Chicora is a visible expression of your commitment to saving and preserving the important cultural heritage of the Carolinas.



CHICORA FOUNDATION MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

As a member of Chicora Foundation, you help support heritage education programs in our school and community programs. In addition to that good feeling inside, you will also receive Chicora Foundation Research (a quarterly publication), an enameled Chicora logo pin, and a 10% discount on all Chicora publications.



Yes! Our rich heritage must be saved, and I can help.

Here is my tax-deductible gift to Chicora Foundation, Inc.

Please rush me the latest newsletter and Chicora logo pin.

\$1000/Lifetime \$500/Benefactor \$250/Patron
 \$100/Sustaining \$35/Friend

Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Telephone: (_____) _____

Please mail this form to: Chicora Foundation, Inc.
PO Box 8664
Columbia, SC 29205