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Mark Williams
University of Georgia, jmw@uga.edu

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Notes and Queries on Spaniards and Indians in the Oconee Valley

Mark Williams

The phrase Notes and Queries was stolen by me from a classic ethnographic field manual that was published in six editions in England between 1874 and 1951 (Seligman 1951). The final edition, edited by Brenda Seligman as Secretary of the Committee of the Royal Anthropological Institution of Great Britain and Ireland, was essentially a how-to book for anthropology field workers. In today’s parlance this would likely be entitled Ethnography for Dummies. I have had a fondness and appreciation for this publication for many years and have routinely used it for some time in my material culture classes to introduce students to many aspects of the things that humans make and use for both their survival and for their pleasure. I happened to be rereading Notes and Queries when Dennis Blanton contacted me about this symposium, asking me to write a review paper about the Spanish contact in the Oconee Valley. Thus, this volume was at the top of my mind as I promptly sent him my title for this paper.

More specifically, what I had in mind by picking the title was a simple summary of various bits and pieces of data that relate to this topic. Not much has happened in the way of direct research on Spanish-Indian contact within the Oconee Valley in recent years, and I have no new discoveries to relate here (Figure 4.1). Thus, instead, I want to summarize the existing data, pose a few pertinent questions, perhaps make a few observations, and, in general, help stir the pot a bit.

Our awareness that there were Spanish artifacts in the Oconee Valley dates from the summer of 1977 and the inception of the final Lake Oconee project conducted by the University of Georgia. Specifically, three burials I excavated at the Joe Bell Site (9Mg28) at the junction of the Apalachee and Oconee Rivers all contained small, blue glass necklace beads (Figure 4.2). These were the only such items located at the site. This location became the type site for the Bell Phase, which I dated to the late sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries (Williams 1982, 1983). The ceramics associated with this historic phase were well-made and relatively easy to identify (Figure 4.3). They included elaborately incised wares but generally lacked complicated stamped wares.
Figure 4.1. Oconee Valley study area.

Figure 4.2. Location of Joe Bell Site (9Mg28) now under Lake Oconee.
About this same time in the late 1970s, Charles Hudson of the University of Georgia began a two-decade odyssey to document the route of the sixteenth century Hernando De Soto expedition throughout the South. As an early and occasional participant in this work, I note here that Hudson's journey metaphorically started in the Oconee Valley as part of a graduate seminar associated with his fall 1976 class on Southeastern Indians. The six graduate students, including Chester DePratter, Dan Elliott, and myself, were all archaeology students who knew the data on Mississippian mounds better than did Hudson at that time. The notion of groups of mounds as ethnographic provinces was soon born, and Marvin Smith and Steve Kowalewski led the way with the definition of the Oconee Province (Smith and Kowalewski 1980). In a series of papers, frequently with many co-authors, Hudson's work culminated in his 1997 publication on the De Soto expedition, a volume that is apt to stand for another 50 years as the standard De Soto route reconstruction (Hudson 1997). Not everyone agrees with every inch of his projected route, but the fact that it is the first attempt to use archaeological data comprehensively certainly makes its more reliable than all earlier constructs.

In the Oconee Valley, Hudson's route passes from the Lamar Site at Macon, to the Shinholser Site south of Milledgeville, to the Shoulderbone mounds north of Sparta, northwest to the Dyar mound north of Greensboro, and then east to the Savannah River and beyond (Figure 4.4). Marvin Smith excavated the Dyar mound in 1977-1978 before it was lost under Lake Oconee (Smith 1990), and I conducted testing at all of the other mound sites in the Oconee Valley in the 1980s and early 1990s. My own suggested route of De Soto through the valley is slightly different from Hudson's, and he and I have happily argued about this for some time (Figure 4.5).
Figure 4.4. Hudson's suggested De Soto route through Oconee Valley.

Figure 4.5. William's suggested De Soto route through Oconee Valley.
In all this work, however, not a single unequivocal De Soto period historic artifact has yet been located in this part of Georgia. Much of this likely relates to the lack of excavation of burials from these sites. Indeed, since the sorts of artifacts that would be tied to the De Soto expedition as well as later Spanish contact within the Oconee Valley are usually located only in burials, we have a big problem facing us in the future. The paradigm shift away from excavating human remains in American archaeology means that our database of Spanish artifacts deep into the interior will grow only at a slow pace in the future.

Turning now, again, to the post-De Soto Bell Phase, Spanish artifacts have now been recorded in the Oconee Valley from seven additional sites other than Joe Bell (Figure 4.6). In 1978, Jerald Ledbetter recovered over one hundred blue and white glass beads from burials at the Shaky Pot Site (9Ge948), a small Bell Phase site located in the Lake Oconee area just south of the Dyar mound. In 1983, I located a single dark blue glass bead in general midden excavations just south of Mound A at the Scull Shoals mound site (9Ge4) in northern Green County (Williams 1992). In 1984, Dennis Blanton recovered over 300 glass beads from a single burial at a small farmstead site in northwestern Hancock County (Blanton 1995). Although he did not name the site, I have now, and without his permission, christened it the Blanton Site. The late Edwin Bowden, an amateur archaeologist from Oconee County, located two glass beads with human remains at the Bowden Boulder Cache Site (9OC319) near his home in Oconee County (Figure 4.7) (Ledbetter 2006). These beads were destroyed in a fire that claimed his entire collection about 10 years ago (Figure 4.8). I located a moderate number of Spanish artifacts at the Shinholser Site south of Milledgeville in 1985 and 1987 (Figure 4.9) (Williams 1990, 2008). These include three glass beads, all dated by Marvin Smith to the end of the sixteenth to the early seventeenth centuries. They were located in water-screened feature fill from the southern perimeter of the site. Also located here were two majolica sherds, both apparently typed as Mexico City White. I know of no other majolica from the entire Oconee Valley. Everyone thus far agrees that this site was the probable location of the De Soto period town of Altamaha. I believe the extreme southern part of the site is perhaps the best candidate for Spanish-Indian archaeological excavation within the Oconee Valley (Figure 4.10).

In 1995, the late Pennsylvania State University archaeologist, Jim Hatch, located a single glass bead in Bell Phase context at the Marshall Site near Barnett Shoals at the northern end of the area. Finally, a set of blue glass beads was located a few years ago by amateur Buddy Jones, purportedly at the Dyar Site (Figure 4.11) (Ledbetter, Personal Communication). This last identification is certainly the least reliable one reported here. I should also note that peach pits, known to be reliable contact markers, are present from a number of Bell Phase sites in the Oconee Valley. Peaches apparently were rapidly spread by native trade all the way from their probable origin in St. Augustine to Jamestown in Virginia by 1607 (Williams 1982; 1983).

Hundreds of Bell Phase sites are now recorded in the Oconee Valley area. I strongly believe that if burials were excavated at these sites, the number of late sixteenth to early seventeenth century Spanish artifacts in our database, particularly beads, would increase substantially. As has been shown, however, these items are not exclusively present in burial contexts.
Figure 4.6. Sites with Spanish artifacts in Oconee Valley.
Figure 4.7. Edwin Bowden.

Figure 4.8. Edwin Bowden's beads.
Figure 4.9. Sites with sixteenth-century Spanish items in the Oconee Valley.

Figure 4.10. Plan of Shinholser Site.
The data from recorded history that can be used to illuminate the subject at hand is limited but important. This data has been thoroughly dissected, discussed, and presented by John Worth (Worth 1993, 1994). In his view, there were seven expeditions of varying sizes that were sent to the area of the Oconee Valley from St. Augustine by various Spanish governors between 1597 and 1628 (Figure 4.12). The quality of information about these expeditions varies from moderately good to almost non-existent. The most important, and in many ways the most informative, was that of Gaspar de Salas in 1597. A soldier, De Salas was accompanied by two friars, Fernandez de Chozas and Francisco de Verascola. This little group, accompanied by 60 Indians from Guale on the Georgia Coast, went into the Oconee Valley sometime in July of that year. They visited the towns of Tama and Ocute. Although other past researchers have suggested that the Tama of Gaspar de Salas might be at the junction of the Oconee and Ocmulgee Rivers, there seems little doubt now that it was in the Piedmont, and likely at the Shinholser Site. The site of Ocute was a day's march further into the interior. The exact location of Ocute is still in debate, but, as I have argued before, I do not believe it was at the Shoulderbone Site.

Figure 4.11. Dyar Mound glass beads.
The next known visit to the Oconee Valley was that of Juan de Lara in the summer of 1602, five years after the De Salas expedition. As Worth discusses, it is quite probable that this group also reached Shinholser and beyond it into the Piedmont. Just as had the earlier expedition, the De Lara one was impressed with the population size and resource richness of this Piedmont area. Indeed, as Worth also points out, the Spanish colony would have likely expanded in this direction had the English not settled in Jamestown soon thereafter in 1607. While the logical connection here is admittedly complex, events
conspired to deflect the Spanish from this northern expansion and set the stage for their eventual western expansion into the Apalachee area. With reference to the Spanish in Florida after 1607 their concerns seem to have shifted toward defense. No further expeditions were sent to the Oconee area for 22 years.

Florida governor Juan de Salinas sent a small party of two soldiers and an unknown number of Indians deep into the interior twice during 1624. It is not certain that these came to the Oconee Valley, but it is possible, given that this was still the area most thickly populated in the interior at that time. Neither of these unnamed expeditions yielded much useful information to either the governor or to us.

In early 1625, a small expedition led by Ensign Adrian de Canizares was sent to the Oconee Valley and apparently did visit the Piedmont area. Interestingly, the ability of the Spaniards to get sufficient food on this expedition was made difficult by the constant attacks to which they were subjected. It is also possible that food was becoming scarcer in the valley then since the Spanish arrived well before new crops could have been harvested.

Finally, during the late spring and summer of 1627, two expeditions, both led by Ensign Pedro de Torres, were sent to the interior. These presumably went through the Piedmont Oconee population center and followed De Soto’s route to Cofitachequi several hundred miles to the northeast. Interestingly, as Worth points out, this expedition found hunger and hardship on the road to Cofitachequi, just as De Soto had 87 years earlier. Few actual details of life in the Oconee Valley were revealed by these final attempts to establish permanent contact or control over the large society in the Piedmont Oconee. Had this occurred, certainly the history of Georgia would have been distinctly different. Indeed, the continued resistance and intransigence of the people of the Oconee Valley during the period described here forced the Spanish to seek new allies to the west among the Apalachee. But their first choice of large interior populations to subjugate had failed. The limited development at Utinahica in the Big Bend region might be best understood as an attempt by the Spanish to get a foothold into the larger, more intractable, but promising, Oconee world.

The Oconee Piedmont population apparently survived a few more decades until they were set upon by gun-toting slave raiding groups from the north, ultimately under the control of the Virginia English colony. This unknown war, which Eric Bowne has done much to document, must have begun in earnest by 1661 and quickly caused the destruction of the Oconee societies (Bowne 2005). The survivors went in many directions, carrying their names with them and confusing the picture of late seventeenth century ethnic group distributions over a huge area. John Swanton, for one, never began to understand how the diaspora of the Tama and Ocute did much to define the late seventeenth century human landscape of Georgia. Indeed, I believe this event was one of the most important precursors to the eventual birth of the Creek Confederacy further to the west.

We have no data on what was happening internally within the Oconee Valley in the 34 years between the last visit by the Spanish and the likely beginning of the slaving raids. In other words, we must once again fall back on archaeological data. The practical problem here is that we do not have ceramic attributes defined that would permit us to break down the Bell Phase into what might be called early and late sub-phases. And we do not have adequate dating techniques to permit separating sites dating from say the 1580s and the 1640s. I wish we did.
My More Recent Work

I mentioned in the beginning that I had little new information from the historic period to present. That doesn’t mean I have been standing still, however. Beginning in 1998, I initiated a ten-year project to study the people of the Little River Valley, a western tributary of the Oconee (Figure 4.13). This work involved excavations at the only mound site in that area, the Little River Site (9Mg46), a great deal of survey to locate sites, excavations at several farmsteads, and, finally, excavations at a communal center or busk site known as the Bullard Bottom (Williams 2003, 2004a, 2004b).

I intentionally selected the Little River Valley as a potentially manageable subsection of the Piedmont Oconee Valley for a study of late Mississippian societies. It has several characteristics which make it desirable for such a study. It is small and definable, approximately 8 by 16 kilometers in size. A huge portion of the area is on land owned by the University of Georgia, thus making access to most of the sites relatively simple. The area is very rural and currently has a very low population density. In fact, I believe the present population level is lower than it was in AD 1500. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the valley had no occupants before 1500 and they were all gone by sometime in the middle of the same century. Thus, the Little River community was a shorter and more geographically restricted occupation than any other part of the Oconee Valley and one of the most limited in the state.

Aside from understanding the life of the people in this short-lived society, two immediate questions come to mind: Where did these people come from and where did they go? Some of the few clues we have are from ceramics. The pottery is reasonably typical Dyar Phase Lamar types, with multiple bold incised lines and occasional punctuates (Figure 4.14). The presence of punctuates seems a bit more common in the Little River Valley than in the rest of the Oconee Valley, although Figure 4.14 does not show this. Punctates are, based upon my experience, more common to the southwest of the Little River and suggest possible origins for these people there. Wherever it was, why did they come to the Little River area?

In late prehistoric and early historic times, the Oconee system represented the largest population center between the Coosa province in northwestern Georgia and the Cofitachequi chiefdom in upper-central South Carolina (Figure 4.15). Among the three, the Little River was closest geographically to St. Augustine, thus explaining the documented interest of a series of Spanish governors in the region. In the context of Oconee Valley as a power center, then, it seems reasonable that the society that settled in the Little River Valley did so with the approval of the rest of the people in the valley and, perhaps, were seen as allies brought in to cover or empower the western flank of the larger valley population. Whatever the specifics, it makes sense to see this development as being in the mutual self-interest of both parties. But why, then, did they leave in the middle of the sixteenth century? We could simply restate that it was in their mutual best interest, but this is not particularly satisfying. An alternative explanation might emphasize that the marriage was a short one anyway, and a no-fault divorce was in order.
Figure 4.13. Location of Little River Valley in Georgia piedmont.

Figure 4.14. Bold Incised ceramics, Bullard Bottom Site in Little River Valley.
As to where the Little River population went, I wish to repeat here an idea I put forward last year in another forum that helps me make sense of much of this data from interior Georgia (Williams 2009). In short, I think they may have moved to the area of the junction of the Oconee and Ocmulgee rivers and became the archaeological phase Frankie Snow has named as Square Ground Lamar (Figure 4.16) (Snow 1990). This population, where Blanton is currently conducting important excavations (see article by Blanton & Snow in this volume), is located just west of the junction of the two rivers. The
incised ceramics from here are very similar to those from the Little River area, including much multiline incising with punctates (Figure 4.17) (Snow 1990). Clearly Blanton and I need to conduct more detailed comparisons of the ceramics from both areas.

Another way to discuss the possibility of this move requires me first to discuss the pattern of distribution of Late Prehistoric Coastal Plain societies from a broader geographical scale. For over twenty years now, many researchers have worked in concert to determine where Mississippian societies were located and what their associated dates of occupation were. Often this effort had been led by Dave Hally (Hally 1995). I certainly have spent much time helping determine this for all the Oconee Valley mound sites. I now argue that it is perhaps time to discuss where societies were not located. In an attempt to do this for the Coastal Plain, an interesting pattern emerges. After about A.D 1350, the population of the Coastal Plain in Georgia and South Carolina began to be abandoned, and, by AD 1450, the process was essentially complete in an area that runs from the lower Flint River in southwestern Georgia all the way to the area northeast of Columbia, South Carolina, and likely further. This vacant area is over 300 miles long and some 100 miles wide (Figure 4.18). Populations continued to reside at the Fall Line in valleys other than the Savannah. The associated abandonment of the Savannah Valley has been recognized for over 20 years now. Oddly, the region around the mouth of the Savannah has the only population center on the coast throughout this geographical range. This clearly defines the Guale as they soon were known at the beginning of the historic period.

This broad pattern of Coastal Plain and central Savannah Valley abandonment is likely real. Why it happened is unknown, but some speculation is happily in order. The pattern seems too large to raise the specter of warfare as a sole explanation. It likely was caused by, or certainly led to, a breakdown of communication between the many disparate Mississippian communities across a broad area. In terms of the area of the junction of the Ocmulgee and Oconee rivers, it strains my credibility to believe this would be the only place in this huge area of the central Coastal Plain that had a population present at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

For purposes of conversation, then, why would the Little River population - or any other population - decide to move to the heart of the Vacant Quarter in the middle of the sixteenth century (see Figure 4.18)? The most compelling answer for me is that it was a post-1565 move to optimize interaction with the Spanish at St. Augustine. Ultimately this population did effectively act as a gateway community to the Oconee, as we know from history.
Figure 4.16. Proposed Little River to Big Bend migration route.

Figure 4.17. Square Ground Lamar Bold Incised (after Snow 1990).
Conclusion

In conclusion, I hope I have fulfilled my goal of presenting an interesting paper based on no new data. I have long said that every important site should have new excavations every decade or two. Perhaps I now should add to that the precept that literally everything that we believe we understand should be formally reexamined after the same time interval. I do believe we are now closer to understanding the nature of the late prehistoric native societies in Georgia, and how they were altered by contact with the Spanish. Looking back on what we knew, or better yet, what we did not know when I began seriously thinking about all this 40 years ago, our progress is crystal clear. I hope we can collectively continue making such progress over the next 40 years. In this context, maybe we can one day write a book summarizing everything about sixteenth century chiefdoms in Georgia.