



The Barnwell Tabby Ruin

A story about discovering colonial Hilton Head Island and the people who shaped it



BARNWELL
TABBY C.1730
HILTON HEAD ISLAND

The Barnwell Tabby Ruin is an **archaeological site** that has been in the care of the Barnwell family for over eighty years. The care, preservation, and stewardship of this precious historical resource has been fully conducted and financed by the Barnwell Family.

This project revealed a lot of new information about Hilton Head Island's colonial past, even in the tabby itself. **Tabby is a building material made from lime, water, sand, oyster shells, and ash.** This tabby building is made from oyster shells mined from two nearby Native American shell rings, large shell monuments.

In 2009, the Barnwell's began an **extensive restoration project** with this tabby ruin. The family first worked with architect Colin Brooker and tabby reconstruction specialist Rick Wightman to rebuild the areas of the building that were damaged. After decades existing without a roof, the tabby walls were very damaged. Rick worked to patch weak areas and rebuild whole sections of the crumbling walls. Rick and the Barnwell's made sure **to use appropriate materials down to the correct species of shells shipped in from Florida.**

After this stage, they worked to build a pavilion roof above the tabby structure to keep the structure dry. **Though tabby is hearty, water eventually breaks the walls down by dissolving them.** Colin designed the roof to overhang the walls, ensuring they remain dry during normal rains.

During the reconstruction process many artifacts were unearthed. At this point, the Barnwell's contacted Dr. Kimberly Cavanagh, a professor of Anthropology at the University of South Carolina Beaufort. The family wanted to know **who built this building, when they build it, what was it used for, and was it part of the deep Gullah Geechee history of this island.** To answer these questions, Dr. Cavanaugh assembled a team of researchers consisting of archaeologist Dr. Audrey Dawson and historian Dr. Eric Plaag.

Dr. Dawson and Dr. Cavanagh being by excavated the inside of the building, looking for evidence to help answer the Barnwell family's questions. Students from USCB assisted in **excavations** while historian Dr. Plaag dove into the **archives.**

A specialized archaeologist from the University of Utah was brought out to help date the tabby building. She took a sample of the sand from just below the first layer of flooring. Using a technique called **Optical Stimulated Luminescence** Dr. Tammy Rittenour was able to figure out the last time those sand grains saw sunlight, providing us with a date range; the middle of the 1700s.

Artifacts recovered from the excavations spanned many years, because this building had been used since it was built over and over again in different ways. But the earliest also suggest the early to middle 1700s.

The people who would have built this tabby building were enslaved Africans and Native Americans. **Tabby is a lot like building materials that have been used to construct buildings in west African for millennia.** When enslaved west Africans were brought here, they came with all the knowledge of their homelands, which included tabby-like building construction.

Enslaved workers first built large molds out of wood called cribs, that were then filled with the tabby mixture. One layer or course was laid atop the other after the first had dried. **The circular holes you can still see in the tabby come from wooden pegs in the crib molds.** Within the tabby mixture, artifacts from Native Americans can sometimes be seen, like ancient 4000 year old pottery.

The research team had several hypotheses or educated guesses about this building could have been used for. **The archaeological evidence tells us it was built in the middle of the 1700s, a time when Hilton Head Island was being heavily settled by Europeans after the end of the Yamasee War.** The island was home to indigo plantations run by English, French, and Scottish planters and worked by enslaved Africans and Native Americans.

Research is happening every day!

What this tabby building a *planter home*? Was it an *outbuilding like a barn*? Was it a *militia house or meeting place*? As research continues on, each possibility provides us with a new opportunity to learn more about Hilton Head's Gullah Geechee past.



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All text & artwork by Dr. Katherine Seeber, Carolina Community Archaeology, 2024

For more in depth information about colonial Gullah Geechee history, see *Black majority: Negroes in colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* by Peter H. Wood.