Ebenezer and Sunbury: Revolutionary War Landscapes of Two Dead Towns in Georgia

Daniel T. Elliott,
The LAMAR Institute, Inc.
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Ebenezer and Sunbury
New Ebenezer, M. Seutter 1747
Wilson’s Plan, ca. 1779
Redoubt 3, Ebenezer
GPR Image, Redoubt 3, Ebenezer
Identified Redoubts in Red, Ebenezer
Redoubt 4, Ebenezer
Silk Filature in DeBrahm’s Fort
Silk Filature

- 2-Story Frame bldg. w/ stone foundation & numerous ovens
- Self contained factory for producing silk filament
- Enclosed in 1757 fort
- Actively used 1752-1770s
- Possible Magazine in Rev. War?
Silk Filature, Ebenezer
Unidentified Redoubts, Ebenezer
Augusta Road & Rifle Trenches, Ebenezer
Sunbury, 1770s
Sunbury
Detail of Campbell’s Map, Showing Sunbury
Fort Morris (later Forts George & Defiance)
Distribution of Arms Related Artifacts, Sunbury.
Jones Tract, Sunbury
Maj. Gen. Charles Lee

Brig. Gen. Wm. Moultrie

Gen. Peter Muhlenberg

Patriots at Sunbury

Col. Charles Pinckney
British Officers at Ebenezer
Patriots at Ebenezer
Guns from Fort Morris
Figure 24. Buckles, military insignia, & buttons.
A-Brass & Iron Buckle; B & C-Brass Buckles; D-Buckle Hook; E-Brass Insignia; F, G, & H-Brass Buttons.
Fort Morris, Sunbury Artifacts
Heirloom Hanger Guard, Fort Morris, Sunbury
Excavated Well at Ebenezer

- Contained many Rev. War items
- Cannonballs and bullets
- British military buttons
- Coconut and peanuts
- Debris from January, 1779
- Spoiled by British, ca. 1780
Ebenezer and Sunbury
New Ebenezer was the urban center of a settlement of German-speaking Lutherans that covered over 25 square miles. By the time of the American Revolution the town was already in decline, but the constant struggle for control of the town by opposing military forces eventually resulted in its abandonment.

- Established in 1736 here at Red Bluff
- First colonists were Lutheran refugees (Salzburgers) from the Alps
- Later immigrants from other parts of Germany
- Town plan identical to Savannah
- 160 house lots (60 x 90 feet each) arranged around the town squares
- At peak, contained about 800 people and 100 homes

About 210 years later, archaeologists and historians with The LAMAR Institute, a 501 (c) 3 non-profit began discovering Ebenezer’s buried secrets. This work continues today through grant funded projects and emergency salvage archaeology.

Did you know you are standing in Rentz’s Tavern? It served travelers on the Augusta Road. Archaeologists excavated the weights (right) used to weigh coins on the tavern’s scales.
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In 1878 renowned historian and former Confederate Colonel Charles Colcock Jones, Jr. released his book, Dead Towns of Georgia. Included in his book were chapters on Ebenezer and Sunbury. Today’s presentation, 132 years later, revisits the history of these two towns with the added tools of archaeology. Today’s emphasis is on the town’s history and resources that pertain to the American Revolution. Both towns played important roles in the creation of the United States of America and, hopefully, in another 132 years, citizens and scholars will reflect kindly on the current efforts to identify and preserve that precious heritage. Many building blocks relate the story of these two towns. A few researchers, some living and many deceased, deserve special credit including: the aforementioned C.C. Jones, Jr., George Fenwick Jones, Larry Babits, Robert Scott Davis, Jr., Margaret Davis Cate, Rita Folse Elliott, Gordon Midgette, Milton Rahn, Reverend Philip Strobel, John Sheftall, and Renate Wilson.

New Ebenezer, which henceforth for brevity will be called Ebenezer, is located in present-day Effingham County, Georgia just below the confluence of Ebenezer Creek and the Savannah River. Sunbury is located in present-day Liberty County, Georgia, on the waters of the Medway River. Both towns were major urban centers in colonial Georgia, each rivaling Savannah as the most important town in the colony.

Ebenezer

The second town site of Ebenezer was established by a colony of Lutheran refugees from the Alps of Europe in 1736. That town was laid out on an identical plan to that of Savannah with a rectangular grid of town lots that were regularly broken up by public squares, streets and lanes. It contained 160 town lots, of which fewer than 100 were likely occupied. The most heavily settled areas were nearer to the Savannah River. The flanks of Ebenezer’s lots were town commons and 2-acre garden lots.

A series of ship transports from the 1730s to 1750s provided the people for the town. It reached its maximum population at about 800 people by the 1750s and was in decline before the 1770s. The town had strong religious origins, which were still quite evident at the time of the American Revolution. The town of Ebenezer was surrounded by two large farming settlements, known as the Mill District and Bethany, and several satellite villages of Abercorn, Goshen and Bethany. Collectively, the Ebenezer settlement of ethnic Germans covered more than 25 square miles.

Eighteenth century cartography of Ebenezer includes several maps by Archibald Campbell, Wilhelm DeBrahm, John Gardner, Matthias Seutter, and John Wilson. Early 19th century mapmakers for Ebenezer included Isadore Stouf and other unknown draftspeople.
Ebenezer has an extensive historical record that continues to be discovered. The archaeology of Ebenezer, however, is a relatively recent addition to scholarship. LAMAR Institute survey at the town of Ebenezer began in 1987 and archaeological work on the town has continued, as grant funds and personal energies permitted, to the present day. Elderhostel excavation in 1999 encountered a rubble-filled fort ditch (later identified as British Redoubt 3); The ABPP funded a survey of the Ebenezer battlefield (and its many associated military resources) in 2001. Georgia Governor Roy Barnes’s Emergency Fund provided funding for excavations northeast of the Jerusalem Church in 2002, which yielded additional information on Revolutionary War life in the town.

Systematic shovel test survey is complete for most of Ebenezer. Over 140 small test units have been excavated and mechanical stripping of one area yielded features associated with the American Revolution. Metal detecting survey has been attempted in several areas of Ebenezer but was only effective at two locations thus far. GPR surveys sampled several areas of town and particularly relevant are the results of GPR survey at British Redoubt 3, where deeply buried evidence of an octagonal redoubt was clearly discerned. Detailed topographic mapping of the entire town and surrounding land produced maps of eight military redoubts and several sections of military ditch work.

**Sunbury**

Sunbury was established in 1758. It was created with a linear plan consisting of 496 town lots that were broken up by three large public lots and numerous streets and lanes. Several wharfs were established on the Medway River on the town’s eastern side. Sunbury reached a maximum population of about 1000 by the 1770s. Many of the original settlers were Congregationalists who had originally moved from Dorchester, Massachusetts and Dorchester, South Carolina before moving to Georgia. These were supplemented by a variety of tradesmen, merchants, longshoremen and other workers. Approximately 200 town lots, of the 496 that were planned, were actually occupied. Sunbury’s town lots were graded into three economic groups at the time they were issued. Those nearest to the Medway River were more valuable. Many of the lots away from the river were likely never settled. The flanks of the town of Sunbury were town commons.

Eighteenth century cartography of Sunbury is nearly absent but includes maps by Archibald Campbell and C.C. Jones, Jr.’s redraft of a town map that was owned by his grandfather, Joseph Jones. A slightly dyslexic 1814 U.S. Army Engineer Thomas Macomb’s map of Fort Defiance, built on the site of Fort Morris, is the only detailed fortifications map known for the area.

Like Ebenezer, Sunbury has a large body of historical records that have been partially explored by historians. Also like Ebenezer, serious archaeological scrutiny of the town is a relatively recent addition to scholarship. Early archaeological reconnaissance of Sunbury in the 1960s and 1970s provided almost no information about the town. Test excavations at adjacent Fort Morris by Gordon Midgette in the 1970s fueled a controversy over that fort’s identity. Mapping, GPR and Test Excavations in 2002 was done by Southern Research under my direction (funded by Georgia Legislature). ABPP Survey of Sunbury Battlefield was done in 2003 by The LAMAR Institute and this effort was supplemented by a GDNR
Historic Resources Survey grant that enabled more identification of Sunbury’s resources. Both projects were also under my direction.

Sample shovel test survey of several parts of town and Fort Morris. Archaeologists have excavated several small test units in portions of Sunbury and at Fort Morris. GPR survey sampled portions of Sunbury and Fort Morris. Backhoe trenching at Fort Morris facilitated our search for military ditch work. Most recently, survey for maritime resources by archaeologists with the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, Historic Preservation Division. Metal detecting survey has been attempted in several areas of Fort Morris and Sunbury with excellent results. Archaeological study of Sunbury focused on several privately owned tracts scattered about the town. This work included systematic shovel testing, test units, GPR survey, metal detecting and mapping. Most of Sunbury, however, remains to be surveyed and at least 40 acres of the town site has “gone away” since the last archaeological work in 2003.

**Similarities**

Ebenezer and Sunbury also display many common characteristics. As noted by C.C. Jones, Jr., both are dead towns that were vacant by the mid-19th century.

Both towns served as major military headquarters for the British and Loyalist forces under command of Major General Augustin Prevost. Both were bivouac and campaign staging areas for both armies. Both towns contained large military garrisons for both sides of the conflict. Thousands of troops were garrisoned at both towns.

Both towns hosted major military hospitals. The British and Loyalists who were garrisoned at Ebenezer were a sickly lot. Their plight is partly documented in a surgeon’s account that was published as, *The Fevers of Jamaica*. Ebenezer also had its “Great Swamp Hospital”, which was operated by the Patriots in 1782. Sunbury was used by the Patriots in their three failed campaigns against East Florida.

Both towns had military prisons, although both were temporary facilities. Ebenezer held captured Loyalist Native Americans for a brief period in 1782. Sunbury held the Continentals and others captured in the January 9th battle at Fort Morris.

Many hundreds of soldiers from both sides of the conflict died and were buried at Ebenezer and Sunbury. Ironically, none of their gravesites are known. GPR surveys on existing cemeteries in both towns have revealed many dozens, if not hundreds, of unmarked graves and some of these may represent the graves of Revolutionary War soldiers. Others may lie buried in unknown graveyards elsewhere in, or just beyond the towns.

Both towns contained large storage depots for military supplies, including weapons, ammunition and accoutrements. As fears of an invasion by sea grew in Savannah, large stores of the Patriots’ precious munitions were shifted to safer location at Ebenezer. The British also kept munitions at Ebenezer during their occupation. Sunbury’s captured Patriot munitions, following the attack on January 9, 1779, were detailed in a list of captured weapons and military stores in Henry Clinton papers. Ebenezer’s heavy
ordnance is less well documented, although one British plan of the fortifications provides a few details on the British weapons.

Both towns were Revolutionary War battlefields. The battle at Ebenezer took place in September, 1779, when Brigadier General Casimir Pulaski and his Legion attacked the nearly vacant town after most of the British and Loyalists had removed to defend Savannah. A latter 1782 engagement, which is chronicled in Heitman’s list of battles, actually is an amalgam of three different engagements that occurred within a dozen miles of Ebenezer.

Sunbury was the scene of military action on at least four times: 2 in 1778, 1 in 1779 and 2 in 1782. The best documented battle took place on January 9, 1779, when Fort Morris was taken and the town of Sunbury was secured in British hands. Lesser known engagements in 1782 included a raid by Captain Patrick Carr and his company of Georgia Battalion and a sacking and burning of the town by Captain Scallion and his Loyalist marines.

Both towns contain a multitude of archaeological features large and small associated with the military presence. Ebenezer contains a series of small forts, or redoubts, which were connected by ditches and abatis lines. To date, no definitive archaeological evidence has been discovered of any battle at Ebenezer, although many areas remain to be explored by excavation. Sunbury’s military presence is dominated by Fort Morris, although several loci were identified that relate to military activities around Sunbury. Battle debris from the January 9th engagement is widespread on the landscape at Fort Morris and on portions of Sunbury.

Both Ebenezer and Sunbury have a military history in later wars, including the War of 1812 and the Civil War. Fort Morris was being rebuilt at Fort Defiance in 1814 but construction halted when the war ended. A proper discussion of these later events must wait another episode of our tale.

Differences

Ebenezer and Sunbury also display many aspects that distinguish the two towns. Sunbury was a thriving seaport whereas Ebenezer was more of a “sleepy” river port on the Savannah River on the uppermost fringe of coastal navigation. The scale of large ship and transoceanic transport was far greater at Sunbury compared to Ebenezer. Nevertheless, some small sailing craft frequented Ebenezer during the war. The British made obstructions to the flow of Abercorn Creek, to prevent Patriot boat traffic, which rendered this formerly navigable stream unnavigable. The advantages of Sunbury, its proximity to the sea, also led to its demise. Two major hurricanes wasted the town in the early 19th century. Ebenezer also became extinct around the same time as Sunbury, due largely in part to its remote location and an exodus of settlers into the new frontier.

The Germans at Ebenezer were nearly equally split in their loyalties to King George III. Division within the community predates the American Revolution, when the town had two Lutheran ministers. Those who were later to become Tories supported Reverend Triebner, while the Whigs and later Patriots supported Reverend Rabenhorst. Rabenhorst died during the war. The Patriots from Ebenezer enlisted in militia and Continental Army units.
Some of Ebenezer’s loyalists joined locally organized British military units, such as Thomas Brown’s East Florida Rangers or Wright’s Georgia militia. About 50 townspeople from Ebenezer remained loyal to the King to the end of the war and they fled Ebenezer, then Savannah, then St. Augustine to settle in the Bahamas and other British colonies, including New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. Several dozen other Loyalists at Ebenezer took the opportunity to surrender to the Patriots when Major General Anthony Wayne and about 1,000 ill-equipped U.S. troops arrived in early 1782. General Wayne maintained Ebenezer as his primary headquarters until July 11, 1782, when Savannah was surrendered to him. During the first half of 1782 the British and Loyalists were hunkered down within the safety of Savannah.

Ethnically and economically speaking, Sunbury had a more diverse population compared to Ebenezer. Like Ebenezer, it was a mix of people with polarized loyalist and patriotic leanings. Generally speaking, Liberty County was a hotbed of liberty, as the name indicates, which leads one to presume that the majority of the populace opposed the king. The loyalists at Sunbury existed, although their numbers remain a mystery. Some may have joined up with Loyalist units who were garrisoned at Sunbury in 1779, and they likely accompanied them on campaigns in the Carolinas. Following the war, some former residents of Sunbury, including some who had been enslaved, settled in British colonies, including the Bahamas, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Ontario.

Most of Ebenezer’s fort system was designed and built by the British, or enslaved workers. A plan map showing most of these defenses has survived. The Patriots also had some military constructions before and after the British invasion, but the configuration and extent of these defenses is poorly documented. The Continentals and militia under command of Anthony Wayne reoccupied at least some of the British defenses. General Wayne and his troops left Ebenezer in late June or early July, 1782 to occupy Savannah. His superior, General Nathanael Greene wrote to Wayne advising him to level the British fortifications before leaving Georgia. The archaeological evidence from at least two of the Ebenezer Forts, Redoubts 2 and 3, and also in the case of the British fortifications at Savannah, indicate that General Wayne followed General Greene’s orders. Redoubt 4 at Ebenezer was left completely intact, however, and remains visible today. Its survival can be explained by General Greene’s letter to General Wayne, in which Greene ordered that the forts were to be leveled, leaving one for refuge of the citizens should British forces return. In February, 2009, the LAMAR Institute team located Redoubt 6 at the Ebenezer Creek crossing, which appears in remarkable condition. Redoubts 1 and 7, the northernmost of the British forts, remains to be located and Redoubt 5 is known only from surface evidence. Two redoubts have been mapped but their association is unknown. Evidence of an earlier 1757 fort also has been identified at Ebenezer.

**Historic Preservation and Interpretation**

Ebenezer and Sunbury are both treasure troves of American Revolutionary war history. Their shared status as “Dead Towns” stands in contrast to the living history potential that they contain. Many war stories, as well as domestic stories, are contained only in the archaeological records of these two towns. The perceived significance of these two towns in historical literature and Revolutionary War histories, as well as their cultural value in the eyes of the public, falls short of their actual significance. Ebenezer was listed in the National Register in the 1970s, although its archaeological component was not considered
in the nomination and the defined National Register boundaries did not include any of the outlying military fortifications. Fort Morris was listed in the National Register in the 1970s, although Sunbury remains unlisted. Sunbury recently had the dubious distinction of being listed as one of Georgia’s “Top Ten Endangered” historic resources by the Georgia Trust. The LAMAR Institute has sought to research and educate the public about the nonrenewable resources in Ebenezer and Sunbury, but the actual “saving” of these two gems lies beyond our means.

Most of Ebenezer’s resources are located on property owned by various manifestations of the Lutheran Church. The remaining portion is privately owned. Only a corridor of one state highway, Georgia Highway 375, is publicly owned. This road crosses the town site with disregard for its historic plan or its historical resources. Except for one publicly owned boat ramp, the town of Sunbury is privately owned. Fort Morris, which lies adjacent to the town, is protected within a Georgia park.

The story of Ebenezer and its military history is interpreted to the public by a small museum operated by the Georgia Salzburger Society, by the LAMAR Institute’s research projects and its reports, and by several Georgia historical markers. The main mission of the Salzburger Museum is to tell the story of the Georgia Salzburgers, so the American Revolution is tangential to their mission.

The story of Sunbury and its military history is interpreted to the public by the museum and programs at the Fort Morris State Historic Site, by the Southern Research and LAMAR Institute research and reports, by outdoor signage at the Sunbury Cemetery and a few Georgia historical markers. Fort Morris staff hosts an annual “Come and Take It!” program, which attracts visitors. The museum’s interpretive display was recently overhauled and a modern interpretive video was produced. Nevertheless, this state park has had continuing problems with low attendance and threatened closures ever since it was created in the 1970s. Recent State budget cutbacks in the current economic crisis forced layoffs and a reduction in interpretive programming.

Since the late 1980s historical archaeology has made great strides in the discovery of these two important colonial and Revolutionary War era towns. Many tasks remain however and the work done thus far is little more than a Phase I study. So, what’s next? Well, beyond the obvious, “More work is needed!” here are a few specifics:

- Revision and expansion of Ebenezer’s National Register status with upgrade to a National Historic Landmark or, at the very least, a National Register District.
- Submission of a National Register nomination for Sunbury, and a revision for the existing National Register form for Fort Morris, with, perhaps, a redrawing of the boundary to create a district, and/or National Historic Landmark;
- Additional archaeological survey and test excavation of unknown portions of Ebenezer and Sunbury;
- Protection of remaining portions of the two towns and their outlying military components through protective easements, direct acquisition, or other land preservation measures.

I hope you will agree that these two urban areas are well worth fighting for, as did the thousands who passed through the towns’ gates in the American Revolution. Thank you for your time and attention.