The Story of the Excavation of Fort Prince George, Pickens County, South Carolina

By

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Editors Note: This publication was completed by Marshall Williams as a hand-written
diary over 40 years ago on May 28, 1968. It is a detailed and personal account of his
involvement with the discovery and archaeological excavation of Fort Prince George in
Pickens County, South Carolina. We in the Lamar Institute are delighted to offer this
delightful and poignant account that will be interest to all who are fascinated with the
study of the past. The text was transcribed by Phil Williams and was lightly edited by
and completed by Mark Williams.

Foreword

I have written this little book for the enlightenment of my children, grandchildren,
and such descendants who may follow them. Every once in a great while it is a man’s
privilege to brush cheeks with history, and it was my privilege to become part of the
history of Fort Prince George, however small this part may be. If you will read carefully
what I have to say, I believe that you will find that there will stir within you a curiosity
and an interest in the momentous events which took place at or near this old fort. It
became possible for me to help with the archaeological excavations of Fort Prince
George; to resurrect it, as it were, from the buried past, and to live with it until it
disappeared beneath the waters of Lake Keowee. Here is how it all happened.
Chapter I

On the afternoon of Saturday, May 11, 1968—or rather, at seven twenty-five p.m., I stood alone in the rain and bade farewell to Fort Prince George. I then drove out of the valley, knowing I had seen this site for the last time. By the next day, May 12, 1968, the dam which Duke Power Company had built caused the Keowee River to flood the valley, and to blot out, for untold generations to come, the historic sites of Fort Prince George and Keowee, the Indian town. It was a strange feeling I felt when I turned and left the valley that memorable evening. The rain was falling steadily, the sky was dark, and the hillsides, bared to their bones by the relentless bulldozers, were obscured in the mist. Already the waters were out of their banks, creeping inch by inch toward their ultimate rendezvous with Fort Prince George. I could not feel the dispassionate detachment of the professional archaeologist, for I remembered the adventure of discovery, the warm sunny days and the icy mornings when I had to break the frozen surface of the ground to lay bare the features of the fort. I remembered the months of back-breaking toil, as we labored to find out secrets of this place before its ultimate destiny with the clear waters of the Keowee River. Happily, we plumbed the depths of its mysteries before this watery grave arrived. Now, back to the beginning of my discovery that the world did not begin with my birth.

A number of years ago my family spent a week at the beach in South Carolina with my wife’s sister, Laura, and her family. Laura and Dave lived in Rock Hill, South Carolina, and on our return we all stopped at their house for a couple of days. Up until this point my interest in history consisted of thankfulness that I would never have to
suffer through another course of the stuff. Now Laura and Dave didn’t have too much
reading material in their house, and I, being a great reader, idly pulled a ragged little book
from their shelf and began thumbing through it. This little book was an elementary
history of South Carolina, written by that famous Carolinian, William Gilmore Simms.

Here it was that I first heard of Fort Prince George, and of the Indian town of
Keowee. “What’s this?” I thought. “Here, I’ve lived in Oconee County for twenty years
and did not know that a Colonial English fort was within sixteen miles of where I was
born?”

I read further. Why, there were armies crossing Oconee’s soil! And Indians!
And scalping and murders and massacres—all on my doorstep, and I never knew it. I
resolved then and there that I must know more of this, and from that moment a new road
began for me. I read and studied all I could find about those awesome events of the
middle 1700s. I went to the libraries of Clemson College and the University of Georgia
seeking out old newspaper files which might tell something of the doings of those times.

I made a discovery! There was not one good description of Fort Prince George,
and even less of Keowee, the Indian town just across the river from it. Many reports
conflicted, and those which existed were only fragmentary. Even the exact site of Fort
Prince George had been lost, though it was known to have existed in the large river
bottom on the Pickens County side at Nimmons Bridge.

With my sons, Mark and Philip, I traveled to the place. The first time I ever saw
the site there was a large mulberry tree growing all alone in a cornfield. The surrounding
hills were all green and beautiful, and the valley of the Keowee at that moment became a
part of me in a way which is difficult to describe. In these fields where corn now grew there was once a town of Cherokee Indians, an English fort, and life, and much death.

Of course at this time I was no archaeologist—had no knowledge of the archaeologist’s methods or attitudes. What I was, I suppose, was a romantic—but in a very special way. This was my home country, and the hills were lovely, and I knew of the valley’s secrets.

With my sons, I roamed the hills and the fields, looking for artifacts of past events and peoples. Then, about 1957 or 1958, a bolt of lightning hit the mulberry tree, splitting it from top to bottom. The farmer who owned the land then removed the remains and burned the stump. Local tradition had place this tree—or perhaps its sire—inside the fort, or perhaps just outside the gate. Soon after this, I visited this field, finding bits of melted glass, and, on one occasions, a very ancient hoe. As it later developed, this hoe was found inside the area of the fort.

There followed many trips to this valley, usually with my sons. Then, about 1962 or 1963, I learned that the Duke Power Company was planning a series of dams on the Keowee River, which would, of course, flood the entire Keowee valley, and with it Keowee Town site and Fort Prince George, wherever in the cornfields its site was. This was sad news for me, and I wrote letters and cussed, but to no avail. The Keowee Valley, as it had existed for thousands of years would soon be destroyed in the waters of the flooded Keowee River.

Soon I learned that there was a possibility that Fort Prince George may be archaeologically excavated, and I attended every meeting in which the topic was discussed. To make a long story short, red tape and inefficiency almost let the secrets of
the valley be flooded without examination. Finally, the assistant state archaeologist, John Combes, took matters more or less into his own hands and began work at the suspected site of Fort Prince George. I first met John Combes on Thanksgiving Day, 1966. He was then living, with his new wife, in the Few House, which lay only 100 yards from the supposed site of the fort. John was a young man in his early thirties, sporting a very distinguished beard and mustache. His early digging put him exactly on the northeast corner of the fort’s surrounding ditch. With some hard back-work, he soon had outlined the fort’s stockade wall. In the summer of 1967 other archaeologists moved into the valley to do work on two early Indian sites—and so the work at the fort lagged behind.

Finally, in August of 1967, John employed a bulldozer and pushed the top six inches or so from the fort site. A couple of shallow trenches had been put in by college students, and this was the state of affairs when I took the bull by the horns and asked if I could work on the fort—free “for nothing.” I could, and beginning in August, 1967, and going through May 11, 1968, I spend almost every weekend at the fort site.

In the next chapter, I shall describe the unfolding of the mysteries which for two hundred years had been locked in the earth beneath that cornfield.
Chapter II

One sunny Saturday morning in August of 1967, I appeared at the site of the “diggings,” meeting for the first time Don Robertson, a big fellow in his middle twenties, who was John Combes’ assistant in the project. John was not there. Anxious to get myself into the very midst of the history of the place, I suggested that we go to work. Don said OK, and we loaded up with shovels and wheelbarrows and walked down to the site. Now, I had never before dug in an archaeological site and had only a vague idea of what to look for. In the next 10 months I learned—oh, how I learned!—the techniques of just how to dig, how to slice the soil just so, how to trowel out artifacts, and even human burials. In those ten months, I labored the labor of love—love for this beautiful valley and its history. At first, my soft muscles rebelled, and my hands grew calloused. Little by little I grew accustomed to the grueling work, knowing that this soil had a date with a watery destiny.

On this very first day of my work at Fort Prince George, Don and I uncovered the first post-molds which had been found there. Post-molds are soil discolorations which result when wooden posts buried in the soil rot out, leaving the humus in the shape of the original post. Even though such a post may have rotted out hundreds of years ago, the soil discoloration remains. Even a hole dug in the ground, with no post in it, may show up hundreds of years later as mottled soil. It was this kind of thing which we uncovered that day.
The area to be dug was laid out in 10 foot squares, and we would tackle one square at a time, removing about six or seven inches of “plow zone” soil before we could get down to the lower soil which had never been disturbed by a plow. It was in this undisturbed soil that the “features” and post molds would show up. A feature is any obviously disturbed soil in the sub-soil layer, such as a ditch, an ancient hole, or even, perhaps, a grave.

At the end of this first day of work we had excavated three squares—some 150 or more cubic feet of dirt. We turned up nails (wrought iron, handmade nails), bits of glass, crockery, china, leaden musket balls, food bone, and other debris which accumulates in a lived-on surface. Most important, many post molds were showing up.

Now, these post molds were important to us, for from them we could determine, hopefully, the number and dimensions of the houses inside the fort—something which no historian had recorded.

My son, Philip, went to work with me on several occasions, and as I will relate later, made a most significant discovery.

The hot weekends of August gave way to the more moderate ones of September, and then to the haunting, leaf-colored autumn of October. Little by little, we peeled the plow zone from the site, wheel-barrowing the dirt a hundred feet or more to our dirt-dump.

In almost the exact center of the fort, a fine, rock-lined well had been uncovered back in the summer months of 1967. It had been filled with large rocks which the crew then working on the site removed, lowering the depth of the well to about ten feet. From this well, the perimeter of the stockade ditch extended fifty feet north, east, south, and
west. Our first work was done on the west side of this well, and this area was what engaged us most of August, September, and October.

The work of the archaeologist is to read and interpret the past from the things he finds buried in the soil. Here was a field which has been plowed and re-plowed for a hundred and fifty years, yet the tip of the plow never reached deep enough to eradicate the features in the soil which not only proved the existence of the fort at this spot, but in the end gave us its exact dimensions, and the shape, locations, and dimensions of the buildings within it.

I was present at the site, and working, when we first uncovered enough post molds to show that a house must surely be “in the making.” As it turned out, it was many months before the final pattern of the house (or barracks) became apparent, but this was the beginning of the “west barracks.” Shown in drawing below is the outline of the fort, and the approximate position of the west barracks.
My son, Philip, as I have mentioned, went to the site with me on several occasions. On one particular Sunday, we had labored mightily, but our reward had been slim, for we had found no post molds, no glassware, no potsherds, and only a nail or two. A visiting friend of John Combes had brought his children, and of course they wanted to dig, too. Well, to come to the point, this boy of some ten years of age turned up a cannon ball after hitting only a few licks with a shovel. Well, were glad to get the ball, but the sting, the injustice of it all, rankled just a bit. And just a short time later, my son Philip hit a rock with his shovel—something else to make digging difficult. It wasn’t long before this old rock became a cornerstone of the most important finds in the fort.

The succeeding weekend and the next showed us that we had not one rock but many of them. Then we began the slow task of cleaning the dirt from them, and sweeping up. Well, as it turned out, we had a house, with an obvious rock wall, about 20 feet square (more or less). But the whole inside of this house, within these neatly laid rock walls, was a jumble of rocks thrown helter-skelter about. This made no sense, until I discovered something. In troweling out the dirt from the around the rocks, I noticed holes opening up in the dirt between the rocks. I could stick an opened-up coat-hanger probe a foot or more down in this hole, and we could hear it strike another rock. I called this to the attention of John, and at once there began a round-robin of guesses as to the significance of such a thing. I felt like then and there tearing out the rocks and having done with it, for our most likely consensus of opinion was that there was a cellar in this house, and that it had been filled with rock.
Archaeology is not this kind of work, though, that a whim of the moment can prevail in the light of good reason. So, it being late on a Sunday afternoon, we had to quit work for another week—but oh! What a suspenseful week it was for me!

On the following weekend we swept and cleaned and brushed, getting the rock house pattern ready for its photograph, and ready to be drawn on a piece of graph paper, rock for rock, if possible. Phil didn’t go with me on this particular weekend, and a beautiful weekend it was. The sky was cloudless, and a mild, radiant morning surrounded us. As was usual in the Keowee valley, the birds were singing, with the whip-poor-will the most predominant on this morning. Autumn was in the air, and a hint of chill was present when I had put in my presence at the dig that morning.

To my surprise, on the next weekend my older son, Mark, and his girlfriend, Diane, agreed to go with me. Diane’s work was all cut out for her, for we put her to drawing the rocks. She worked diligently, and before too long, she had accomplished the job.

Oh! I made an error! Philip did go with us on this particular weekend. How could I forget? For on this weekend he made one of the most spectacular discoveries of the entire excavation. As soon as Diane had completed the drawing, we hurried to begin removing the thrown-in rock in the “cellar.” Huge rocks, many weighing 50 pounds or more, and hundreds and hundreds of them to move! We began in the northwest corner of the house near the west chimney foundation. We hauled the rock with large wheelbarrows, dumping them near the road. I pulled rock, while the others passed them on, and still others hauled. After we had made a sizeable dent in this corner, having a hole some 2 or 3 feet deep, I saw Philip coming back from the rock-dump near the road.
We were all alternating tasks to keep from wearing out muscles doing the same repetitive jobs, and Phil's turn at dumping rocks had just come up. This was his first trip to the rock dump. He returned with a large rock in his arms and a very peculiar expression on his face. He held out the rock—and engraved on it was the date 1761, and below this, very faintly, was what appeared to be an initial (H.S.) and another date, 1770.

Well, needless to say, all work ceased immediately, while we all gathered around to marvel at this absolute corroboration of the date of the site. Phil was justly proud of his find, and we were proud of his sharp eye in spotting it among the big pile of rock which had already accumulated on the roadside. The chances of it being spotted, we figured, were about one in a million, since there were so many rocks, so many sides, and the sun just right to side-light the carving on it. Truly miraculous, and so we went back to work with high hopes of finding another engraved rock. As it turned out, this was the only one. Within the hour after its discovery, it had been photographed and stored away to prevent accidental damage to it.
Chapter III

It was now time to begin work in dead earnest on the fort, for winter was approaching when the ground would be wet or frozen, and the chill northerly breezes would be swooping down the valley from the mountains. One of the largest crews ever to work on the fort, including a number of students from the University of South Carolina, began the tremendous task of clearing the rocks from the cellar where the dated rock was found. This was hard, back-breaking work, and my hands grew calloused and my bones ached. For four consecutive weekends we labored, until finally most of the rock was out. There remained in the bottom of the cellar, however, much dirt which had accumulated between the rocks and which we had simply let fall to the bottom of the cellar.

The next Saturday, I arose in Madison, Georgia, some 120 odd miles away from the dig to the south, and found the skies dark with night and with rain clouds. The feel of rain was in the air, and a wintry chill. No rain, winter, or a team of horses could have kept me from going to the fort that morning. When I arrived there, the rain was coming down, the site was muddy, the skies were dark, and I was all alone in the valley.

The sad feeling that we couldn’t work came upon me; but still I sat. Imperceptibly, at first, the rain slackened, and then, soon thereafter, quit altogether—but only, I found out shortly, to renew its drenching the valley with renewed vigor.

During the lull, John’s old battered truck pulled up behind me, and with him was Don Robertson. They jumped out and began to nail together two long poles. Then they brought out a roll of plastic. Well—it was obvious that we were going to cover the cellar.
I pitched in, and soon it was done. We place a sifting screen at each end of the cellar, stretched the pole between them covered the whole with plastic, like a tent, and weighted each end down with a rock. This altogether took about 15 minutes, and we finished none too soon. The heavens opened up. It came down in torrents. But would you believe it? After stopping the first few inevitable leaks in our “tent,” we were “dry”? The soil at the fort was very absorbent, and a tremendous amount of water was required to make real slippery mud; the cellar had not yet reached that state, so, while rain came down in sheets, beating itself against our plastic tent, we shoveled dirt from the cellar out the end of the tent. After several hours, it was piled so deep we could move no more. John said, “Enough of this madness”—and we went home.

Another weekend or so was required to clean up the cellar for its official photograph. We trowelled down the bottom, removing in the process nails, parts of flintlock muskets, and a large broken Indian pot of clay. A large sledgehammer turned up, but this was left in situ for several days, and someone stole it. It was obvious to us that the house had burned, for the charred remains of the sills lay ever so delicately in the soil. They crumbled at a touch. We determined, however, that the sills were fixed north and south, which would make the floor laid east and west. We knew from history that William Bartram had come through the Keowee valley in 1775 and had stopped at this spot. Bartram said that the old fort no longer bore the marks of a fort but was a trading post—a “factory,” according to early frontier usage.

There is no way of knowing whether or not the house for this cellar was built of stone or wood. I suspect that it was part stone and mostly wood. This house was placed in the fort just inside the gate on the right side of the entrance path.
After the house, we expected that the further work on the site would be anticlimactic—but how can the prospect of digging in the beautiful historic Keowee valley be anything but exalting to the soul? I felt that by this time I was becoming a skilled field archaeologist, though in truth I was a long way from it. Still I had acquired many of the skills for excavation, and the joy of working in my own South Carolina helped to make me forget that all this was doomed to a watery destruction.

We proceeded with the slow, drudging, but necessary process of removing about six or seven inches of dirt from the unexcavated portion of the site. We used large green wheelbarrows to haul this dirt to the dump pile. When I first started to work there I would occasionally drop a barrow of dirt; but later, as my muscles became more used to the hard work, I easily carried large loads, never dropping one.

The long days of summer had shortened, and the leaves had turned and were falling. It was now 199 years since Fort Prince George was abandoned by the British troops. We knew that by the 200th anniversary it would be many feet deep under water. For that reason, there was no question but that we would work all winter. We had a lot to do. Only half the fort had been excavated, and still no definite house patterns had emerged from the various and scattered post molds which we had found.

Along about this time, I went over the site with my metal detector. Near the well, I came upon an especially strong sounding. It sat there under the ground—whatever it was - for many weekends. Finally, I could stand it no longer, and I asked John if I could dig up whatever it was. “O, sure, go ahead!” he said. Well, I first pinpointed it exactly and started digging. “Pot-holing,” I’m afraid (since this is a derogatory term applied by archaeologists to people who despoil a site by aimless digging). I found nothing. But
when I passed the “business end” of my metal detector over the spot there was not one bit of doubt that my mysterious treasure was still there. John had by now become interested, and he forthwith took trowel in hand and proceeded to begin excavating my “pot hole” in earnest. Everybody gathered around, and wonderment increased. What could it be? Even John, the emotionless archaeologist, was becoming perplexed. At long last there was the scrape of metal on metal. Carefully, with the precision of one doing open-heart surgery, John peeled away the surrounding dirt, and there it was.

But what was it? No one knew. There were seven or eight hand-forged bars of iron laid parallel to each other, about 3/8 inch apart. The end of each bar was flattened and a hole was through each end. Cameras clicked, even though by now the sun was quite low. Carefully we measured and recorded the dimensions of the bars. We then determined to remove the entire group of bars as one unit. Obtaining a piece of tin, we sawed back and forth beneath them until, by sheer good luck, we got the whole thing up without moving a bar. Ever so carefully two men carried the bars (only about a foot long) to the Few House, which was the field lab and which stood 100 yards from the fort.

Funny thing, though. There was something under the bars. It was a ring of metal about 6 inches in diameter with a flat spine sticking out from it. It was even more mysterious than the bars, and we, for lack of a more meaningful name, dubbed it the “bomb sight.” Months later, believe it or not, we found out what these things were. I think I’ll wait awhile before telling you!
Chapter IV

As I have said, there was an abandoned house 100 yards from the Fort site known as the Few House. The University of South Carolina had taken it over, and it was used both as sleeping quarters and as a field laboratory. Students (males) from the University used it on weekends when they were up digging. In the front yard of the place there was a small “house” trailer, where Don Robertson and his wife lived before moving up the road about a mile or so to the Stewart House. This little house trailer was to become my temporary home for a number of weekends during the winter of 1967-1968.

In it was a gas stove, a bunk, couch, kitchen table running water, bathroom, electric lights—all the comforts of home. My first use of it was for one of those long weekends which I stole from home—Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.

After the finding and uncovering of the cellar, and the iron bars near the well, the work at the Fort devolved into the really tiresome (physically only!) work of removing the remaining portion of the plow zone from the rest of the Fort. We simply had to make sense of the many post molds which has turned up! Of course, there were huge piles of bone from animals which had been used for food. And there were those delightful moments when the shovel unearthed relics of that long-ago time, such as buttons, buckles, nails, pieces of glass, etc. One that first weekend spent in the trailer, I came to ultimate grips with the mystery and the beautiful sounds of the Keowee Valley at night.

Work had ended for the day that autumn Friday, and the air had been warm that day, but by night, a chill had stolen like a mist into the valley.
I was alone. John had gone to Six Mile, where he and his wife Joan lived; Don had gone to his home up the valley a-ways, and the University boys had not yet arrived. Just me, the Keowee River, and the thousands of ghosts of soldiers, Indians, and pioneers who peopled the broad, flat bottomlands. There was the never-ceasing burble of the waters at the ford, and the night sounds of invisible population of crickets and frogs. And there was the sad knowledge that this valley of life was even at that moment dying. I worked harder than ever the following two days.

Slowly, we removed the plow zone; first from the western half of the Fort and now, as autumn was giving way to winter, the eastern half. One day in November of 1967, I drove up, knowing that our work would be cold and hard. Having stocked up on food (pork and beans, canned soup, Vienna sausages, bread, jelly, coffee, etc.) I unloaded everything into the trailer—including bedroll and blankets. The cold rolled into the valley as the sun went down; the gas heater in the trailer struggled to keep me warm, and I snuggled down into my sleeping bag.

When I awoke the next morning, the sun was still sleeping. I shivered a bit, and hurriedly dressed, putting on my heavy shoes and coat. My wool knit cap I pulled down over my reddening ears. As I stepped outside the first traces of dawn were visible over the hills to the east. All was complete silence; there was no bird, no frog, not even a noisy ghost—just the complete silence of a frozen morning. Jack Frost had come in the night, for the ground was spewed up and crunched under each step.

First, I got a wheelbarrow, and then I went to the abandoned corncrib, which still had piles of corn shucks and cobs in it. I loaded the wheelbarrow with these old shucks, then I got a 20-gallon can from the storeroom; finally, I attacked the remnants of an old
building, getting fire-sized wood. I rolled the whole mess down to the site, and there, in
the middle of the Fort, I built a roaring fire inside that can. Then I went to make my
breakfast.

When John and Don arrived, I had the fire blazing high. We set to work, then, on
the frozen ground with our shovels. Happily, the freeze was not too hard—and so we
were able to peel off the frozen top of the ground and get to the unfrozen part beneath.
You see, archaeologists do not normally work in the winter for this very reason: bad
weather, rain, snow, frozen ground, and chill breezes all combine to make digging very
difficult at times. Besides this, the spewing up of the ground on a cold night can
completely ruin a previous day’s very careful work.

This particular morning was typical of many such mornings I experienced there at
the dig that winter. On some occasions, though, it was not the frost I had to contend with
but rain. I remember one night in particular when I awoke to hear the rain beating its
primeval rhythm on the tin roof of the trailer. Most often, however, this posed no real
problem to the digging, for the soil was very porous, and the sandy loam would absorb a
tremendous amount of water before getting too muddy to dig. The biggest problem about
the frost was when the sun came out and the surface ice began to melt. If we had not had
time to scoop the layer of ice off with our shovels, the melting frost turned the top inch of
dirt into a greasy mess. We very soon learned to use plastic to cover the area we planned
to work on the following day; for the frost did not arise under the plastic. But as they say
about postmen, the same could have been said about us. We were determined that the
secrets of Fort Prince George should be discovered before The Day.
Chapter V

As November wore on, and as the weather became more disagreeable, we redoubled our efforts. Now, November 17, 1967, was my twenty-second wedding anniversary. I had always celebrated this anniversary with my dear wife Ruth, and this year purported to be no different, until I discovered that my anniversary came on a Saturday. Well this placed me in a quandary—but only for a short while.

There would be other anniversaries, but no more opportunities to salvage the knowledge of this old fort. Consequently I went to the dig on my wedding anniversary. At the time of this writing, some two years later, my good wife is beginning to forgive me, I think. Of course, I spent the whole weekend working, you see.

December came, and with it, thoughts of Christmas. And other thoughts, too. In my job at the University of Georgia, I got a Christmas holiday just as the students do—and I had already planned how to spend it. December of this year was warmer and sunnier than many I remember, and we accomplished much in the weekend immediately before Christmas. We all took Christmas Day off to be with our families, of course. But on December 26, we began work in earnest, and I began the last week of my Christmas vacation. I literally moved into the trailer at the Few House, living there for nearly the whole week. Some of the students from the University of South Carolina came up to work that week; the boys lived in the old Few House, and the girls lived in the house with Don Robertson and his family, about a mile or so up the valley.

The Christmas vacation saw us toiling with wheelbarrows, but for me it was a labor of love. On one occasion during this week a newspaper woman visited us, and
shortly a piece about the dig came out in the *Greenville News*. As a matter of fact, there was a good deal of newspaper publicity about the diggings there, and about the valley in general. Of course, most of the county residents knew something was going on there, although many of them didn’t know exactly what. On the warm, sunny Sundays the site would be overrun with visitors. It got so bad that much of our delicate work was being ruined by innocent sightseers. As a result, John and Don put up a stout barbed-wired fence around the fort site. This only discouraged the more timid of the visitors, however.

Most people haven’t the foggiest notion of what archaeologists seek. I feel that a majority of the visitors we had thought we were hunting for intrinsically valuable artifacts, such as silver or gold items—or even money or bullion. When we would patiently explain to them that we were seeking primarily stains in the earth where posts had rotted out, they just grunted or said, “Oh!” The first question 90 percent of the sightseers asked was, “Have you found anything of value?” And our stock comeback was—“Yes, we found the *fort*!” One lady drove up one day in a big, fine automobile and wanted to know who the paleontologist was on the job. When we patiently explained that we had no need of a paleontologist, she looked a bit perplexed and in a few minutes drove on. Then, of course, we had visitors who insisted that we were wasting our time digging all day long—that this old corn field didn’t really mean anything, and anyway, we couldn’t find anything _worth_ anything. And of course there were skeptics who said that we were digging in the wrong place; that if we wanted to find the fort we’d have to dig somewhere else. There were the secretive informants who knew where gold was buried, and would we help them get it? And then there were the furtive visitors who came to the dig when no one was there. **A fine Colonial sledgehammer _in situ_ in the**
cellar was stolen; a trash pit in the northwest bastion was potted; the fine sectioning job I did on the gun mount in the southwest bastion was vandalized by a stake-wielding clod of unknown vintage.

For the most part, however, people were just curious. I oftentimes found myself having a sort of monkey-in-the-zoo feeling when, on Sunday afternoons, droves of people would stop by to watch us work.
Soon the warm December vacation period was over, and the full-time work at the fort had to come to a halt. I had to get back to the University, and the student diggers had to go back to school. As the warm December ended January of 1968 rolled in on the wind whistling down the valley. The weather turned cold, the rains came, the winds blew, and for the first time, we had to curtail work at the fort. John called a halt for all of January. How miserable I was, knowing that soon the valley would be flooded, and we had yet so much to do! But I gritted my teeth and tried to divert myself into historical research about Fort Prince George. John had decided to do his doctoral dissertation on the history and excavations of the fort, and, of course, I wanted to know all there was to know about the place.

Eventually, we did start back to work sometime in early February, I think. About this time I decided I had better get myself a complete set of dimensions of the place. Using my 100-foot tape, an ice pick, and pen and paper, I set to work. I measured every conceivable thing about the fort—anything to help me make a scale drawing of the place when it was all over. I even measured the distance to the river and at other points so I would be able to pinpoint it on aerial maps of the area. One of the discoveries I had made during the enforced vacation from digging was what that rough band of iron with the spine sticking out from it was—the thing we found under the iron bars near the well. It was used in a wagon hub as a bearing, and the spine on it kept it turning. And the iron bars? That’s another story—which I’ll tell about later!
All the while, we were still uncovering post molds, but as yet they made no sense. We found a chimney foundation near the north curtain (or north wall) of the fort. We found a large feature in the northeast corner of the fort, and I for one was sure this feature would, when dug out, prove to be the graves of at least half of the 14 Indians massacred there.\(^1\) You see, on February 16, 1760, a little drama took place here that was to play an important part in the course of America’s history. On that date, Oconostota, the Great Warrior of the Cherokees, set about 25 or 30 Indians on the east side of the river, at the ford which was located just to the south of the fort entrance. He then called to Lieutenant Coytmore, commander of the fort, that he wanted to talk with him. Coytmore with three others came to the river, and, after a little talk, Oconostota gave a signal to the waiting Indians, who blasted away at the Englishmen, mortally wounding Coytmore, who died about 10 days later. The soldiers inside the fort then attacked 14 Indian hostages who were being held at the instigation of Governor Lyttleton. All 14 Indians—and one white man—were killed. Where did they bury these Indians? We didn’t know, and history left this information from its pages. Anyhow, all these doings led directly to the Cherokee Wars of 1760-61, during which the South Carolina frontiers were ravished by the Cherokees. Many South Carolinians who later became famous fought in these battles, including Andrew Pickens, Robert Anderson, Francis Marion, Sumter, Moultrie, and others.

In addition to the 14 hostages, there were two white men to bury: Coytmore, the commander, and the soldier who had been killed by the hostages when he went to them after the ambush.

\(^1\) No, it wasn’t a grave but apparently the remains of an early powder magazine. Eight of the original 22 hostages had either escaped or died, leaving 14.
The exact sequence of events and discoveries in the excavations become somewhat dim to me now. Those last four months were very toilsome, and so much had to be done that my mind simply didn’t catalog the sequences exactly. During all of February, we worked at excavating the entire remaining surface area of the fort. A multitude of post molds were apparent, and some were beginning to make a little sense. The northwest bastion was perfectly preserved in outline, while the other three were eroded away in varying degrees, although they, too, were discernable. In this bastion, as in all of them, there was a large post mold near the center which had held a 12 inch oak log; spaced around this in a square were four smaller post molds, these being supports for a platform around the center post. This 12 inch post and the platform was the cannon mount used to support the swivel gun to shoot over the stockade wall.

As the weeks rolled by the patterns of a building at the north curtain wall became evident. There was a chimney foundation—which I had first found months before with a steel probe. The large post excavations, with their rotted out posts, formed a large rectangle with this end of the chimney at the east end of the building. Since we had found pot-hooks, broken dishes, bits of bone, etc., in this area, we dubbed this building the “mess hall.” Other similar patterns were emerging.

One beautiful Saturday morning which I shall never forget, John and I, in a brilliant flash of insight and inspiration, identified the “west barracks” and a small house on the left of the entrance gate. On a similarly beautiful day early in March (1968), I arrived at the fort to find John and Don already there. John, looking for all the world as if he had swallowed a canary, called me over to a large black plastic sheet stretched over a piece of ground in the southwest bastion. As we flipped back the sheet, there was a
human skeleton in his grave. I was overjoyed! We had felt all along that there must have
been burials inside the fort. He had been a large fellow, for even after 200 years his
skeleton was still six feet long or maybe even a bit more. His hands were neatly folded
over his lower abdomen; he was on his back, stretched out in best funeral fashion. The
grave was just a bit too short, and his toes were rather “pushed in” to fit, it seemed.

Who was it? And why was he buried here in the very entrance walk to the
southwest bastion? Was he Indian or Caucasian? Except for the last question, all such
queries must forever remain without a factual answer unless some long-lost journal
turned up to shed light on the subject. John thought he might be one of the Indians which
were killed on February 16, 1760. I disagreed, and to this day disagree with his
conjecture. I personally believe this was one of two people: either a soldier whom the
hostages held on that fateful February 16 or Lieutenant Coytmore, the ambushed
commander himself.

Why? My reasons are not scientific—more of a Sherlock Holmes nature. The
corpse was laid out too neatly. His grave was too expertly dug, with all straight sides and
square corners; his teeth were too perfect; and what better place to hide a corpse’s scalp
and body from an enemy who might at any moment overrun the fort?

There were no grave goods. Not even a button. My conclusion? It is obvious
that either he was buried naked, or with a blanket around him. I believe the latter to be
the case. Coytmore was wounded on February 16, but he didn’t die until February 25 (as
I write this, 210 years later to the day). He lay in bed during that time. The fort was
under siege, and when he died there was doubtless no opportunity for funeral niceties. Of
course, there is also the possibility that the man in the grave was that of a soldier who
was killed as he stood in the northeast bastion. This occurred on the day Coytmore died. He was shot from the hill which was just to the west of the fort on the Oconee County side of the river. (This hill is not covered with water, and remains accessible.) No leaden musket ball of death was found in the grave, however.

There were a number of other grave sized “holes” (features of former holes) in the same bastion with the skeleton. When we excavated them, however, they were empty, with the exception of one clasp knife which I found in one of them. John felt that perhaps they contained some of the bodies of the massacred hostages. Again, I disagreed. The thesis of John’s that the Indians had been dug up and reburied in happier times simply didn’t take into account the fact that you can’t dig up corpses from a grave without mutilating the original hole (unless you are an archaeologist!). These holes were perfectly straight and square, with no evidence of re-digging. That they were of a size to accommodate a grown man I can attest. I crawled into one of them and stretched out. Sure enough, I fit nicely. No answer can be truthfully made to these “empty graves,” but I think it must be that they were dug for graves and then not used.
Chapter VII

The week after I first saw the skeleton in the southeast bastion, I returned, as usual, to the site of Fort Prince George. Though spring had come, it was in name only. Upon my arrival at the fort, Don Robertson already had my work cut out for me. The first thing he did was call me over to a small space between the rock cellar and the palisade, which was very near the gate. There, where I had not noticed it before, was a white ring about nine inches in diameter in the soil. And there, again, was the discolored soil of another ancient hole, and this one, too, was grave-sized.

The white ring was the cross section of the rear portion of a human cranium. The shovel and plow had claimed the rest of it. They had not excavated this one but had waited for me, for both Don and John knew I wanted to excavate a burial.

With my most delicate tools, I began work. Slowly, I scraped the soil away from the yellowish, crumbling bones which soon appeared. Ever so carefully, as if I were doing brain surgery, I labored at my task. But then, another problem arose. In spite of being past the first day in spring, the sky was overcast and the temperature was, I think in the 30s, and the wind began to whistle down the valley from the north.

Work in a stationery position became impossible. Fingers became numb, the eyes watered, and the toes froze. Something had to be done, and we set out about doing it. We erected a makeshift frame of wood on the south edge of the rock cellar, and hung thereon all the plastic sheeting we could get. Then we returned to the dead. Though we were still cold, the chilling wind was deflected sufficiently to permit us to continue our work.
In a few hours it was done, and we beheld our work. What a mess! Oh, our work was neat enough. But it was obvious that in this grave was not one, but three persons. They were not placed neatly and carefully in the place of rest, either, as has been our friend in the bastion. They had simply been tossed in, one of top of the other. It took a little doing to figure out which legs went with which, but we reached, I think, a satisfactory conclusion.

The bodies were in very bad condition with nothing remaining except the long bones of the arms and legs, and even then they were somewhat fragmented.

No heads were present; a large rock from the stone cellar (or house) had in the past fallen and landed exactly in the spot two of the heads would have been. We could only conjecture who these three people were. I felt that the obvious irreverence with which they were placed in the grave indicated that they must have been Indians. But why was it so close to the gate? We had no answer. It seems quite possible, however, that these were three of those hostage Indians whom the soldiers killed that February 16 in 1760. We never did find any other human burials in the fort, though we unearthed bones by the bushel. These were food bones, though: the remains of cattle, swine, and even bear, as well as deer. Practically all of the food bone had been neatly buried in round pits; and in each bastion was a small pit of bone and other trash. I figured that the soldiers on guard duty must have buried their garbage there.

April came at last, and with it came the unforgettable warm, sunny days, and the singing of the birds and green life sprouting again in what the bulldozers had left of the vegetation.
By this time, all the trees had been removed from the river’s banks, and the hills were scalped of their woods, as if some gigantic, angry Indian had been at work. In spite of this, the Keowee valley in the springtime is—or was—an unforgettable sight. The wild strawberries which Bartram had mentioned burst forth in abundance, and the April flowers opened their eyes.

But there was a heaviness within me, too, for I knew that the hour was drawing close when this historic spot would be blotted out for ages to come.
Chapter VIII

Only one part of the fort remained to be deciphered—that portion near the east curtain. We could see many post molds, but we were having poor luck in deciding just where our building should end. This “east barracks” as I called it for lack of a better name, directly faced the west barracks on the west side of the fort. Since the west barracks was about 52 feet long, we figured that any proper British soldier or officer would surely make the fort symmetrical. But the terminating post molds just weren’t there. They kept going north, in a rather jumbled fashion.

In a blinding flash of inspiration, Don said that the barracks must have stretched the entire length of the fort! That was it! We found, after some checking and measuring, that this was truly the case. While I don’t believe that the barracks-proper was that long, the building surely was. Perhaps part of it was storage or served some other function. History records, however, that this small fort held a garrison of 100 men. Perhaps this long building had been their home.

This was apparently it. There were no more buildings to be discovered. We had now uncovered most of the palisade trench around the fort, had found the entrance gate, the ditch around the fort, the cannon mounts and platforms in each of the four bastions. We had found a rock-lined cellar and the post molds of three other buildings. There was a beautiful rock-lined well and numerous burial places of food bone, of cow, deer, bear, and other animals. And, too, there were two human graves—one in the southwest bastion and about 5 feet south of the rock cellar. The fort, then, appeared something like this:
The bastion angles were more or less symmetrical, & not at odd angles as I have sketched them here.

There was a strange, inexplicable pit which we excavated in the northeast corner of the fort. Since three of the posts for the long “east barracks” went down through the fill for the pit, it is obvious that the pit was dug before the building was erected. Also,
growing into this pit was the famous so-called English mulberry tree which stood for many years in the field of corn, and which some tradition had as having been a scion of one that originally grew inside the fort. It is certain that this tree did not grow inside the fort, since it was hard against the east palisade wall and growing almost out of the long building. But the strange pit? We never did find out. (Later: actually, we did find out. The dark material was old gunpowder, and this was obviously an old powder magazine). There were several squares of charcoal-like material arranged quasi-geometrically in the north end and faint, parallel wood-appearing earth stains leading into them from the other end of the pit, something like the sketch here.
My eldest son, Mark, and girlfriend had worked with our crew from time to time. Diane, being an art major, was drafted to do the drawings of the features, post molds, barracks, and other like-chores. Mark, I could see, was succumbing to the lure of archaeology, of the beautiful Keowee and the valley and its history. I recall one warm spring day in 1968 when he went out into the cold Keowee at the ford. He brought back some water-rounded rocks which I will keep. Mark worked very diligently with me in uncovering the pit shown before this paragraph.

We were almost certain of finding more burials here. Of course, we didn’t. Out of pure sentimentality, I brought home several boxes of dirt-fill from this pit. I still have them, as of this writing. If ever I can find time to make a model of the fort, this dirt will be the floor of the fort.2

Refer again to the earlier drawing of the fort. You will notice two parallel dashed lines running from near the well directly south and out the gate. This sophisticated feature of the fort we almost missed, for all of us had assumed that the mottled “feature dirt,” which we had known about for some time, was just a ditch or perhaps a pathway.

At the end of Chapter III in this little story, I mentioned some iron bars which we had found. Well, this “ditch” terminated near the well at the place where the iron bars were! Don asked John for permission to “pot” the ditch just to see what turned up. After awhile, as I watched, nails began showing up, and a neat, flat, 8 inch thick layer of white sand appeared. I called to John, who was talking to a visitor, and told him to come and look. For it was obvious what this thing was. It had been a wooden pipe, nailed together with the hand-wrought nails of the period. And it had obviously been a drainage pipe, for

2 Indeed, M.W. did build a scale-model of Fort Prince George, and it is now in the Keowee-Toxaway Museum on SC 11 in Pickens County.
it was silted up with layers of sand and terminated at the iron bars near the well and obviously a “storm drain” type of grating. The pipe was 7 inches by 8 inches, though the dimensions varied very slightly along the way. It ran outside the gate and emptied into the ditch outside the fort.

This, then, except for the last day, is the story of the fort. But for the last day of its life, I must reserve the final chapter of this story.
Saturday, May 11, 1968, was to be the last full day of existence for the site of Fort Prince George. For some number of days prior to this time, Duke Power Company had closed the coffer dam. The rains had been extensive, and the impounded waters rose rapidly. On the afternoon of Friday, May 10, 1968, I arrived at the fort, ready to do any last-minute chores and to photograph some features. On this day, the bones of dead gentlemen in the graves were removed, being stored unceremoniously in mayonnaise boxes which contained sawdust for packing. Numbers of small, meaningless features were dug out. John had gone to an archaeology meeting somewhere out west, so Don, I, and two newly hired fellows from up north somewhere constituted the crew.

Already, the river was out of its bed at the old ford, just south of the fort. I stood in fascinated fear and sorrow, watching the little fingers of water gradually reaching out into the bottomland, as if it were some giant, relentless amoeba flowing its aimless way. Time and time again, I climbed the large bank of earth just south of the fort to look at the progress of the flooding. (This 20 foot tall pile of earth had been pushed up by the bulldozers in 1967 when they had scraped the upper plow zone from the site.)

I made numerous last-minute measurements; re-took some photographs, and dug at features. Our nice, clear, orderly archaeological excavation was now a shambles. The rocks from the cellar had been pulled out and hauled off for storage. Back-hoes had dug long, deep trenches at various places through the dry moat; plans and plastic were scattered helter-skelter. An examination of the cross-section of the palisade wall and moat, as dug by the back-hoe (a kind of mechanical hand-and-arm used for digging deep,
narrow trenches), proved most interesting. The moat on the south side, even though dug as a dry ditch, had many thousands of water-laid pebbles in it. And just off the point of the northwest bastion at a depth of some 7 feet I found a piece of worked flint. A cross-section of the palisade ditch, as well as excavation of the post molds showed that in every case the post was put in the hold or ditch and “walked up” against the side and left there.

The posts in the palisade ditch were not everywhere apparent, but history records that they were made of “lightwood”—probably pine—and therefore perhaps did not leave as durable an earth stain as the oak used for building posts.

After the rocks had been removed from the cellar, Don and I scratched around at the (west) chimney foundation and came up with a rotted pewter pot and a fine iron “trade” tomahawk. Also after the cellar was torn up, I found stuck between some of the wall-stones a long slate point of Indian design. [Late Archaic period--ed.]
We made a desperate last-minute effort to deepen the well by removing the large rocks from its bottom. A large, hand-operated winch and buckets were employed. Mark, my son, went down in the well and worked diligently in helping to get the mud and rocks out. We screened every ounce of mud and recovered many fragments of stone-ware, china, and rum-bottle glass. But the water was at least coming in faster that we could remove it—and in addition, there was the ever-present danger that the fine rock lining would come down. So we had to abandon the well.

On the last day—May 11—I spent almost the entire time excavating the drain pipe and ditch that ran from the well to the south moat. On that day, an aerial photograph was made of the site, and in it I can be seen near the gate digging away at the drain ditch.

Also, I removed a small section of the puzzling charcoal squares from the pit near the northeast bastion.

About noon on the 10th of May, the wreckers came to tear down old Nimmons Bridge, which had withstood the ravages of time and flood since its construction in 1903. First, they removed the ramp planks on the east end of the bridge, and then progressively removed the entire bridge floor, working toward the Oconee County side. After this, large derricks and cranes came, and with them their long steel cables. An effort was made to pull the iron framework from the stone foundations on to the bank on the Pickens side; however, the bridge, as I watched, fell off the rock supports and landed with a great splash on the north side of its abutments. There then began a long tug-of-war between the derricks on the one hand and old iron bridge on the other. What a tenacious old bridge it was! After many hours of being pulled out of the river bed in bits and pieces, it finally gave up the ghost and crawled out on the field beside the river. But even now,
beneath the waters of Lake Keowee, a part of this bridge lives on, for the stone pillars and abutments were left in place.

On Friday afternoon (May 10th), after supper and after work, Don, Jen (his wife), and I took a quart of my wine, some glasses, and went down to the site of the fort. As the sun sank behind the hills we sat in the center of Fort Prince George and drank toasts to the fort, Coytmore (the ambushed commander), Oconostota, Attakullakulla, etc., and even, I think, to King George II—but I’m not sure.

There was, then, a rite to perform. Of course, being caressed with rain many times during our dig, it had only just finished a downpour. But we had to perform this rite—one which I originated. I had prepared a time capsule to be planted in the fort upon its drowning. And the time had come. The capsule consisted of a box made of 1/8 inch brass, with all sides soldered on, and epoxy cement over the solder. It was about a 4 inch cube, and inside was a thick lead plate and a thinner stainless steel plate with the following inscriptions stamped deeply thereon:

This marks the site of
Fort Prince George, built
by the British in 1753.
Excavated in 1968 by John D.
Combes, Don Robertson, and
Marshall Williams.

Inside the box was a plastic bag, heat-sealed, with these plates, a piece of paper with the same inscription and a 1968 nickel and 1968 penny. Where did we put it? Where, perhaps a thousand years from now, archaeologists might find it. We never did have time to excavate the southeast bastion. But squarely inside the large excavation for the cannon mount in this bastion was buried a very large rock. Just on the south side of this rock, right against it, we dug a hole perhaps 18 inches or two feet deep, and there we
planted our brass time capsule. And there it remains until such a time, hopefully, when Lake Keowee will be drained and the beautiful Keowee River is allowed once more to flow as had done for thousands of years. Then perhaps some enterprising archaeologist will find the fort site again—and my time capsule.

As I have said, my last day at the site was spent mostly in work on the drain ditch. I worked all day long with an ache in my heart. And then, late in the afternoon of Saturday, May 11, the rains began again. Don and I each got a large rock from the mouth of the well and I took a number of smaller ones from the cellar, hoping to use them in a model of the fort.

Late, late in the afternoon we got ready to quit work for the last time here, I dawdled around, watching the water creeping toward the fort, where we had labored mightily for the past 10 months. Don went to his home up the river, and I was left alone in the valley.

No other human being was near, and the dark sky and gray mist and rain were fast descending upon the valley, and my last moments with the fort, its ghosts, and its history, was at hand. I stood in the center of the fort for a few moments, gave my best military salute, and then turned and drove off without a backward glance. The Great Adventure was over.

The next day—Sunday, May 12, 1968—Mother’s Day, it was—I received a phone call from Jen, Don’s wife.

“Well, it’s gone,” she said.

And so at noon of May 12, 1968, the Keowee finally conquered Fort Prince George.