

Coquinas Of Coastal North Carolina: A Preliminary Assessment

by John J. Mintz

Sedgley Abbey

The opening of the lower Cape Fear region to settlers and merchants was largely due to the efforts of proprietary and later royal governor George Burrington. Governor Burrington along with Maurice Moore, and other prominent planters from South Carolina were largely responsible for the development of the colonial port, Brunswick Town which from the time of its founding in 1725 to its abandonment around 1812 was the political, social, and commercial center of the lower Cape Fear settlement. Benefiting their status many of these wealthy planters and merchants built large and fine homes. Among these, was one that was constructed adjacent to a newly completed coastal road that extended from the eastern terminus of the Brunswick ferry into Onslow County. Located south of Wilmington and just northeast of Doctor's Point along present-day Telfair's Creek was built a fine home and plantation in the mid 1700s, possibly by one William Lord. Later named Sedgley Abbey by its then owner, (ca 1780) the Scottish merchant Peter Maxell. Peter Maxwell and his wife Rebecca resided at Sedgley Abbey until December 1801, when they offered their home on the beach for rent and moved into nearby town Wilmington. An advertisement for the plantation appeared in the Wilmington Gazette, December 14, 1801. To Rent For a term of years, as may be agreed on, that fruitful, healthful, and beautiful plantation, near the head of the sound, known by the name Sedgley Abbey, on which there is a commodious and well furnished dwelling house, open to the sea beach by an avenue, and about half a mile from the sound... There is also on the same a good kitchen; smokehouse, barn, stables, and chair house {i.e., carriage house}, with a remarkable peach orchard... Other advertisements soliciting renters appeared in 1802, 1805, and 1806, thereby suggesting that the Maxwell's were not successful in their efforts to obtain renters "for a term of years". After Rebecca and Peter Maxwell's death (1810 and 1812, respectively). The plantation was sold and then resold to local prominent landowners and merchants. As time progressed, the once grand home of Peter Maxwell began to suffer from neglect and multiple owners. By the 1870s the once grand, colonial era plantation, Sedgley Abbey lay in ruins, and by the early 1900s only the cellar was visible (Jackson 1995). In 1896 the noted historian of the lower Cape Fear region James Sprunt described the ruins of Sedgley Abbey: It was said to be the grandest colonial residence of the Cape Fear. It was about the dimension and appearance of the Governor Dudley mansion in Wilmington, and was erected about 170 years ago... by an English gentleman of 13 wealth and refinement... The house was built of coquina, a rock up of marine shells slightly consolidated by natural pressure and infiltrated calcareous matter... The cellar remains having been cut out of solid rock... In 1909 Alfred Waddell in describing the plantation of the lower Cape Fear region stated that according to tradition the house had a tradition of "some pretensions to unusual elegance of structure and equipment ... but there is no record which the tradition may be corroborated" (Wadell 1909:68). Since its fall to ruin in the late 19th century, the site of Sedgley Abbey has been well known to bottle collectors, amateur history buffs, and local antiquarians. Unfortunately, some, in their quest for information and souvenirs excavated large holes in and around the exposed foundations and removed artifacts and blocks the coquina. It was not until 1978 that Mark Wilde-Ramsing, an archaeologist with the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources relocated the cellar ruins during a state sponsored survey of New Hanover County. According to Wilde-Ramsing the cellar had been excavated by the original builders some eight feet (2.4m) into the underlying coquina outcrop. Limited pedestrian investigations of the site in 1992 determined that the foundation measured some 30 feet by 12 feet (9.1-3.6m), with the western elevation measuring some 6 feet (1.8m) below current ground surface. According to Wilde Ramsing (1992) the house site is situated approximately 20 feet east of a dirt road that was reportedly the original road connecting Wilmington to Federal Point. He notes that the site was heavily overgrown and well hidden in dense secondary growth vegetation. Further investigation of the house site in 1995 resulted in the partial exposure of what was though to be the main structure foundations. This subsurface investigation revealed a 35 by 22-foot (10.6 by 6.7-m) coquina block foundation and a 30 by 30 foot area located approximately 60 feet east of the foundation. Wilde-Ramsing (1995) noted that the building foundation was too badly disturbed to warrant additional archaeological research, but that it may retain is significance for architectural studies, he continues... "A full basement structure built of coquina is extremely rare this far north. The area located east of the house site was determined to be a possible outbuilding." Since the inception of this study, two

other uses of coquina have been noted. During the archaeological investigations at Brunswick Town, a Colonial-era river port located on the west bank of the Cape Fear River immediately south of Wilmington three millstones and scattered fragments of a fourth, all possibly manufactured out of coquina were discovered (Fugur6)(south 1967). According to South (1967) the stones were made of fossiliferous limestone and were in an extremely fragile state. These stones are currently curated in Raleigh, North Carolina and have been scheduled to receive an in-depth examination to determine if they are actually manufactured out of coquina. The geographic location suggest that there is, at this time a strong possibility that they may once have been part of the Neuse Formation of Coquina that is present approximately three miles due east of Brunswick Town. According to a local informant (Jim McKee, personal communication, 2000) there is a shoreface retaining wall constructed out of coquina in Southport, North Carolina. This wall is reported to be approximately 20-30 feet in length and 4 feet high. McKee, a long time resident of Southport notes that Coquina blocks measuring approximately four inches in diameter were used to make this wall sometime in the early 1920-1930s. This probable construction date coincides with the mining of the Coquina outcrop at Fort Fisher, located a scant one mile due east. He further states that Hurricane Hazel buried 14 the in wall in 1956 and that Hurricane Fran uncovered and partially destroyed it in 1996. I guess one could say that the ocean giveth and the ocean taketh away.