

**Exploring Mission Life in 18th-Century West Florida:
2011 Excavations at San Joseph de Escambe**

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Abstract

In 2011, University of West Florida terrestrial field school students participated in a third consecutive year of excavations at Mission San Joseph de Escambe, located north of modern Pensacola between 1741 and 1761. Inhabited by Apalachee Indians and a small number of Franciscan friars and married Spanish soldiers, as well as a Spanish cavalry garrison late in the mission's history, the site's pristine archaeological deposits are gradually revealing details about mission life along this northernmost frontier of 18th-century West Florida. Ongoing block excavations have continued to expose a complex assemblage of architectural features separated by both vertical and horizontal stratigraphy, including several overlapping wall-trench structures capped with what seems to be a clay floor, and a large structure believed to be the cavalry barracks. Artifacts ranging from a predominantly Apalachee ceramic assemblage to an assortment of European trade goods continue to refine our understanding of this important site.

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Colonial mission communities have long been recognized by historians and anthropologists as crucibles of dynamic cultural transformation. Missions were not simply the setting for religious conversion, but in fact represented the primary stage on which two cultures—indigenous and colonizing—confronted each other in the context of daily life over the course of many years, decades, and even generations. Out of this long-term process of missionization were forged new cultural identities that were not simply the replacement of the indigenous culture by the colonizing culture, or some piecemeal blend of the two, but which instead manifested new cultural formations that have been variously described as creole or hybrid cultures. These new cultures were forged in the colonial era, and were therefore products of it, uniquely adapted to the turbulent and rapidly-changing circumstances of colonialism (e.g. Cusick 2000; Deagan 1973, 1983, 1996; Ewen 1991, 2000; Gundaker 2000; Lightfoot and Martinez 1995; Loren 2000; Mullins and Paynter 2000; Voss 2005).

Within the context of Spanish colonialism in the New World, missions were generally considered transitional institutions designed to facilitate the assimilation of indigenous groups along the expanding colonial frontier, but which were never intended to become permanent fixtures of the social landscape. The regular clergy who established and administered these missions came from a wide range of religious orders, including Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, Jesuits, and many others, but their role was not meant to substitute permanently for that of the secular clergy, who served as parish priests under the authority of diocesan bishops in the Spanish colonies. In theory, the end result of a mission was the full assimilation of its congregants into Spanish colonial society, after which the mission community would simply become a part of the ordinary governmental and ecclesiastical structure of its particular colonial region.

Along the edges of the Spanish empire, however, where frontiers evolved into relatively stable borderland zones abutting the territorial claims of competing European powers, missionization became a protracted affair that never effectively moved beyond the mission stage. One such area was Spanish Florida, which suffered from the twin curse of being a strategic military colony that was never intended to expand into a productive settler colony, and of later becoming a battleground bastion against active English and French colonial expansion from the north and west (Bushnell 1994; Worth 1998a, 1998b; Milanich 1999). During the late 16th and early 17th centuries, the Franciscan missions of Spanish Florida played a pivotal role in the assimilation of dozens of indigenous chiefdoms into an economic support network for the St. Augustine garrison (Worth 1998a: 35-76; n.d.). Even as disease and slave-raiding resulted in the decimation and collapse of this network by the early 18th century, however, the persistence of these mission communities provides an unparalleled opportunity to examine the results of missionization when expanded to a multi-generational scale.

The 18th-century missions of Spanish Florida were small in both number and population. Following the total collapse and withdrawal of the original Florida mission system by 1706, a handful of remaining refugee missions from the Timucua, Mocama, Guale, and Apalachee provinces clustered around St. Augustine, while another small group of surviving Apalachee huddled next to French Mobile and along the Spanish-French border west of Pensacola (Higginbotham 1991: 189-194; Hann 1996: 303-306; Worth 1998b: 147-148; 2008; Harris 1998, 1999, 2003). New refugee missions were added in the years following the 1715 Yamasee War, after which formerly-missionized Apalachee and Yamasee Indians returned to the vicinity of both St. Augustine and Pensacola, also near the new Spanish fort of St. Marks (Hann 1988, 1989, 1996: 306-314; Worth 1998: 149-150). By the late 1730s Florida was home to eight such

refugee missions near St. Augustine, one at Pensacola, and one at St. Marks (Hann 1996: 314-322; Worth 1998: 151-155). Following the 1740 English seige on St. Augustine, the number of missions was consolidated to four at St. Augustine, augmented to two at Pensacola, and one at St. Marks (Montiano 1747; Worth 2008). After 1754, just two mission towns remained in both St. Augustine and Pensacola, and the inhabitants of these four towns comprised the 197 surviving mission Indians to evacuate Florida in 1763 with the Spanish (Güemes y Horcasitas 1754; Gold 1964, 1965, 1969; Worth 2008).

Of the handful of 18th-century refugee missions that have been identified archaeologically, only two have been subjected to more intensive investigations, including Nuestra Señora del Rosario de la Punta south of St. Augustine (White 2002; Boyer 2005), and San Joseph de Escambe north of Pensacola (Worth 2008, 2009; Worth et al. 2011; Worth and Melcher n.d.). This latter mission was first discovered in 2009, and has been the subject of three successive years of archaeological fieldwork by the University of West Florida in Pensacola. The most recent of these field seasons took place during the summer of 2011 as an archaeological field school for undergraduate and graduate students, and the cumulative results of that fieldwork form the basis for the rest of this paper.

Available evidence indicates that Mission San Joseph de Escambe was established in 1741 as a new location for the earlier Apalachee Indian mission established in 1718 at the mouth of the Escambia River under the direction of its chief Juan Marcos Isfani, also known as Juan Marcos Fant (Worth 2008). The earlier mission, Nuestra Señora de la Soledad y San Luís, seems to have been abandoned in the same year that the Spanish established a new warehouse and brick kiln on the mainland away from their exposed presidio on Santa Rosa Island, suggesting that Mission Escambe may have been relocated upriver in order to maintain greater distance from the

new garrison of 8 Spanish soldiers at what would later become presidio San Miguel de Panzacola, under modern downtown Pensacola (Figure 1). The original population of the mission pueblo seems to have been 30 Apalachee residents, many of whom likely were identical to (or descended from) the Apalachee Indians who had been living between 1704 and 1718 either among the Creek Indians to the north, or among the French at Mobile to the west. Regardless of their immediate origins, the Apalachee inhabitants of Escambe were what the Spaniards considered “Old Christians,” since their ancestors had been practicing Catholics living in missions since the 1630s. As a result, a Franciscan missionary was assigned to minister to their religious needs, and the small village undoubtedly included a mission church and convento, or friary, from its beginning in 1741.

Mission Escambe, like its predecessor downriver, was therefore established by Christian Apalachee who voluntarily chose to live within Spanish colonial territory, but just barely so. The missionaries did not come to the Apalachee in 18th-century Florida; instead, the Apalachee came to the missionaries. This fact alone belies their creolized identity. Part of the rationale for this may of course have been the fact that during this period the Spanish actually provided direct rations for the mission Indians who were said to “come and go” from the Pensacola presidios (Childers and Cotter 1998; Clune et al. 2004). Nevertheless, by this time the Apalachee in Escambe clearly saw themselves more as part of the Spanish colonial “Republic of Indians” than as part of the Native American hinterland beyond any European territorial claims (Bushnell 1989, 1994; Worth 1998a). Over and above the missionary presence, they even came to tolerate a resident Spanish military presence after about 1750, when Spanish concerns about increasing interaction and trade between the residents of the two Pensacola missions and English-allied Creek Indians to the north led to the posting of three Spanish soldiers and a squad leader in each

mission, including Mission Escambe (Yarza y Ascona 1750; Roman de Castillo y Lugo 1757a). After the Spanish presidio had been officially moved to the mainland by 1756, and augmented by a new cavalry company, the Escambe garrison was augmented to 15 cavalry soldiers and an officer in early 1760, in part as a result of the threat of hostilities from English-allied Creeks during the French and Indian War (Ullate 1761; Worth 2008). Cramped living conditions for the larger garrison led to the construction of a stockaded compound with a formal barracks and stable at Escambe using convict laborers beginning in June of 1760, but an August 12 hurricane halted the work prior to its completion (Feringan Cortés 1760). The Franciscan friar was temporarily withdrawn, and the garrison was reduced to 8 men and a squad leader until the following February, when it was raised again to a total of 15 men after the murder of several garrisoned soldiers in the Yamasee mission at Punta Rasa (Ullate 1761). Just two months later a band of 28 Creek warriors attacked and destroyed the Escambe mission while only 7 cavalry soldiers were present, two of whom were killed, four captured, and one scalped and left for dead. The Apalachee residents escaped into the night with the help of their friar, and the mission was burned, abandoned, and eventually lost for the next two and a half centuries.

Mission Escambe likely held a population of somewhere between 30 and 50 Apalachee Indians and a single Franciscan missionary for 20 years. Four Spanish soldiers were in residence for 11 years, at least one of whom was married to a local Indian, and a cavalry garrison of between 9 and 16 men was there for just 16 months. Based on these figures, calculating the total number of “person-years” represented by the Escambe occupation, some 91% of the habitation at the site can be attributed to its Apalachee inhabitants, with only 9% reflecting the combined presence of Spanish friars and soldiers living at the mission. Village architecture probably consisted of well under 10 residential structures, and at any given time Escambe also possessed a

single church and convento, and for just the last 10 months of its existence, a newly-built cavalry compound, some or all of which was never completed after the 1760 hurricane. With respect to supplies and food, while Escambe's Apalachee residents received Spanish rations, and its missionaries and soldiers were equipped and fed through presidios Isla de Santa Rosa before 1756 and San Miguel de Panzacola as well, the mission's inhabitants also carried on a lively trade with neighbors near and far, including the nearby residents of the Spanish and French borderlands and Upper Creek Indians who traveled more than 150 miles from the deep interior (Roman de Castilla y Lugo 1761). All these facts indicate that the archaeological record of Mission Escambe would be expected to be complex and multifaceted, bearing traces of people and goods from many different backgrounds.

The research goals of the 2011 field season were to build upon previous archaeological fieldwork to discover, delineate, and identify mission-period structures and activity areas, and in so doing to recover a larger and more clearly contextualized sample of material culture from this multi-ethnic mission community. Given that the site evidences a short-term mission occupation, and is in unplowed, largely pristine condition, we continue to hope that by combining the detailed documentary record with systematically-excavated archaeological evidence, we will increasingly be able to ask and answer questions regarding the nature of daily life at Mission Escambe, and how its various inhabitants negotiated the dynamic colonial world of mid-18th-century western Spanish Florida.

One of the most important questions that can be addressed using data from Escambe is the extent to which Apalachee material culture at that time may have reflected their ancestral identity as well as their individual and community histories, and how or if that Apalachee material culture differed from their contemporary neighbors, both European and Indian, with

whom they interacted (e.g. Johnson 2012). As in previous years (Worth et al. 2011; Worth and Melcher n.d.), the portable material culture of Escambe's residents is heavily dominated by Apalachee influences, particularly as regards household pottery, which is 98-99% Native American and only 1-2% European by count and weight (Figure 2). Decorative styles and ceramic pastes show clear affinities both to the Apalachee homeland, presumably where most of their ancestors lived prior to 1704, and to the Lower Creek territory where they lived from 1704 to 1718, although the predominance of brushed decoration along with incising and red filming gives the assemblage greater visual affinity to Blackmon Phase Creek ceramics than to the predominantly plain San Luis Phase Apalachee wares (Knight and Mistovich 1984; Mistovich and Knight 1986; Scarry 1984, 1985). Some minority decorative styles found at Escambe are clearly reminiscent of more westerly Mississippi Valley cultures, which is also not surprising given the proximity of Taensa Indian settlements to the French-allied Apalachee settlement east of Mobile Bay (Waselkov and Gums 2000: 32-34). Colono wares shaped in European-style vessel forms make up a small but persistent minority of the Apalachee assemblage at Escambe, and their presence on site probably reflects either a preference for European-style table settings among at least some of Escambe's Spanish or Apalachee residents, or local production for sale at the Spanish presidios of Santa Rosa or San Miguel, or both (Melcher 2011). As would be expected, imported European ceramics at Escambe are predominantly Spanish in origin, though French faience and Chinese porcelain are occasionally present as well.

Three adjacent areas of the mission's central core were subjected to block excavations during the 2010 field season, and 2011 investigations centered on the continued exploration of all three of these areas (Figure 3). Area A had previously been found to possess evidence for multiple corncob-filled smudge pits as well as a number of mission-period postmolds, and the

2010 discovery of a brick-filled drainage trench extending diagonally through this area raised the possibility that this might have been a mission-period architectural feature. New excavations in 2011 led to the discovery in deep context within the trench of bricks stamped with the 19th-century “J. Gonzalez” maker’s mark, clarifying the date of this trench as post-mission-period. In addition, further excavations this summer in Area B to the south also revealed that a large pit once thought to be the result of a tree fall was actually the eroded upper portion of a large square well located precisely in-line with the drainage trench running downslope from this location through Area A. Both these features which were once thought to be candidates for mission-period structures have now been demonstrated to post-date the mission occupation at the site by a century or more. 2011 excavations in Area A also resulted in the discovery of additional mission-period features, including posts and a possible wall-trench section, though further investigations will be needed to clarify any structure patterns.

In Area B, 2011 excavations were designed to trace the outlines of a presumed cavalry barracks building associated with a substantial post-on-sill wall trench feature running east-west through the area. By the end of 2010, this wall trench had been found to run for at least 12.5 meters, and based on continued excavations in 2011, the trench is now known to run for at least 19 meters, apparently extending even farther to the east. On the western end, what was once thought to be a corner of the building associated with this trench turned out to be the builder’s trench associated with the 19th-century well described above, and as yet there is no clear evidence as to whether a corner once existed where the well was dug. Nevertheless, multiple excavation units were opened both to the north and south of this wall trench during 2011 in hopes of discovering the opposite wall of the presumed rectangular barracks building, but by the end of the field season, no corresponding wall trench had been found in either direction to a

distance of 6 meters. Given these results, we are now considering the possibility that this wall trench is actually a section of the stockade built at Escambe in 1760 under the direction of royal engineer Phelipe Feringan Cortés. A portion of the stockade built around presidio San Miguel de Panzacola by Feringan Cortés in 1757 (Roman de Castilla y Lugo 1757b) was excavated in downtown Pensacola in 2006, and maps and photographs from that excavation suggests that it is nearly identical in size and configuration to the trench discovered at Escambe (Benchley 2007). Next year, we hope to answer this question definitively.

2011 excavations in Area C were designed to explore and delineate the multiple overlapping wall-trench structures and overlying orange and grey clay cap layers found in previous years here on one of the most elevated areas of the mission. A series of shallow shovel test units were excavated in a cruciform pattern around the block excavations in order to determine the horizontal distribution of the uppermost grey clay cap, and current results suggest that the layer measures at least 7 meters east-west by 15 meters north-south. A thicker but more areally-restricted orange clay layer within this area was also explored using a half-inch diameter coring device, and this layer appears to measure 15 meters east-west by 3 meters north-south, corresponding in angle to the wall trench structures directly below the cap layer. Further excavations will be required in order to clarify the relationship between the underlying wall trench structures and the overlying clay cap layers that filled in and leveled the ground surface above the trenches, and to determine the exact function and date of the clay capping episode.

A 4-meter long trench was also opened in Area C parallel to excavation units in previous years in order to follow the course of three east-west wall trenches found there. Although only two of the three trenches were intersected in this unit, which was located 2.75 meters to the west, a new north-south trench was discovered in this unit with a corner on the south, predating all

other east-west trenches, and capped with the same orange clay cap. Based on three field seasons of work in Area C, one thing is clear: this area of the site was the location of at least four successive rectangular wall-trench structures in association with a considerable amount of residential debris, both Apalachee and Spanish. While the identity of these structures remains unclear, they could represent the successive reconstruction of the Franciscan convento building, or the residence of one or more of the four soldiers garrisoned here for 11 years, or even the home of chief Juan Marcos himself. The presence of the clay cap layers, and the location of this area on one of the highest parts of the site, suggests in any case that this area was likely special, though its precise function over the course of the 20-year occupation at the site may have varied.

Three years of excavations at San Joseph de Escambe have provided considerable data for use in understanding the nature of this multi-ethnic 18th-century mission community. Mission Escambe was not a village of newly-converted Apalachee Indians who were still experiencing the first impact of the confrontation between pristine indigenous vs. foreign colonial cultures. The ancestors of the Apalachee Indians in Escambe had been living in Spanish missions beginning as many as five or six generations earlier, not counting nearly a generation living as exiles among the unconverted Creek Indians, some of whom probably married into the Apalachee community and migrated south into Florida with them. There may also have been a few intermarried Apalachee Indians from the village of French-allied Apalachee along the eastern margin of Mobile Bay, whose immediate ancestors lived after 1704 in exile among the French at Mobile, practicing French-style Catholicism until returning to Spanish territory (Waselkov and Gums 2000; Ivas 2005). Some Yamasee Indian residents of the nearby mission San Antonio de Punta Rasa at Garcon Point may also have intermarried into the Apalachee community (Worth 2008). Finally, Escambe also housed an assortment of Spanish missionaries

and soldiers who were stationed there, at least some of whom married and became long-term residents of the community. This mission was a fully integrated colonial community, a product of a process of creolization that had been going on for more than a century by the time of its establishment. And while in order to understand better the nature and implications of this transformation, we will need to explore and clarify the exact identity of the structures and activity areas we have already begun excavating, we have high hopes that further work at the site will continue to provide meaningful insights into a poorly-understood period in the history of Florida's colonial Spanish missions.

Figure 1: Presidios and Missions around Pensacola Bay, 1740s-1761.

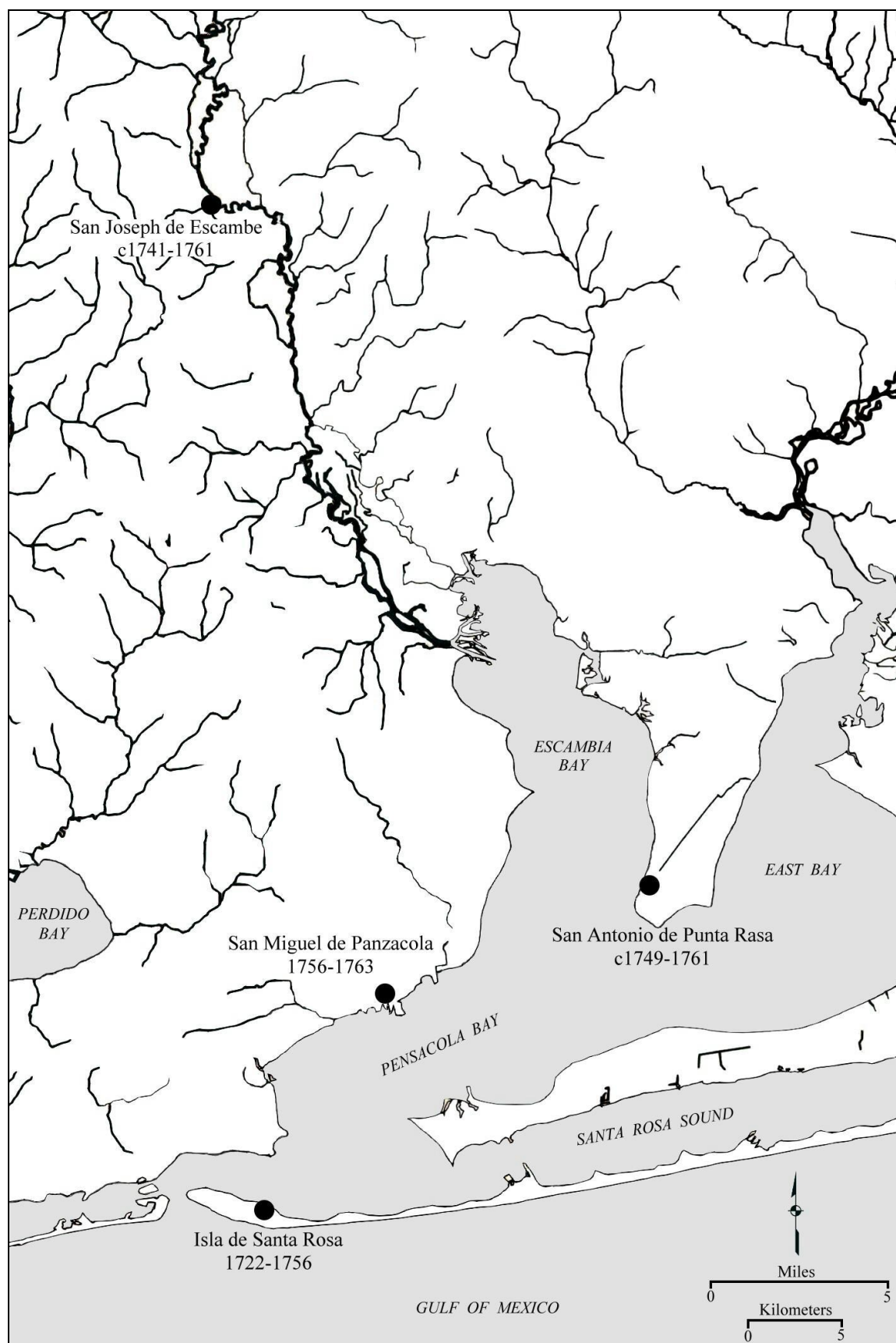


Figure 2: Proportions of Native vs. Imported Ceramics at Mission Escambe.

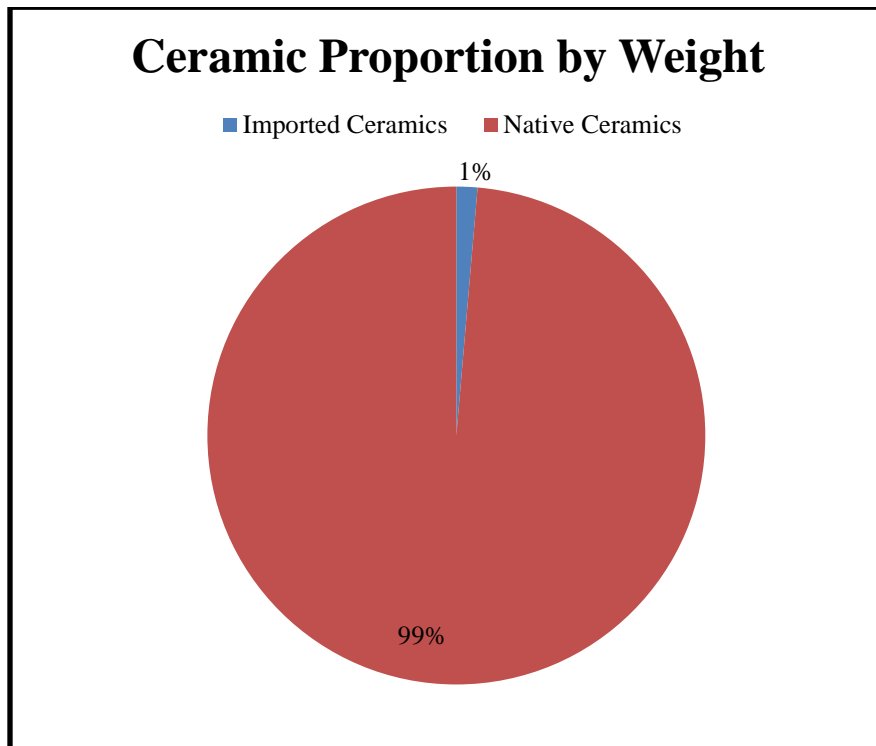
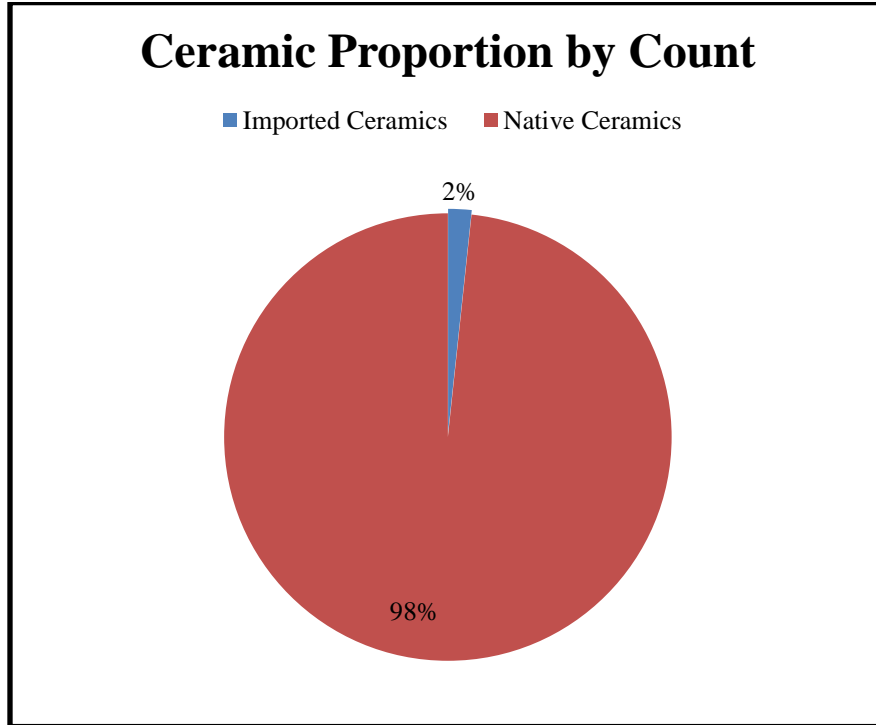
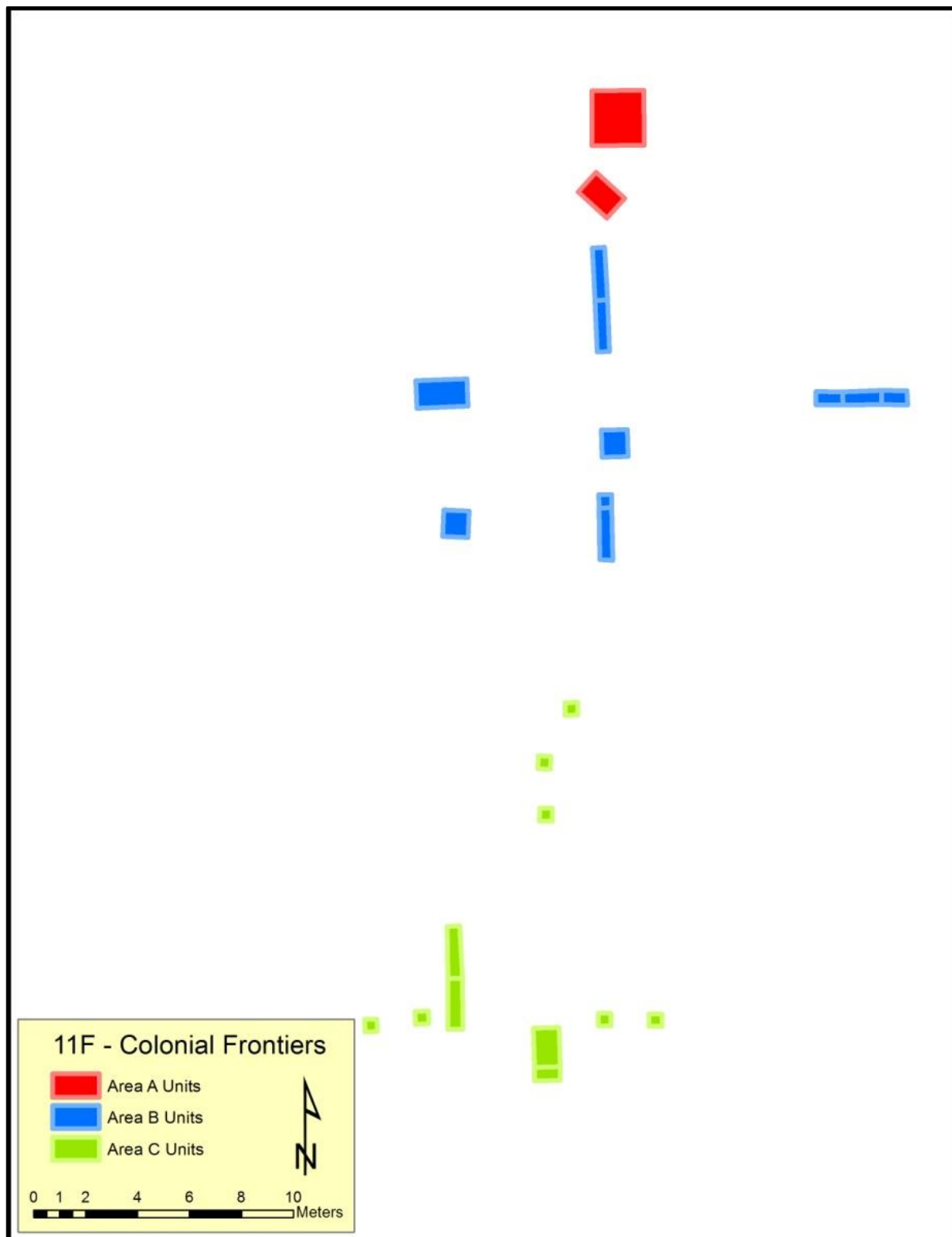


Figure 3: Schematic of 2011 Block Excavations at Mission Escambe.



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