

CEMETERY
Dataw Island
Beaufort County
South Carolina

HABS No. SC-866

HABS
SC-866

PHOTOGRAPHS

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
1849 C St. NW
Washington, DC 20240

ADDENDUM TO:
CEMETERY

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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Addendum to CEMETERY

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Location: Dataw Island, Beaufort County, South Carolina.

Owners: Dataw Island Home Owners' Association.

Significance: Northwest of the Sr. Berners Barnwell Sams plantation house, the cemetery is well-preserved and enclosed by tabby walls. The associated private chapel, now a ruin, of the Sams Family is the only tabby-built example of its kind known from South Carolina.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: The exact erection date for the tabby elements of the cemetery is not known. Archaeological and historical information suggests construction in two phases, with the chapel possibly dating to the late eighteenth century and the cemetery wall dating to the first quarter of the nineteenth century.
2. Architect/ Builder: Although not documented, the chapel is attributed to William Sams (1741-98), and the cemetery wall probably erected by his son, Dr. Berners Barnwell Sams (1787-1855).

B. Historic Context

Dataw (formerly Dathaw) Island was purchased for £55,000 currency by William Sams of Wadamalaw Island, South Carolina, from Robert and Sarah Gibbes on 30 May 1783. Records are scanty but it is likely that Sams made Dataw his principal residence, introducing the cultivation of long-staple cotton to the island before 1798 (the year of his death). Cotton was to remain the principal crop down to the Civil War although cattle, sheep, and hogs along with maize, sweet potatoes, peas, and fruit all played important roles in the plantation's economy.

Architectural evidence suggests that a small tabby house, measuring 38' -4" east-to-west x 20'-3" north-to-south excluding an external end chimney, already stood on the property at the time of its sale in 1783.¹ Subsequently, this building was adapted and enlarged to accommodate one branch of the Sams family as it grew in prosperity, size, and status. Alteration probably

¹The original house could have been built either by Lewis Reeve (who inherited Dataw from his mother, Anne Wigg in 1770) or Robert Gibbes who came into possession of Dataw in 1774.

commenced under the supervision of William Sams who thoroughly reworked the old building, raising its main floor, walls, and roof to improve head room. A new porch (or porches) and end chimney were probably added at the same period.

William's grandson, James Julius Sams, who lived in this house as a child, described how the building "consisted of two rooms, a narrow passage between, two attic rooms above and two cellars below." The same account mentions "a narrow piece above the stair" which probably means that stairs rising out of the central "passage" gave access to a landing linking the two attic spaces. While it improved storage capacity, work completed during the initial alteration phase did little to provide additional living space which probably remained static at about 650 square feet until ca. 1816-19 when Dr. Berners Barnwell Sams (1787-1855) who had inherited an interest in Dataw Island when a minor from his father William Sams in 1798, conceived a simple yet ingenious scheme to enlarge the old homestead.²

This involved erection of a rectangular tabby wing, measuring about 38' 9" east-to-west x 20' 9" north-to-south, right and left of the original building. Each wing incorporated one principal floor raised over an elevated basement with spaces organized about a central, or nearly central in the case of the east wing, chimney stack.³ Set back from the old house, new construction was linked by an enclosed corridor constructed behind the existing dwelling, the corridor communicating with an open porch fronting each wing on its south side and the old building's central hall. James Julius Sams described the arrangement, his terminology reflecting how the three building masses were considered distinct units even though they constituted parts of a single architectural composition:

The two wings were connected by a large passageway, running back of the Middle house, not only connecting the east and west house, but also connecting the middle house. The narrow passage [i.e., central hall] in the middle house opened into this large passage on its side. The two ends of this passage were entered from two doors respectively in the parlors and piazzas of the east and west house. The three houses each had its own piazza.

The sense of economy which dictated alteration rather than demolition of the original house, is further demonstrated by the way in which Berners Barnwell Sams set about fabricating his east and west "houses." In order, no doubt, to save time and maximize output, these were

² Under the terms of his will dated 10 November 1795 Dataw passed to William's three younger sons: Lewis Reeve (1784-1856), Berners Barnwell (1787-1855), and Edward Hext (1790-1837). Lewis Reeve and Berners Barnwell bought out Edward's interest and subsequently divided Dataw between themselves. Lewis retained the northern half of the island and Berners the southern half which included the old house.

³ An undated drawing by Eugenia Sams shows each wing enclosed by a hipped roof. While there is no reason to doubt this information, which is probably based on memory rather than direct observation, no structural evidence now survives to confirm it.

erected together, slight dimensional differences attesting use of two separate formwork sets, one set for each wing. This allowed construction crews to alternate between structures, striking, re-erecting and filling forms in one location as tabby cured over the course of several days at the other. With the east and west "houses" underway, operations commenced on the narrow area linking them. The high tabby facade on the link's north side was cast independently thereby creating what constituted a screen wall extending between the two new building masses.⁴

Ultimately, the link became the enlarged building's principal entrance; visitors and family members entered from the north via a double staircase leading to the main living level. From the south, entrance was by way of porches, excavation showing each "house" had its own set of steps. "Piazas" (porches) were supported on Tuscan columns of stuccoed brick raised over cruciform brick piers erected on tabby foundation blocks.⁵

Dr. Bernard Barnwell Sams was almost certainly his own contractor and probably used his own slaves to haul shell, burn lime, and cast tabby. His son, James Julius Sams, described the process of tabby-making as follows:

The way of construction was to make a box or several boxes according to the length and width of the building, each box so many feet long, say about fifteen or twenty feet, and about one and a half feet wide. These boxes were put in place, filled with the [tabby] mixture, which was packed or pestled down, and allowed to stand until dry. The sides and ends of the boxes were held by moveable pins. When these pins were drawn out, the box would fall to pieces. The box was taken down and put upon the tabby already dry, and so box after box was packed and pestled until the walls were as high as you designed."

It also seems likely that Berners Barnwell Sams was responsible for enhancing the surroundings of his enlarged house, refurbishing old outbuildings, erecting new ones, and laying out an extensive yard.

⁴This wall is not bonded into end walls of the wings, a circumstance which must have simplified formwork fabrication.

⁵Interior planning is now difficult to discern. The distribution of wall openings suggest two principal spaces existed at the upper level in each new "house" separated by timber partitions running north-to-south about the central chimney. James Julius Sams states. "the extreme west room was my Father's chamber, the next that a parlor." He implied analogous arrangement in the east "house" where "the first room was called the drawing room." Living spaces were probably interconnected by doors positioned right or left of the chimney stack. Facade organization mirrored the hierarchy established by placing main living areas on the upper floor and what were service or storage functions below. Long elevations feature four small lower windows grouped in pairs. Second floor openings, insofar as known, repeated the same rhythm but were much taller and slightly wider.

Defined by timber post and rail fences erected upon 12" wide tabby foundation strips, the yard measured about 122' north-to-south x 233' east-to-west and accommodated activities directly associated with the day-to-day running of the owner's personal household. Along its boundaries were situated at least seven small, single story buildings including a kitchen, dwellings for domestic slaves, and a store, tabby foundations of each being continuous or linking with those of the fence. More outbuildings were built or possibly rebuilt north of the main residence, these including a dairy, an ice house with a tabby roof, and a stable.

Located several hundred feet northwest of the main house, the family burying ground was probably established at the end of the eighteenth century following the death of William Sams in 1795. Inscriptions attest that Dr. Berners Barnwell Sams raised memorials here to both his father William Sams and mother Elizabeth Hext Sams (died 1813). It is also likely, given its careful construction, that he erected the high tabby wall now enclosing the surrounding cemetery. Who was responsible for constructing the chapel occupying the cemetery's southeast corner is less clear. A pencil annotation on an early twentieth-century drawing gives the building's date as 1783 and calls it the "property of William Sams." Construction details also suggest that the chapel and cemetery wall belong to different building phases. But, while probably derived from a Sams family member, the veracity of the pencil annotation cannot be confirmed.

It is known that James Julius Sams visited his mother's grave a few months after her death. He described the scene as follows:

West of the orange orchard was our family burying ground. It was shaded all over by the spread of the largest live oak I ever saw. The tree grew in the middle of the graveyard, and threw its limbs out in all directions, even taking under its cover the wall which encircled the yard.⁶ On the east of the oak between it and the orange orchard, was a chapel, which was so placed as to form part of the wall.

James Julius Sams also described how the chapel was used by the family on special occasions, his father who was an active member of St. Helena's Episcopal Church in Beaufort being a man of firm religious convictions. On Dataw, slaves received Christian instruction from both their master and missionaries employed to evangelize among the island's slave settlements. But, if slaves other than house servants attended the Dataw chapel along with family members is uncertain. The building's relatively small size would have precluded active participation in services by anything more than a fraction of the plantation's total slave population.⁷

⁶ This tree was still alive (though much wired) in 2004.

⁷ U.S. Census Returns for 1850 list 158 slaves belonging to Dr. B.B. Sams. How many were resident on Dataw Island is not clear since Sams had other properties in the vicinity of Beaufort including two town residences.

The cemetery continued to be used for family burials down until the Civil War, its graves apparently escaping looting and desecration by Union soldiers who, looking for valuables, broke into tombs at the Chapel of Ease on neighboring St. Helena Island. Ultimately, the plantation chapel fell into ruin, unconfirmed reports stating that what remained of its standing walls collapsed during hurricane Gracie (1959).

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

The cemetery on Dataw Island is surrounded by tabby walls standing to a height of about 4'-2" above present ground level except at the southwest corner where a chapel, also built of tabby, stands in ruins. The area enclosed measures at maximum, about 80'-0" north-to-south x 70'-0" east-to-west.

Cast in vertical increments measuring about 2'-0" in height, the enclosing tabby wall is 12" thick and stuccoed smooth on both internal and external faces, the stucco – unlike the exterior stucco of the main house – showing no sign of scoring in imitation of stonework. Walls are founded approximately 2'-0" below grade, the lowest pour having probably been cast directly into trenches excavated in sub-soil down to the appropriate level. There is evidence suggesting the walls once had a brick coping but apart from a few impressions, this feature has disappeared. The cemetery is entered from the east via an opening left next to the chapel's north facade. Numerous stone markers commemorate family members.

Before its partial destruction, the chapel was (judging by drawings and the extant ruin) a simple, single-story rectilinear structure. The main body of the building measured about 20'-2" north-to-south x 30'-4" east-to-west, this area opening into a smaller sanctuary at its eastern end.⁸ Elevations are incompletely known, however it seems that the Sams family's chapel followed conventions established locally by the Chapel of Ease on St. Helena Island. The main entrance was at the west end, its doorway flanked by a window right and left. Long elevations (north and south) each featured a central door flanked by two windows fitted with double hung sashes on both sides. Unlike the jerkin head roof employed at the Chapel of Ease, this chapel (if undated drawings are to be believed) utilized gabled roofs with separate roof frames enclosing the main body of the building and its sanctuary. A view of the interior by Paul Brodie dating to the early twentieth century shows a pulpit placed centrally at the east end, an elaborate balustrade enclosing the pulpit area. Now badly deteriorated, exterior walls measure about 9" in width above present ground level, the tabby having been cast in 19½" high vertical increments.

Below ground, exterior walls were cast to a width of 13", the junction of upper and lower wall levels being marked by an approximately 4" wide ledge visible on internal north and south building faces. Impressions indicate that each ledge supported a continuous timber wall plate

⁸ Overall the sanctuary measures about 12'-3" inches north-to-south x 10'-2" east-to-west.

(measuring about 5" wide x 2 ½" high in section) doubtless designed to carry timber floor joists spanning across the chapel from north to south. Exterior walls descend to a depth of about 3'- 4" below the lowest plate level. There is no evidence for any kind of spread foundation. Rather, lower tabby walls maintain their 13" width to base level, the tabby being founded on yellow sand.

The main body of the building exhibits four small splayed openings along its south face designed to ventilate sub floor areas. An identical opening is found on the south face of the smaller space, presumably the sanctuary, opening out of the main building at its eastern end. Typically, openings measure 17" in width when seen from the building's exterior. Clear impressions of lost timbers visible on tabby and mortar surfaces indicate these openings housed timber frames set flush with the facade. Horizontal and vertical framing members measured about 5" x 2 ½" in section, joints at the head and sill being tenoned. Horizontal members were made longer than the finished opening size, the prefabricated frames being set in position prior to casting of the tabby walls and anchored in place as the tabby was poured.

Whether openings were spanned by a timber lintel is not clear, the tabby walls being too poorly preserved to settle the point. Evidence does survive, again in the form of mortar and tabby impressions, to indicate that frames measured about 14" in height overall.

No other private plantation chapel built of tabby is known from South Carolina, although timber framed structures used for worship and religious instruction are attested from two plantations on Port Royal Island, Beaufort County, *Old Fort* and *Woodward*.

PART III. SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Drawings

No original architectural drawings are known. Several exterior sketches exist of the cemetery and its associated chapel; these are held in the Sams Family Collection and by the Historic Beaufort Foundation, both in Beaufort. Perhaps done by Eugenia Sams, these are of uncertain date and it is unclear if they were contemporary depictions made before the chapel's destruction or reconstructions drawn from memory. An accomplished view of the chapel interior signed by Paul Brodie must date from the early twentieth century when Brodie was advertising his services as an architectural draftsman in Beaufort, although it remains possible this drawing reproduces an earlier original.⁹

⁹ Reproduced in Poplin and Brooker. *The Historical Development of Dataw Island*. Volume I, fig. 67.

B. Bibliography

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PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION

This project was sponsored by the Historic Beaufort Foundation and by the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) division of the National Park Service, Paul D. Dolinsky, Chief, HABS. This report is one component of a larger survey of extant examples of tabby architecture within Beaufort County, South Carolina. The documentation was undertaken by HABS under the direction of Paul D. Dolinsky with assistance from Virginia B. Price, HABS Historian, who worked with Jefferson G. Mansell, (formerly of) the Historic Beaufort Foundation, Ian D. Hill, Beaufort County Planning Department, and Colin Brooker, Brooker Architectural Design Consultants, to identify subjects of study and locate them in the field in 2002 and 2003. Colin Brooker, whose research underpinned the project, wrote the historical report. Evan Thompson, now with the Historic Beaufort Foundation, assisted Brooker in the production of the reports. Jack E. Boucher, HABS Photographer, took the large format photographs.