

Ghosts and Secrets

The Hidden History of the Hitchcock Woods

BY PAM GLEASON

If you stand in the middle of the Hitchcock Woods on a quiet day, you will hear the sounds of birds chirping and the wind murmuring in the pines. You will notice something special, too: the unspoiled calm of the forest. If you believe in such things, you might also feel the spiritual presence of the people who came there before you. This could give you visions of the Bostwicks and the McKinneys training their steeplechasers on the Ridge Mile Track, or of the Aiken Drag in all its early 20th century glory, with green-coated riders sailing over immense fences on the High Point Line. Listen carefully and you just might hear their hoofbeats and the faraway voice of one of Mrs. Hitchcock's hounds.

The Hitchcock Woods is a place with ghosts and secrets. Some of its history has been told in books and some of it can be found in vintage photos held in Aiken's museums and private collections. But a great deal is hidden and unexplored. There was more that went on in the Woods than most people might realize, and its history goes back thousands of years. There were colonists who lived there in the 17th and 18th centuries, and before that, the area was a hunting ground for Native American people. Although many details will probably remain secret forever, almost everyone who passed through the Woods left some traces behind.

In an effort to uncover some of their stories, the Hitchcock Woods Foundation commissioned two archaeologists, Carl Steen and Bobby Southerlin, to conduct a complete archaeological survey of the Woods. Over the course of three years, they worked



with GIS maps and GPS devices to examine the entire 2,100 acres and identify the “cultural resources” of the Woods. First, they divided the area into three sections. Then, in each section, they dug small “shovel test” holes at 30-meter intervals. If they found artifacts, they would explore further. If they did not, they would move on. They also examined census records and did extensive archival research. By the middle of 2017, they had finished their survey and produced a 492-page summary of their findings. They concluded that the Hitchcock Woods is an excellent place for archaeologists, or anyone who is interested in learning about the past.

“One of the most important things about the Hitchcock Woods from an archaeological standpoint is that the area was never subjected to mechanized agriculture,” says Carl Steen, who is the president of Diachronic Research in Columbia. “Before the Civil War, the people who farmed the Hitchcock Woods would have used a mule and a plow, which only disturbs the top layers of the soil. Most other places that we go, the land has been plowed by steam

or gasoline powered equipment and pines have been planted around the sites, which are far more disturbed.”

Because the Hitchcocks bought the land and made it into a forest preserve in the first part of the 20th century, it has remained relatively pristine up until today.

Some of the recent findings have national importance. For instance, the Charleston to Hamburg railroad, which was the longest railroad in the world when it was constructed in the 1830s, ran directly through the Woods. While most of the track was removed a long time ago (Cathedral Aisle

the chairman of the HWF’s Historic Preservation committee. “Everyone is very excited about it.”

In addition, the archaeologists found the remains of a brick-making shop, a pre-Civil War pottery kiln, a secret moonshine still from the Prohibition era, empty wine bottles with labels from prestigious early 20th century European vineyards, fragments of ceramic tableware from grand Aiken Winter Colony hotels, and Native American pottery and arrowheads (properly called “tips”) dating back as far as 11,000 years. They also identified the site of an early 20th century mansion that was a replica of the Henry Wadsworth Longfellow House in

Cambridge, Massachusetts. The Hitchcocks bought this house and tore it down in the late 1920s. Before they did, it was occupied by a mysterious woman who was known as Baroness Adele Von Loesecke (this may not have been her real name); a recluse who claimed, at one point, that her butler was holding her hostage in the house.

“Our goal in doing this work is always to preserve and protect,” says Mrs. Conger, who explains that a management plan is currently being created to decide how best to showcase and share the hidden history of the Woods while protecting important sites for posterity “We are delighted to have been able to identify what is out there and to have a management plan for it.”

Although the Hitchcock Woods will never give up all its secrets, many more of them will likely come to light in the future, along with the stories of inhabitants from earlier eras, whose ghosts may (or may not) contribute to the profound sense of history that lingers in the shadows of the pines. 🍄



Carl Steen describes his archaeological methods to a school group.

is said to be the oldest “rails-to-trails” site in the nation), large portions were discovered, essentially untouched.

“No human eyes have seen anything like it since the mid 1800s,” says Courtney Conger, who is a Trustee of the Hitchcock Woods Foundation and