



The steamboat Gopher on the Ouachita River, Louisiana or Arkansas, 1910

## Clarence Bloomfield Moore's Archaeological Expedition to Ossabaw Island, 1896 - 1897 by Dr. Charles E. Pearson

On November 25, 1896, a small sternwheel steamboat named Gopher steamed up Buckhead Creek to the landing near the middle of Ossabaw Island, then known as "Middle Settlement," now known as Middle Place. The Gopher carried members of an archaeological expedition intent on digging into the several prehistoric Indian burial mounds known to exist on the island. Aboard the Gopher were Clarence Bloomfield Moore (1852-1936), leader of the expedition and several others who were to aid Moore in his searches on Ossabaw. These included Dr. Milo G. Miller, who was charged with analyzing any skeletons discovered, George Rossignol, who was captain of the steamboat, eight or ten African-American men who conducted the digging, but whose names, unfortunately, are unknown, and one or two crew members.



Clarence Moore was a member of a prominent Philadelphia family and heir to a fortune accumulated by his father, a manufacturer of paper. A couple of years prior to arriving on Ossabaw, Moore decided to leave the business world and use his wealth to explore prehistoric archaeological sites across the southeastern United States.



Photograph of Clarence Moore (seated) while working along the Ouachita River in Louisiana and Arkansas, 1910. Josiah Raybon, captain of the Gopher at the time is in the background. In the foreground is one of the unidentified members of the digging crew that Moore used on his expeditions.

Moore began his archaeological work in Florida in 1891, where, in 1895, he had his steamer Gopher built and outfitted to support his expeditions. On leaving Florida in 1895, he moved north to the coast of Georgia, where he worked in 1896 and 1897 digging large numbers of prehistoric mounds on the Sea Islands and the adjacent mainland. Subsequently, Clarence Moore took the Gopher to the Gulf of Mexico and over the next quarter century traveled every major waterway in the southeastern United States seeking out and digging prehistoric mounds.

Relative to modern archaeological standards, Moore's work is considered substandard. However, Moore's saving grace is that he presented the results of his work in a series of reports published by the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, and he turned over the bulk of his finds to institutions and repositories throughout the eastern United States where they have been preserved. Typically, these well-illustrated reports were prepared and published in the summer immediately following fieldwork conducted the previous fall and winter. Moore's report on his Ossabaw Island work appeared in 1897, and is still relied on by archaeologists today.

Moore and his team spent slightly over one month digging on Ossabaw Island, during which time they all lived aboard the Gopher. The expedition dug into six burial mounds at Middle Place and three mounds at Bluff Field, on the northeastern corner of the island. In addition, the scientists examined several "shell middens," or deposits of food remains, mainly oyster shells, and cultural material such as pottery and bone artifacts. In the six mounds Moore dug at Middle Place, he discovered over 300 prehistoric human burials, many of which consisted of cremations or disarticulated bones interred in ceramic burial urns.

A large number of complete or partial pottery vessels were discovered in these mounds, including 47 in one mound alone. In addition to human remains, Moore found purposefully placed dog burials in several of the mounds, with 11 in one of the mounds. At the three mounds dug at Bluff Field, Moore and his crew recovered the remains of at least 25 individuals.

With Clarence Moore's departure from Ossabaw in 1897, no archaeology was conducted on the island until the 1970s, when students from the University of Georgia undertook several projects with support from Eleanor "Sandy" West's Ossabaw Island Project and Genesis programs. More recently, the University of Georgia has initiated more archaeological research on the island.

Clarence Moore's work undertaken more than a century ago remains the most extensive archaeological activity conducted on Ossabaw Island. His findings, as presented in his 1897 Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia publication (Moore 1897) on his coastal Georgia work and in his field notes, now housed at Cornell University, continue to be of value to researchers.

*Editor's note: Since the purchase of Ossabaw Island by the State of Georgia in 1978, archaeological work on Ossabaw has continued, in collaboration with Georgia's State Archaeologist. Led by Dr. Victor Thompson, University of Georgia began their current study in 2014. This year UGA's Archaeology Field School returned in June for a six-week stay. Their 2022 excavation is at Bluff Field, the site of Moore's work on Ossabaw Island 125 years ago.*

*Dr. Charles E. Pearson is Adjunct Professor of History at Hampden-Sydney College. Photos courtesy of Dr. Pearson.*

#### Sources:

*Moore, Clarence B. "Certain Aboriginal Mounds of the Georgia Coast." Journal of the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia, vol. 2. (1897).*

*Moore, Clarence B. 1896-1897 Field notes and travel logs of Clarence B. Moore. Notebooks 11 and 12, on Microfilm Roll 2: Field notebooks 8-16 (1894-1899), of Clarence Moore. Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.*

Pearson's complete article on Clarence Bloomfield Moore's Archaeological Expedition to Ossabaw Island can be found through this QR code:

