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National Register of Historic Places  
Multiple Property Documentation Form

NATIONAL  
REGISTER

This form is for use in documenting multiple property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Type all entries.

A. Name of Multiple Property Listing

Late Archaic-Early Woodland Period Shell Rings of South Carolina,  
ca. 1,000-2,200 Years B.C.

B. Associated Historic Contexts

Late Archaic-Early Woodland Period Shell Rings of South Carolina,  
ca. 1,000-2,200 Years B.C.

C. Geographical Data



See continuation sheet

D. Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Planning and Evaluation.

Mary W. Edmonds  
Signature of certifying official

8/20/90  
Date

Mary W. Edmonds, Deputy SHPO, S.C. Department of Archives & History, Columbia, S.C.  
State or Federal agency and bureau

I, hereby, certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

John J. Knowl  
Signature of the Keeper of the National Register

10/14/90  
Date

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E. HISTORIC CONTEXTS

With the onset of slow sea level rise some 6,000 years ago, coastal environments, as we know them today, began to develop in South Carolina and other parts of southeastern United States (Colquhoun et al., 1981). Aboriginal humans must have continually exploited these environments, but the earliest records of this use have been lost or inundated because of the continuing rise of the sea. The oldest archaeological sites, which document the more continuing use of South Carolina marshes and estuaries, contain ceramic and/or other artifacts which archaeologists assign to the Late Archaic and Early Woodland periods of human history; radiocarbon dates from these sites typically range between 3,000 and 4,200 years before the present. Accumulations of shellfish molluscs are prominent at many of these sites, and hundreds of these shellfish mounds or middens dot the southeastern United States' coast.

A small subset of these Atlantic Coast middens has received special attention in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries-- those with arcuate geometries. Nineteen of these shell rings, from seventeen sites, are presently well-documented in South Carolina, and the rings range southward into northern Florida. Written reports on these sites date from the early nineteenth century (Drayton, 1802) and the shell rings have been studied by natural historians for over 100 years (McKinley, 1873).

The shell rings of the southeastern United States are arcuate ridges of shellfish remains, constructed by humans, which stood in positive relief (as original topographic highs). Where these ridges completely enclose a central area, the adjectives circular, ovate, elliptical, or donut-shaped have been used to describe ring geometry; when closure is not complete, adjectives such as crescentic or lunate are more appropriate. Outer rim-to-rim diameters of the rings are generally 50 to 300 feet, with topographic relief of two to ten feet. Although the width of the ridges is variable, it is typically between 10 and 30 feet.

Postulated uses of the rings have been many, including ceremonial, religious, recreational, and exploitative as fish traps or weirs (Edwards, 1965). However, these types of explanations have not been supported by convincing evidence.

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Recent investigations suggest that at least some of the rings were arced habitation sites, with the rings themselves gradually developing from kitchen refuse (Trinkley, 1985). But the questions and details of ring function are far from completely answered, since thorough scientific investigations of shell rings have been limited.

Postholes, as evidence of built structures, have been found within the piled shell of some rings. Pits are common in the ring sites, and the original uses of these features were varied. At recently investigated rings, two types of cooking pits have been identified (Trinkley, 1980). Those which yield ashes were most likely used for roasting while those with preserved charcoal were probably for steaming food. Other pits seem to have been used for underground storage only and not for cooking. Scattered and fragmentary human remains have been found at some South Carolina sites, but human burial pits have not been substantiated.

Near the shell rings, invertebrate shellfish were likely the most consistently available food for the occupants. South Carolina rings are often composed primarily of the American oyster. Periwinkles, whelks, razor clams, ribbed mussels, and hard-shelled clams are also preserved (Hemmings, 1970). Some blue crab and stone crab claws have survived the thousands of years of decay, and occasionally crab shell bits are evident. Shrimp were probably available to the aboriginal peoples, and their remains should be present. The shellfish were eaten both raw and cooked, but other details of their preparation as food need to be further analyzed.

Both skeletal and ear parts from fishes have been collected through careful screening of the ring sediments. At least 30 species of fish, including sharks and rays, have been recovered from the more intensively studied shell ring sites of the southeastern United States (DePratter, 1979). Terrapin, turtle, snake, lizard, and alligator remains have also been reported (Marrinan, 1975). Thorough collecting nearly always yields deer bones, as well as many species of birds. Raccoon, rabbit and opossum are found at most sites studied in detail, and at least two locales have yielded the bones of domestic dogs (DePratter, 1979).

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Plant remains have been less thoroughly analyzed. Macroscopically, they occur in the form of carbonized seeds and nutshells. Hickory remains are most common at the sites, and plants could have provided an important part of the diet of the people dwelling on these rings (DePratter, 1976). The subsistence patterns of the aboriginal ring-dwellers need our closer attention.

The shell rings have yielded worked artifacts of ceramics, organic remains, and rock. Lithics are least common and include objects such as flaked stone tools and hammerstones. The organic artifacts were manufactured from three types of raw materials: bone, deer antler, and shell (Hemmings, 1970). As examples bone awls and pins, antler projectile points, and shell beads and scrapers have been recovered from the shell ring sites (Hemmings, 1970). The ceramics are typically tempered with sand or fibers, and may be modeled, molded, or coiled. Punctations and finger pinching are among the most common ceramic decorations. In ceramic typology, the artifacts are most commonly assigned to the Thom's Creek/Awendaw/Stalling's Island series of wares.

These rings have attracted archaeologists because of their geometry and, more importantly, because they and other middens are among our earliest records of coastal zone utilization by both non-ceramic and ceramic-making cultures, in the southeastern United States. Outside of this region, the closest proposed shellfish ring has been found in Colombia, South America; some North American archaeologists (e.g. M. B. Trinkley, personal communication, 1989) doubt the true ringed nature of this more southerly occurrence. But since the Colombian site dates from several hundred years before the North American occurrences (Hemmings, 1970), the time difference has been used to suggest the northward transfer of culture, through Caribbean and Atlantic waters, long before the time of Columbus' "discovery" of the New World (Ford, 1969). This theory has not received widespread support. Even if the Colombian site is a true shell ring, archaeologists including Trinkley suggest that the rings in the two Americas represent convergence in behavior, among unrelated peoples, when faced with the needs for life in the coastal zone; transfer of culture may not be necessary to yield a similarity in form. Yet the rings do generate more than local or mere regional interest. And despite numerous data on at least some of the

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sites, there is still much to be learned about the total culture of the aboriginal people who made these structures.

The integrity of South Carolina's shell rings has seriously decreased in the past two centuries. Natural geologic processes, plowing, road material and other constructional uses of the shells, and housing and other developments have all had a negative impact upon the sites. Increased awareness and protection of these exceptional archaeological locations should become more important as seaboard populations and developmental pressures do rise in the future. Although the rings comprise but a small part of our earliest record of coastal habitations, information losses at a single place are very significant because the rings are not numerous. National Register status, both collectively and singly, should aid in these protection and preservational goals.

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**F. Associated Property Types**

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I. Name of Property Type Late Archaic-Early Woodland Period Shell Rings of South Carolina

II. Description

See Continuation Sheet

III. Significance

See Continuation Sheets

IV. Registration Requirements

See Continuation Sheets

See continuation sheet

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See continuation sheet for additional property types

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**G. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods**

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Discuss the methods used in developing the multiple property listing.

See Continuation Sheets

See continuation sheet

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**H. Major Bibliographical References**

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See Continuation Sheets

See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional documentation:

- State historic preservation office  
 Other State agency  
 Federal agency

- Local government  
 University  
 Other

Specify repository: S.C. Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of  
South Carolina, Columbia, SC 29208

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## F.II.

## Description

Shell rings are arcuate and confined ridges or topographic highs. They were constructed by humans mainly using shellfish remains, and may or may not completely enclose a central region. Ring geometries have variously been described as circular, ovate, elliptical, donut-shaped, and crescentic. Outer rim-to-rim diameters of the rings typically range between 50 and 300 feet; preserved topographic relief extends to 10 feet; the width of the original confined ridges is most commonly between 10 and 30 feet.

At present, nineteen rings from seventeen sites are relatively well-documented in South Carolina. All are coastal zone, Lower Coastal Plain occurrences. The nineteen rings are confined to Charleston and Beaufort counties, but additional systematic archaeological surveys may extend the geographic range of these archaeological sites.

South Carolina's shell rings are composed primarily of valves of the American oyster. Other bivalved and gastropod molluscs also occur at the sites; remains of various crabs, fishes, amphibians and reptiles, birds, and small- to medium-sized mammals have been reported from the shell rings. Macroscopic plant remains are typically carbonized seeds and nutshells. Only scattered and fragmentary human remains have been found at the South Carolina rings; no undoubted human burial sites have been uncovered by work to the present date.

The shell rings contain worked artifacts composed of rock, organic remains, and ceramics. Lithics are not common and include hammerstones and flaked stone tools. Bone and shell artifacts include awls and pins, deer antler projectile points, and mollusc beads and scrapers. The ceramics are most typically tempered with fibers or sand and are molded, modeled, or coiled. Finger pinching and punctations are common decorations, and archaeologists have most frequently assigned these wares to the Thom's Creek/Awendaw/Stalling's Island series of ceramics, within the Late Archaic-Early Woodland periods of human history. Radiocarbon dates from the sites typically range between 3,000 and 4,200 years before the present.



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## F.III.

## Significance

South Carolina's shell rings are among our earliest material evidence of coastal zone utilization, by both non-ceramic and ceramic-making cultures, in the southeastern United States. Limited in number, they are a small but very distinctive subset of the hundreds of shellfish mounds or middens, dating from the Late Archaic and Early Woodland periods, which dot the southeastern coast. Earlier humans must have exploited these coastal environments, but these more ancient records have been lost or inundated because of the continuing rise of sea level over the past 6,000 years.

Away from the southeastern United States, the closest proposed shellfish ring has been found in Colombia, South America. Some North American archaeologists (e.g. M. B. Trinkley) question the interpreted ringed nature of this South American site but, since the Colombian locality dates from several hundred years before the North American ones, the time difference has been used to suggest the northward transfer of culture through Caribbean and Atlantic waters. This theory has not received widespread support. Even if the Colombian site is a true shell ring, archaeologists including Trinkley suggest that the rings in the two Americas represent convergence in behavior, among unrelated peoples, when faced with the needs for life in the coastal zone; active transfer of culture may not be necessary to yield form similarities in archaeological structures which are widely separated in space. Yet obviously the rings do generate more than mere regional archaeological interest.

On a more local scale, archaeologists have been attracted to these sites because of their potential to yield significant scientific data, as well as because of their geometry. But the very reason(s) for their arcuate nature still remain obscure. Recent work suggests that the rings accumulated as kitchen refuse but other origins (for example ceremonial, religious, or recreational use) have been proposed and have not yet been convincingly refuted. Systematic, scientific research investigations and analyses of the shell ring sites should help resolve this question, thus materially adding to our knowledge of aboriginal cultures. Other major and cultural questions can easily be examined at the ring sites. Examples of research questions which must be addressed are: were the rings used

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seasonally or throughout the year; what changes in seasonal shell ring site use can be traced through the Late Archaic-Early Woodland periods of time; how does any seasonality pattern found in the rings compare with that from other time-correlated sites from the southeastern United States coast; and what then is the relationship between the shell ring sites and the more abundant, time-equivalent shell midden occupations along the coast of the southeastern United States? Seasonality techniques have never been applied to a South Carolina shell ring. Thus questions and working methods deemed state-of-the-art in archaeology, including the entire areas of seasonality and subsistence patterns through time, remain to be part of future work on the shell rings.

This future work will clearly depend upon preservation of these unique cultural features. The integrity of South Carolina's shell rings has decreased over the past two centuries. Natural erosion, plowing, constructional uses of the oyster shells, and residential and other developments have all had detrimental effects upon various sites. Developmental pressures can only increase in the future, as seaboard populations rise, and protection of the sites should become more important through time. Although the rings comprise a small part of our earliest record of coastal habitation by humans, information losses at a single site are quite significant, because the rings are not numerous. National Register status, for all eligible sites, should help in achieving these preservational goals.

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F.IV. Registration Requirements

To be eligible for the National Register under this multiple property listing, a shell ring site in South Carolina must pass tests of (1) original geometry, (2) age, and (3) integrity.

(1). A South Carolina Late Archaic-Early Woodland period shell ring is an arcuate and confined ridge built primarily of molluscan shellfish remains. The minimum preserved arc will typically be in the 60-120 degree range, and evidence will clearly suggest that this arcuate geometry did not originally and merely parallel some adjacent geomorphic or cultural feature (such as a curving river bank). Conscious architectural design, by the builders, is implied in the definition of a shell ring. Mapping will support the interpretation of the body as an originally constructed arc, and will not support a secondary origin for its arcuate form (as in the selective removal of shells, from an originally irregular midden, for constructional uses).

(2). The ring will contain diagnostic ceramic and/or other artifacts which archaeologists assign to the Late Archaic or Early Woodland periods of human history in South Carolina. Radiocarbon dates, if obtained, will normally be expected to range between 3,000 and 4,200 years before the present.

(3). Since its time of formation, a ring may have lost integrity because of human and/or non-human agents. But in addition to passing the test of original geometry, a South Carolina ring to be nominated under this listing will have its base intact and near horizontal if tested or excavated and mapped, and will have a significant thickness of preserved and undisturbed shellfish remains (normally 18 inches or greater), thus supporting the interpretation of the site as an original arcuate ridge or topographic high.

Of the seventeen presently well-recognized shell ring sites in South Carolina (map, attached), nine are already on the National Register (Table 1, attached). One site, Guerard Point (38BU21), has been extensively plowed for agricultural use for over 90 years, most likely would fail the above test of integrity, and is probably ineligible for inclusion in the National Register. However, this site needs to be mapped in

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detail and tested to sterile soil in order to assess its Register eligibility.

Five additional sites have never been mapped in detail (those on Daws Island- 38BU300, 38BU301, 38BU302, 38BU303- and the Bull Island shell ring- 38BU475). Artifact samples have been recently collected and interpreted for only two of these sites (38BU300 and 38BU301). These latter two sites are probably eligible for inclusion in the Register under this multiple property listing, and the remaining three are possibly eligible. However, detailed mapping and some degree of archaeological testing or excavation are necessary before any of the five can be shown to clearly meet the three criteria or tests that are stated above.

Two sites remain- Lighthouse Point (38CH12) and Stratton Place (38CH24). Additional studies of the history of archaeological work at Stratton Place (38CH24) are necessary to thoroughly document its eligibility; these studies should result in completion of the required registration form. Previous work and its comprehensive analysis have clearly demonstrated that Lighthouse Point (38CH12) satisfies the criteria of original geometry, age, and integrity developed for this multiple property listing. A nomination for National Register status for the Lighthouse Point shell ring (38CH12) is here appended.

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Continuation SheetSection number F Page 6TABLE 1  
NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES STATUS OF  
PRESENTLY RECOGNIZED SHELL RING SITES IN SOUTH CAROLINA

<u>Site</u>	<u>Common Name</u>	<u>Status</u>
38Ch7	Hanckel	Register listed
38Ch12	Lighthouse Point	here nominated
38Ch14	Horse Island	Register listed
38Ch23	Buzzard's Island	Register listed
38Ch24	Stratton Place	potent. eligible
38Ch41	Auld/Yough Hall	Register listed
38Ch42	Fig Island	Register listed
38Ch45	Sewee	Register listed
38Bu7	Sea Pines	Register listed
38Bu8	Skull Creek	Register listed
38Bu21	Guerard Point	potent. eligible
38Bu29	Chester Fields	Register listed
38Bu300	Daws Island- Barrow's	potent. eligible
38Bu301	Daws Island- Patent	potent. eligible
38Bu302	Daws Island- Broad River	potent. eligible
38Bu303	Daws Island- Medicine	potent. eligible
38Bu475	Bull Island	potent. eligible

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G. Identification and Evaluation Methods

This multiple property listing is part of a plan of staged work upon the aboriginal shell rings of the southeastern United States, a plan designed to increase our awareness and knowledge of, and preservational interest in, these important archaeological sites. Since the fall of 1988, studies have been supported by the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, through its Historic Preservation funds. Work to date has included the generation of a shell ring bibliography, the assembly of a partial archival record of past studies upon the rings, the production of an initial inventory of these sites in South Carolina, and the writing of a draft version of a lay audience document describing these archaeological sites and their significance.

With student help, a bibliography of 66 works upon the shell rings was assembled; this work has been issued as: Lawrence, D. R., and H. L. Wrightson, 1989, "Late Archaic-Early Woodland Period Shell Rings of the Southeastern United States Coast: A Bibliographic Introduction," South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology Research Manuscript Series 207, 19 pages. This bibliography, with minor and appropriate additions, is here presented in Section H.

Forty-two of these works have been gathered together and reprinted as: Lawrence, D. R. (ed.), 1989, STUDIES OF SOUTHEASTERN UNITED STATES ABORIGINAL SHELL RINGS, PART 1 (656 p.), PART 2 (609 p.), and PART 3 (637 p.), Columbia, S.C., Department of Geological Sciences, University of South Carolina. Copies of these collected studies have been issued to appropriate State and Federal agencies, and have also been deposited with the South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia and the Library, Charleston Museum, Charleston, South Carolina.

These previous studies, and especially the site management files at the South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, were used to compile an inventory summarizing our present knowledge of each of the seventeen now-recognized shell ring sites in South Carolina. This inventory has been transmitted to appropriate regulatory agencies, both State and Federal. The inventory served to pinpoint the registration requirements developed for this multiple property listing, and

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provided the data for determining which of the South Carolina shell rings, not presently on the Register, were eligible under the registration requirements. The lay audience and other documents produced with Historic Preservation funding contain narratives concerning the shell rings (most typically as background or introductory statements). These were all written for subsequent use in this multiple property listing; responses to Parts E, F, and H are thus openly adapted from these previously issued works.

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