

ANCIENT SHELL RINGS



Video 1

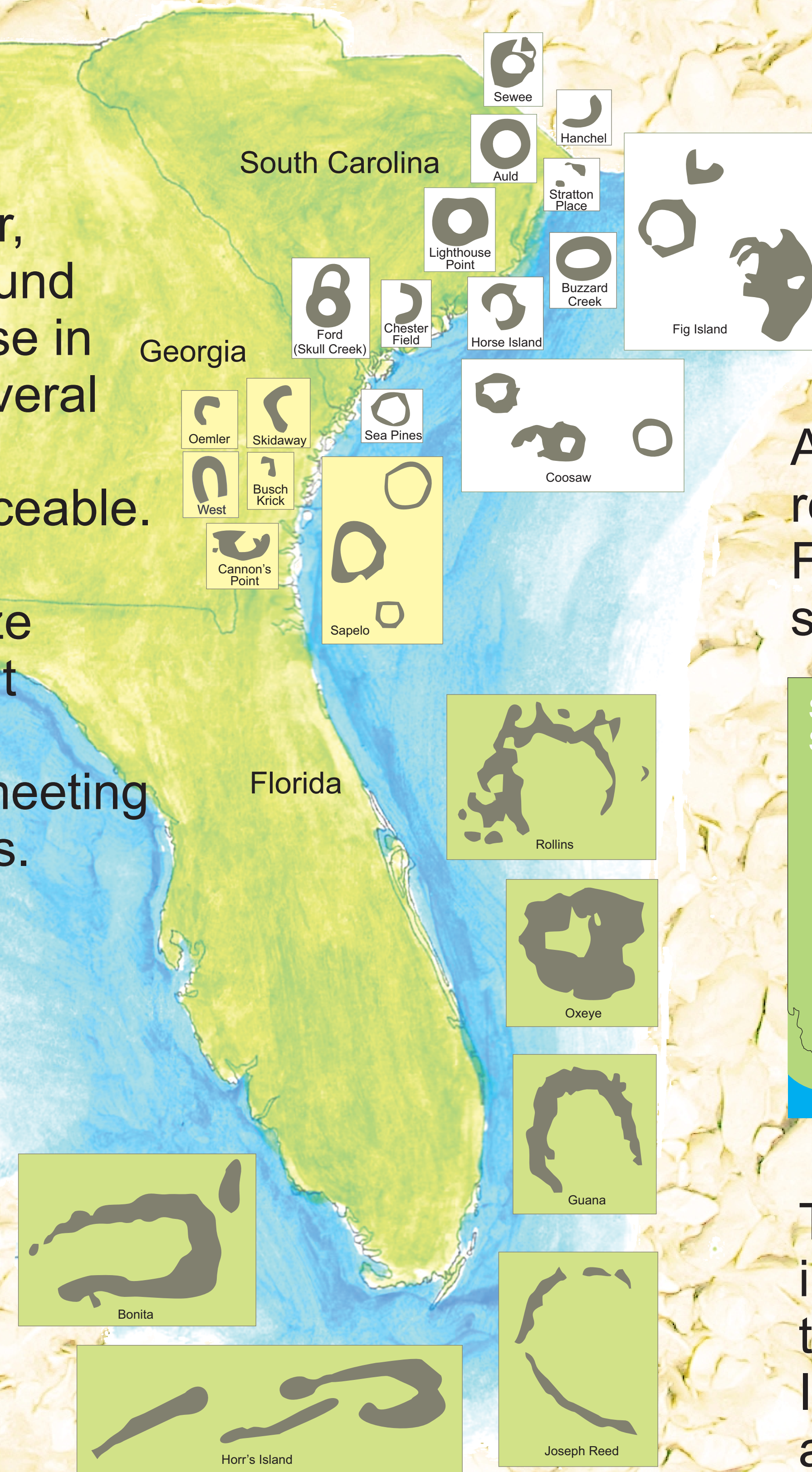
Currently, more than fifty shell rings have been identified along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts between South Carolina and Mississippi.

Shell rings are circular or u-shaped piles of oyster, clam, and other shells that are mounded to surround an open plaza. Rings vary in size: some, like those in Florida, are massive constructions measuring several football fields long and more than 15 feet tall. Other rings are much smaller and are barely noticeable.

Archaeologists often view these differences in size as relating to how and why Native Americans built these shell rings thousands of years ago. Many archaeologists see shell rings as early villages, meeting points, ritual centers or a combination of functions.

Whatever the reason they were built, native peoples created shell rings during a very limited amount of time: the vast majority were made between 3,500-5,000 years ago in a period called the Late Archaic.

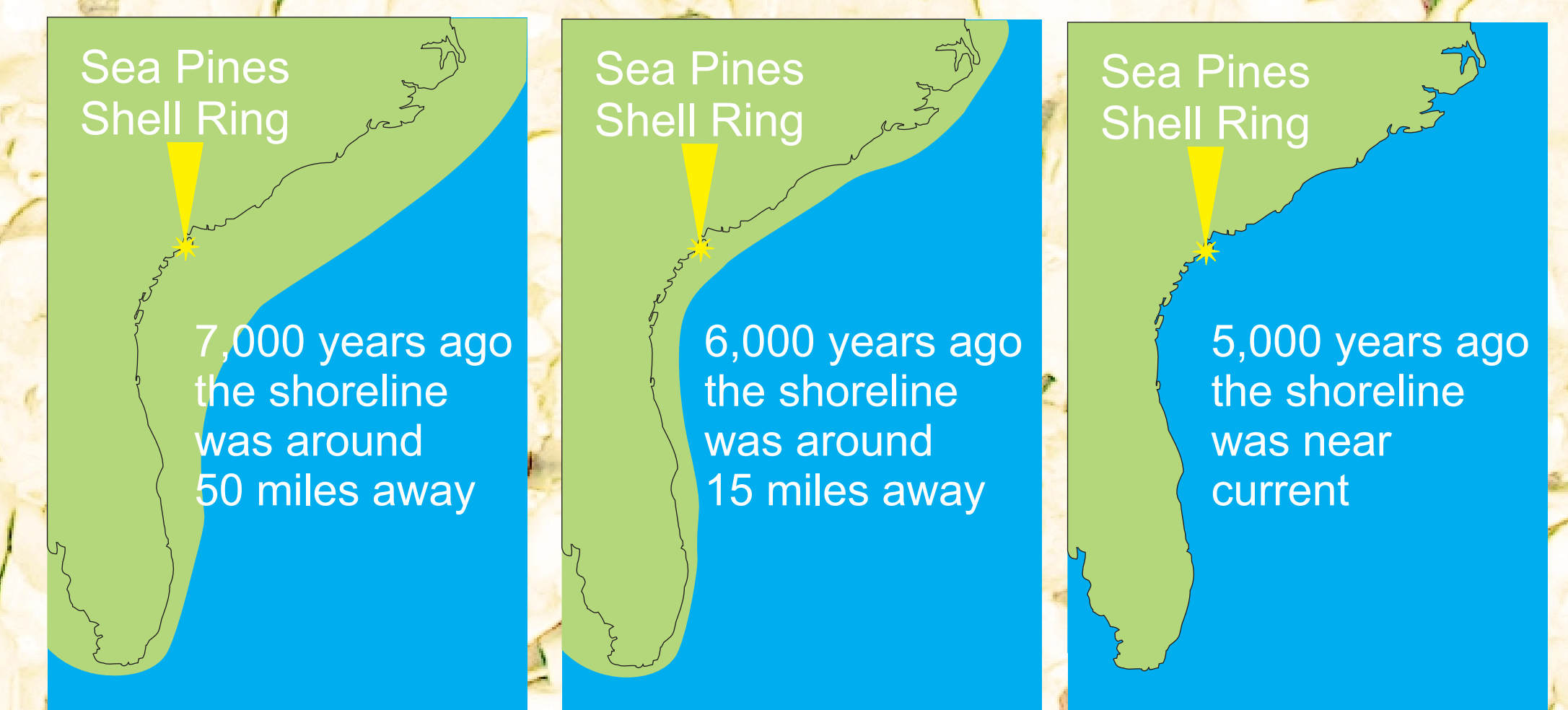
This was a transformational time. Weather patterns and global temperatures shifted, resulting in rising sea levels. As sea levels rose the salt water tidal creeks and marshes flourished creating abundant resources that supported the ring builders.



Ring images are to scale with one another.

Scan the QR code in the top right corner to view videos expanding on each panel.

As sea levels changed, the shoreline reached about where it is today. Fluctuations continued during the time shell rings were occupied.



The Sea Pines Shell Ring remains an important part of our past and sacred to some Native American groups. It remains in near pristine condition and should be respected by not disturbing or removing anything from this site. Thank you.

PIVOTAL POINT IN TIME AND PLACE



Video 2

Native Americans responded to environmental changes in a number of ways. Many moved to the newly formed coastline in large numbers, with some living at the shell rings. Ring builders utilized abundant wild foods found in the marsh and nearby tidal creeks. Harvesting oysters, clams, fish, and turtles from the water. Deer and other small animals were hunted from the forest. Ring builders tended to oyster beds, being careful not to over harvest, while also caring for nut-bearing trees like hickory and oak.



Abundant food resources allowed the native peoples to establish larger, long-term settlements, including shell rings, that could be occupied year-round. This newly established stability allowed native peoples to begin experimenting with new technologies. These included the invention of pottery, creating new types of shell and bone tools as well as objects of personal adornment.



Shell rings were built with a variety of shells including oyster, clam and periwinkle.



Aerial photo of Fig Island Shell Ring 1

They also had formalized trade networks that spanned half the continent. At one shell ring in Georgia, ring builders had acquired a copper armband from the Great Lakes more than 1,000 miles away!

Perhaps one of the most important changes occurring during this time was that native peoples increasingly lived and identified themselves with people outside of their extended families. This was the start of what would become some of the tribal groups that we have today.

ESTABLISHING THE SEA PINES SHELL RING



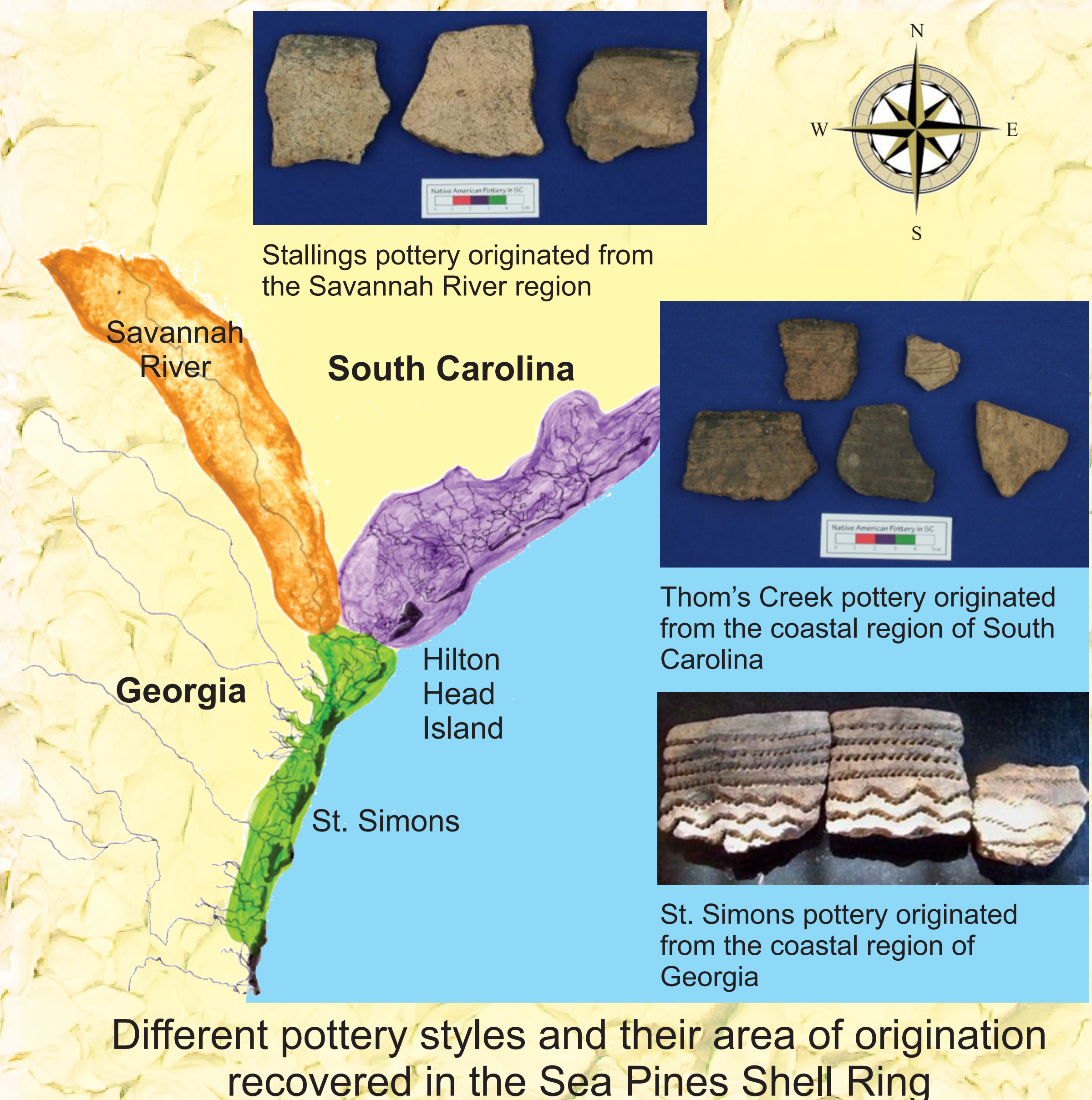
Video 3

The Sea Pines Shell Ring is an excellent place to learn more about the native peoples who lived on Hilton Head Island thousands of years ago. It is in near pristine condition, is readily accessible, and is protected by the Sea Pines Forest Preserve Foundation. The ring is relatively small, with the shell mound measuring almost 200 feet across and only reaching a few feet high. Despite being small, the Sea Pines Shell Ring has long been a very important place. The ring was first established 4,800 years ago, making it one of the oldest rings in the region.

During the initial periods of shell ring occupation tidal creeks flowed through Hilton Head Island. A creek entered from the Beach Lagoon area connecting to many other creeks on the island. In later years, many of the creeks were isolated from salt water becoming sloughs- freshwater habitats with fertile soil.



Research at the Sea Pines Shell Ring recovered pottery that originated from different locations, including from the coastline to the north and south, as well as from nearby river valleys. This would suggest that this was a place where people gathered, likely to engage in ceremonies, meet neighbors and friends, and celebrate.



Most of what we know about the Sea Pines Shell Ring comes from research conducted by Binghamton University (New York) between 2015-2019 and was funded by the National Science Foundation and the National Geographic Society. A grant from the Town of Hilton Head Island Accommodations Tax (ATAX) program assisted to produce educational material for this site. A special thanks goes to Dr. Matthew Sanger and his research team for their efforts and dedication. The Sea Pines Shell Ring is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

LIFE AT THE SEA PINES SHELL RING



Video 4

Although it was first established almost 5,000 years ago, the Sea Pines Shell Ring was only lightly used until around 4,000 years ago. At that time a community moved in and began living at the site year round. This community was probably small, perhaps only 5-6 families, likely living outside the ring. The community gathered in the ring to prepare food, tools, nets and pottery. On special occasions neighboring groups would join the local community and gather in its plaza.

Archaeologists suspect that these gatherings included a wide range of native peoples. Their excavations recovered a large number of highly decorated pots, many of them quite large- the sort of thing that one would take to impress while attending a large party.



Archaeologists actually recovered what they call a “pot drop”- a group of 3 or 4 large bowls stacked on top of one another- dropped roughly 4,000 years ago with food remains still in them.

Daily life in the Sea Pines Shell Ring was filled with a variety of activities, including harvesting food from the creeks and marshes.



A few of the spear points discovered in the Sea Pines Shell Ring.

CONTINUED IMPORTANCE OF THE RING



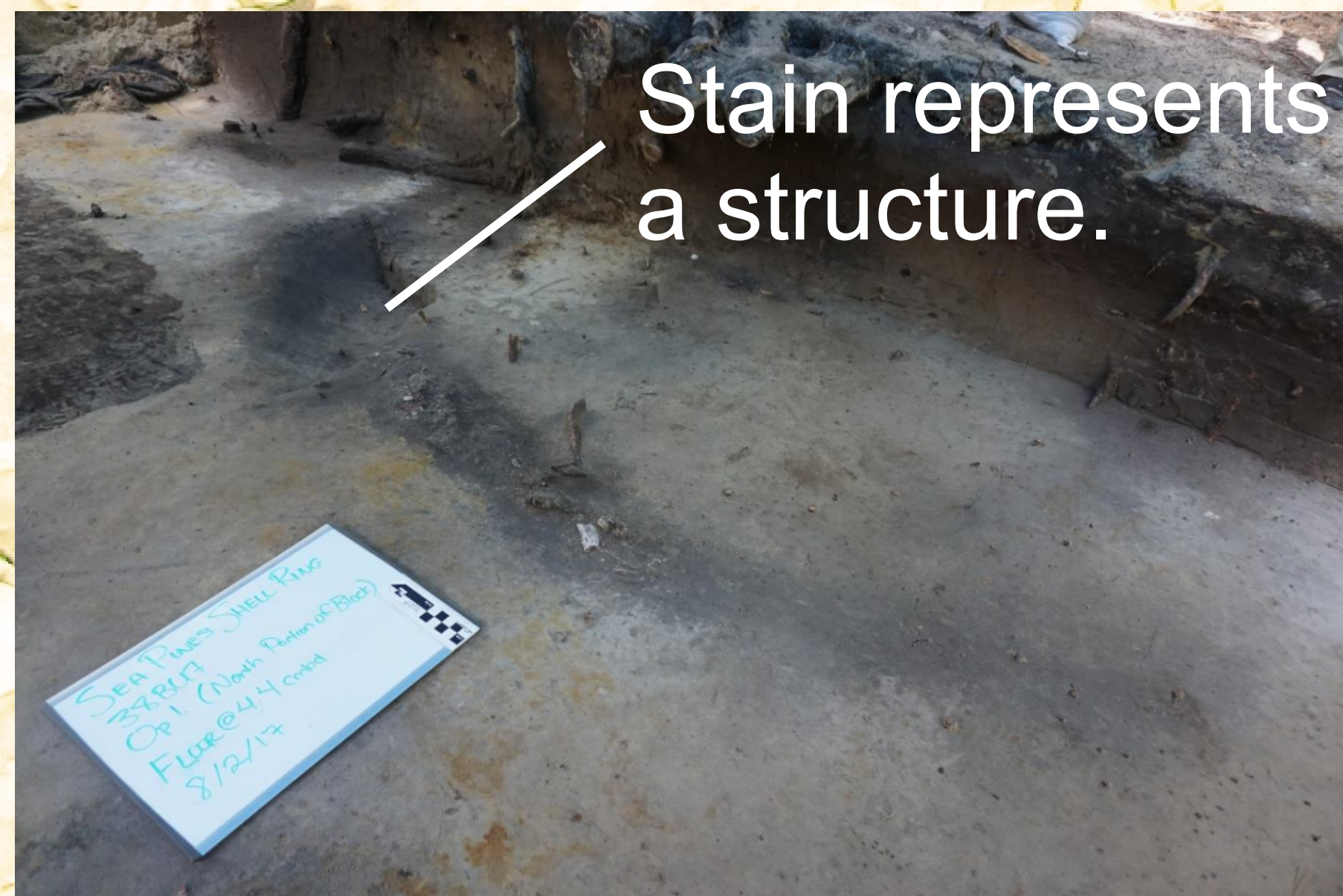
Video 5

Likely due to falling sea levels, native peoples left the Sea Pines Shell Ring for several hundred years. They returned to the island when sea levels bounced back roughly 3,000 years ago. At that time they started living in small villages arranged around garden plots. Although they did not live at the ring, it still remained an important place. Archaeologists believe that they returned to the site several times, during which they cremated their dead inside of small structures.

Some of the pits used to cremate the dead turned into a sort of concrete, likely formed when bone was mixed with shell at high heat and then filled with water. Respecting the wishes of modern Native American communities in the area, the cremation pits remain in their original locations. You are standing on a site that contains burials, please treat it with the respect it deserves.



Excavation of concrete like remains.



Stain represents a structure.



Concrete like remains found within structure.

Research shows that native peoples continued to use the ring in other ways as well, including in the direct center of the ring where people dug pits, likely to store and process food. As recently as 500 years ago stone tools were made and sharpened in the center of the ring.

The South Carolina coast is the ancestral homelands of a wide range of local groups. The Escamacu likely lived on Hilton Head Island, along with their neighbors the Hoya and Witheaugh. There were regional groups nearby like the Touppa, Mayon, Stalame, and Kussah. All of these groups have since been disbanded. Their members were widely dispersed among a wide range of modern Native American tribes, including the Seminole, Muskogee (Creek), Catawba, Cherokee, and many other groups. These communities are still linked to the homes of their ancestors and often feel a close kinship to places like the Sea Pines Shell Ring even after thousands of years have passed.

HILTON HEAD ARCHAEOLOGY



Video 6

There is much more history to learn about on Hilton Head Island, including at other archaeological sites and at local museums, like the Coastal Discovery Museum. All of the sites below are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The Ford Shell Rings, also known as the Skull Creek Shell Rings, are about the same age as the Sea Pines Shell Ring. While not as well researched, these rings also appear to be an ancient place of gathering and residence. The Ford Shell Rings are unique in that two rings connect to form a figure 8.

The Green Shell Enclosure looks like a shell ring as it includes a large raised circle. Much of the enclosure is made of earth rather than oysters and clams. This shell midden dates to roughly 700 -1,000 years ago. The site is easily accessible with walking paths and interpretive signs.



Stoney-Baynard Ruins are the remains of a plantation house that began construction in 1793. Along with several slave quarters, the Stoney-Baynard Ruins is a good example of tabby construction, meaning it was created by making a mixture of shell, lime, sand, and water to form a type of masonry.

The Zion Chapel of Ease Cemetery has been in use since the late 1700s. Baynard Mausoleum was built in 1846 making it the oldest structure still standing on the island. This site is the burial place of many influential and important families from Hilton Head Island as well as individuals who fought in the Revolutionary War.



Founded in 1862, Historic Mitchelville was the first self-governed town of formerly enslaved people in the United States. The town of Mitchelville had between 1,500-3,000 residents, demonstrating freedom and opportunity for African Americans. Mitchelville is an important place to learn of the compelling story of its inhabitants and the continuing quest for African-American freedom, inclusion, and equality.

