

From swamp's murky past, tale of plantation emerges

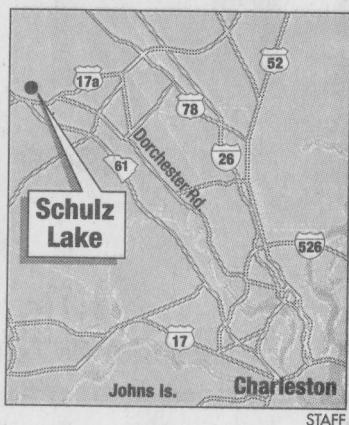
BY BO PETERSEN
Of The Post and Courier Staff

SUMMERVILLE—Back in Great Cypress Swamp so deep the British didn't dare go, a settlers' militia in 1715 won an obscure Indian battle that might have saved Charleston during the Yemassee War. A Capt. Chicken led them.

It's a tale of Schulz Lake, one of the Lowcountry's legendary backwoods fishing holes, and a tale of Big Island, the destination the British wouldn't dare enter and that's so remote that even today experienced hunters get lost there.

And it's a tale of The Ponds, maybe the most remarkable plantation you've never heard of. The tale, like the swamp, occurs past where Dorchester Road dead-ends into U.S. Highway 17A, just beyond the booming Ashley River suburbs.

Three hundred years after the battle, the plantation acreage is roughly intact. The Simmons family that has owned it for three gen-



erations no longer farms, but keeps it for hunting and fishing and as a family treasure. "It's a great avocation," Ralph Simmons said.

The plantation house is long gone, and there are few if any remnants of the past. The family is trying somewhat to restore the land's appearance before it was settled.

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Tale of plantation emerges from swamp's murky past

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THE MUD FORT

In 1695, a map was printed depicting British land-grant rice plantations winding up the Ashley River past the "Great Savana" wilderness. The plantation farthest out, almost off the map's edge, was The Ponds.

At the time, the malarial depths of the swampy Charleston outback were as wild as the Congo, an over-

grown morass of mammoth trees and almost prehistoric reptiles, feared tribes and whispered-about ghosts.

The plantation was set on a bluff at the rim of what would be called the Great Cypress Swamp, the river's headwaters over what would be known as Schulz Lake. The plantation took its name from Schulz and two other ponds nearby in the swamp.

The swamp was way out, a strange new world as wide as a johnboat is long. The valuable cypress and easily diked fresh water for rice fields made for profits that attracted settlers. The environs made for horrors such as predatory, yards-long alligator gar.

About a mile upstream from the lake in that miasma is the 5-acre bluff of Big Island, one of the refuges where patriot raiders such as Francis "Swamp Fox" Marion hid nearly a century later because the British wouldn't brave the treacherous wade to find them.

Even today, getting there is a slithering ordeal, and "when it gets dark everything starts to look the same," said Jack Kornahrens, who manages the land and hunting lease for the Simmons family that owns The Ponds.

One pair of hunters who trekked in to Big Island recently, saying they knew how to keep oriented, wandered out near Givhans — twice as far away the other side.

Even today the plantation is haunted by cinnamon bear and "large bobcat," in the words of one survey. Hunters swear they have seen panthers, and Kornahrens says it's panthers that keep ravaging the wild turkey population.

In 1682 Andrew Percival established The Ponds as a "fortified plantation," like most of the other outlying land grants. Charles Towne itself had fortified against Indian and Spanish attacks as soon as it was settled in 1670.

British and Spanish, "friendly" and hostile American Indian tribes engaged in ongoing trade-rob-or-skirmish shell games over land, deer skins, blankets, guns and other goods.

By 1715, Indians had been encroached on, diseased, enslaved, robbed and beaten by the colonists. Yemassee, Creek and other tribes began organized attacks on English traders working the remote interior.

In 1716, the Goose Creek militia was called up at "Fort Ponds." The militia was a ragtag assembly of some 200 locals who hadn't fled behind the walls of Charles Towne. The fort was almost certainly a mud-and-log redoubt at the edge of the swamp just downstream of