

**San Joseph de Escambe:
A 18th-Century Apalachee Mission in the West Florida Borderlands**

John E. Worth, Norma J. Harris, and Jennifer Melcher
University of West Florida

Abstract

In 2009, documentary evidence and archaeological testing led to the discovery of the archaeological site of Mission San Joseph de Escambe (c1741-1761) along the Escambia River north of Pensacola. Home to Apalachee Indians and resident Spanish friars and soldiers, the mission's excavated material culture clearly reflects the multi-ethnic nature of this late mission community, and is comparable to contemporaneous assemblages from Presidios Isla de Santa Rosa (1722-1756) and San Miguel (1756-1763). Of particular note is the aboriginal ceramic assemblage, which displays characteristics reflecting the origins of the resident Apalachee as refugees formerly living in Creek Indian territory before 1718. Archaeological excavations conducted by the University of West Florida during the 2009 and 2010 summer field schools have also produced evidence for several undisturbed wall trench structures, including what may be Spanish cavalry barracks constructed in 1760, as well as multiple overlapping structures under a prepared clay cap.

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Between 1698 and 1763, Pensacola Bay was home to three successive Spanish colonial presidios, collectively forming Spanish Florida's westernmost border with French Louisiana during the period (Dunn 1917; Ford 1939; Manucy 1959; Coker 1999; Clune and Stringfield 2009). Administered and supplied out of Veracruz, Mexico, Presidios Santa María de Galve, Isla de Santa Rosa, and San Miguel de Panzacola were in many ways archetypical borderlands communities, populated by an assortment of individuals of European, African, American Indian, and mixed ancestry, all living in close proximity to other colonial and indigenous communities within a permeable and sometimes-hostile borderlands region. Their rich documentary history has been augmented in recent decades by extensive archaeological work by the University of West Florida at all three presidios, providing new opportunities to explore the dynamic nature of cultural adaptation and transformation in the colonial frontier (Bense 1999, 2003; Harris and Eschbach 2006; Benchley 2007a, 2007b; Benchley et al. 2007).

One result of such studies has been an increased awareness of the importance of local Native American groups within the cultural mix that characterized West Florida during the eighteenth century (Dysart 1999; Harris 1998, 1999, 2003, 2005, 2007). Despite the fact that the indigenous inhabitants of this region of the northern Gulf coast had been severely depopulated by the time that Spanish and French colonies were finally established there, Spanish authorities took great pains to attract and retain Native American populations in the immediate vicinity of its Veracruz-based garrison settlements on Pensacola Bay. Local support was particularly important after the total collapse of Florida's westernmost mission provinces between 1704 and 1706 (e.g. Hann 1988, 1996, 2006; Worth 1998; Milanich 1999), leaving the Pensacola presidios completely isolated by land from remaining Spanish forces at St. Augustine. Archaeological evidence provides ample demonstration of the extent of such interaction at the three presidio

sites, as exemplified by the frequency of Native American pottery there, constituting up to half of the ceramic assemblages within these predominantly Spanish communities (Harris 1998, 1999, 2003, 2005, 2007).

Despite extensive archaeological data from these three Spanish presidio sites, however, the “other half” of this multi-ethnic borderlands landscape has until now been represented only indirectly, since none of the documented residential sites of Pensacola’s attached Native American neighbors had yet been identified conclusively and explored archaeologically. To this end, a comprehensive review of all available primary historical sources relating to Pensacola’s lost Spanish missions was initiated beginning in 2007, with the goal of identifying potential target areas for archaeological survey designed to discover one or more of these sites (Worth 2008). Detailed review of textual and cartographic evidence from West Florida’s First Spanish and British periods provided clear evidence for a number of different Native American communities living along the outskirts of Pensacola’s presidios between 1704 and 1763, all of which seem to have been relocated at one or more points in their histories. While documentary evidence was generally scant for all these mission sites, one in particular—Mission San Joseph de Escambe—was found to have both a relatively rich textual record of eyewitness testimony relating to its final years, as well as remarkably detailed locational information, particularly deriving from subsequent British maps.

By the late 1750s, Mission Escambe was one of two missions attached to Pensacola’s final presidio San Miguel (Figure 1). Documents show that Escambe was inhabited by Apalachee Indians descended from refugees who scattered after the 1704 English-Creek invasion of the Apalachee homeland in Tallahassee, while the other mission—Punta Rasa—was made up of Yamasee refugees from the 1740 English burning of St. Augustine. The chief of Escambe is

recorded to have been Juan Marcos Fant, who was also the same chief who originally gathered the scattered Spanish-allied Apalachee bands together at the mouth of the Chiscas River (later the Escambia River) in 1718 following a diplomatic visit to Mexico City the previous year. That earlier mission apparently relocated several leagues upriver in 1741, where it remained as Mission San Joseph de Escambe for the next twenty years (Worth 2008).

The 1756 establishment of Presidio San Miguel de Panzacola on the mainland at the present-day location of downtown Pensacola was accompanied by the creation of a new Spanish cavalry unit, and early in 1760 some 15 of these soldiers were detached to the Escambe mission as a northern out-guard to San Miguel (Ullate 1761). In June of that year, construction began on a new cavalry barracks and other buildings at Escambe, but an August hurricane devastated both Escambe and San Miguel, and the project was never fully completed. Early the next year, however, accelerating hostilities within the context of the Seven Years War ultimately led to the destruction of both Spanish missions in the Pensacola vicinity: Punta Rasa in February and Escambe in April (Roman de Castilla y Lugo 1761). While only resident Spanish soldiers seem to have targeted in both cases, the burning of both missions led to their abandonment, with surviving Apalachee and Yamasee residents congregating next to Presidio San Miguel before evacuating with the Spaniards to Veracruz in 1763 when Florida was turned over to British control at the conclusion of the war (Gold 1965, 1969).

The burning of Mission Escambe proved to be a boon for modern archaeologists, however. In addition to extensive Spanish witness testimony regarding life at the mission prior to the attack, subsequent British-period travelers and settlers still used the burned remains of the mission as a landmark well over a decade after its 1761 abandonment. A number of contemporary maps and texts from the 1770s made specific reference to the location of the

“Burned Spanish Fort” along the Escambia River where Spanish records suggest Escambe was located, and one of these—the Taitt map of 1771—is sufficiently detailed to provide relatively unambiguous evidence for the modern location of the landform on which the mission’s remains lay, especially when combined with other details from subsequent primary source material from the Second Spanish and American periods (e.g. Taitt 1771; Purcell 1773; Hutchins 1775, 1968: 79-80; Romans 1999: 267; Putnam 1853). The geomorphology of the lower Escambia River is comparatively distinctive, and fortunately has not changed substantially in the past 250 years. The relict Pleistocene alluvial terrace on which the modern community of Molino is situated corresponds directly to Taitt’s mapped location for the “Burned Spanish Fort,” and for this reason, Mission Escambe was chosen as the target of UWF’s 2009 Colonial Frontiers archaeological field school at Molino.

During the ten weeks of the 2009 field season, student teams conducted a systematic shovel-test survey of the Molino terrace extending generally from the northern end of the terrace southward along the eastern bluff edge overlooking the Escambia River floodplain (Worth and Melcher n.d.). With the permission and support of private landowners, an arbitrary site grid was established for the survey, and shovel tests were excavated at 20-meter intervals while the survey teams moved eastward from a local geodetic benchmark toward the river. Almost as soon as the eastern edge of the Molino terrace was reached, mission-period Native American ceramics and European glass beads began to appear, and although extensive testing was ultimately conducted much farther to the south, what was clearly identified as the remains of the Escambe mission were eventually localized in the vicinity of the first discovery. By the end of the season, 65 shovel tests had been excavated across the survey area, and mission period native ceramics were recovered from 23 of these, with imported Spanish majolicas, nails, and features appearing in

just 3 shovel tests near the central part of the cluster. Combined with remote sensing results from several areas, this reconnaissance led to the opening of four test units, two of which produced evidence of mission period structures, including a substantial wall-trench structure intersected accidentally by one of the shovel tests, and two overlapping wall-trenches under a clay cap layer. Several weeks of block excavations in these areas helped define plans for fieldwork the following year.

The goals of the 2010 UWF Colonial Frontiers field season were to finish delineating the boundaries of the mission period component, and to explore the three structures exposed during the 2009 field season. An additional 19 shovel tests were excavated around the margins of the site, further clarifying its areal extent. A total of 15 new units were opened in four areas, bringing the total excavated area to just over 41 square meters, not counting the shovel tests. Considerable attention was focused on discovering the size and configuration of the wall-trench structures discovered in 2009, as well as on delineating the sequence of what is now three overlapping structures in association with at least two clay capping episodes.

Over the course of two field seasons, a great deal has already been learned about the Apalachee and Spanish community at Escambe, though much of course remains to be explored (Worth and Melcher n.d.). The village was located just south of what appears to have been (and still is) the primary riverine boat landing for the Molino terrace, and was situated on the northward side of the highest elevation of the level terrace abutting the floodplain below. The artifact scatter associated with the mission site measures some 180 meters by 80 meters, comprising just over a hectare in area, though not continuously in all areas. The primary mission compound within this measures roughly 60 meters by 40 meters, just a quarter hectare in area. Test and block excavations in this area have to date revealed evidence for at least four distinct

wall-trench structures dating to the mission period. These include a massive post-on-sill building designated Structure 1, and portions of three overlapping post-in-trench buildings designated Structures 2, 3, and 4.

Structure 1 is most likely the short-lived Spanish cavalry barracks built during the summer of 1760 under the supervision of Spanish engineer Phelipe Feringan Cortés (Ullate 1761). The structure was clearly over-engineered with substantial use of wrought nails found throughout the trench fill, and measured at least 13 meters east-west. A corner was discovered on the last day of 2010 fieldwork, but further delineation of the barracks await this coming year's fieldwork. Structures 2, 3, and 4 are tentatively interpreted to have been the convento structure associated with the Franciscan mission at the site, possibly rebuilt and reconfigured three times during the 20-year occupation of the site. Spanish soldiers were garrisoned in the convento during the construction of the barracks just to the north, and so material culture reflects both religious and military occupation.

Other areas of the site display clear evidence of activity areas that may also be associated with Apalachee dwellings or other structures, some or all of which may be characterized by single post construction, but for which definitive evidence is still lacking. Several mission-era posts were discovered in an area of substantial 18th-century residential debris during 2010, alongside a cluster of three presumed smudge pits filled with charred corn cobs and wood. This area also produced evidence for an unusual brick-filled trench running at an angle directly downslope from the foot of the Spanish barracks, and the presence of a deeper channel containing two superimposed sets of paired wrought nails may possibly indicate this was some sort of "French drain" feature constructed to draw groundwater away from the post-on-sill foundation. Further work is needed in order to confirm this possibility.

Laboratory analysis of the 2009 artifact collections from Mission Escambe has been completed, and analysis of the 2010 collections is still ongoing. Results reveal that the majority of the mission ceramic assemblage is comprised of various types of Native American pottery. Sand/grit temper dominates the total site assemblage, followed by shell temper as the next most common temper, then grog, and finally mixed shell and grog (Figure 2). While the majority of the sherds recovered are plain (69%), for the remaining decorated sherds, roughening (predominantly brushing) is the most common technique, followed by incising, check and complicated stamping, and slipping (Figure 3). In general, the Native American assemblage resembles a blend of Blackmon-phase ceramics of the early 18th-century Lower Creeks with San Luis-phase ceramics of the Apalachee of the same time period (Knight and Mistovich 1984; Mistovich and Knight 1986; Scarry 1984, 1985). This interpretation actually matches quite well with the documented history of these refugee Apalachee, many of whom lived among the Creeks for 14 years before relocating to the Escambia River in 1718 (Worth 2008). Their named ethnicity may have been Apalachee, but their ceramic material culture bore strong and unmistakable traces of their previous sphere of social interaction among the Creeks.

Apart from architectural materials such as iron nails and bricks, European material culture is evidenced by a range of items including Spanish majolica and lead-glazed coarse earthenwares, porcelain, glass container fragments (some retouched), clay pipe stems, glass seed beads, lead shot and sprue, gunflints, a stamped lead bale-seal, and a straight razor. As yet, little European material has been found outside the primary mission compound at the site, suggesting much of it may have been associated with resident missionaries or soldiers. Durable Apalachee material culture seems to have been far more Indian than Spanish even as late as the 1760s, despite well over a century of close association with the Spanish Florida mission system.

In comparison to the contemporary Presidio Santa Rosa to the south, Mission Escambe displays both similarities and differences (Harris and Eschbach 2006; Harris 2007; Worth and Melcher n.d.). As would be expected given Escambe's limited Spanish presence and inland distance from Spanish shipping lanes, European material culture is only minimally-represented at Mission Escambe when compared with Santa Rosa. Native American ceramic assemblages are very comparable between the two sites, however, including both temper and decorative technique (Figures 4 and 5). Observed differences, such as the higher percentage of sand/grit compared to shell at Santa Rosa, and the higher percentage of stamped decoration compared to incised there as well, are most likely explained by the fact that Santa Rosa's assemblage included ceramics from both neighboring Apalachee and Yamasee missions, while Escambe was exclusively Apalachee, and thus represented a smaller subset without the post-1740 influences of Atlantic coastal Altamaha/San Marcos ceramic series, which are present at Santa Rosa but absent from Escambe. Within the realm of architecture, the wall-trench structures at Escambe seem to be very comparable to post-on-sill and post-in-ground structures documented at Santa Rosa, though full building dimensions are not yet known from either site. Apart from these probable Spanish structures, however, as yet we have no definitive evidence for whether the Apalachee used European or indigenous architecture, though present indications suggest Apalachee single-post construction may still have been in use.

UWF excavations at San Joseph de Escambe will continue for a third field season in the summer of 2011, and we hope to find answers to many of the questions we have thus far generated at the site. We are encouraged by the remarkable state of preservation evidenced at the site, the core of which is unplowed, and by the strikingly complex nature of the material culture assemblage associated with this multi-ethnic colonial community. Now that we finally

have access to a relatively well-documented Pensacola mission site, we anticipate being able to combine and compare these results with those from presidio excavations in an effort to understand better the nature of the relationship between Spanish colonists and their local Native American allies. Further research, both archaeological and archival, should allow us to gain even deeper insights into the nature of cultural dynamics in a pluralistic colonial setting such as Spanish West Florida's 18th-century borderlands.

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Figure 1: Presidios and Missions around Pensacola Bay, 1740s-1761.

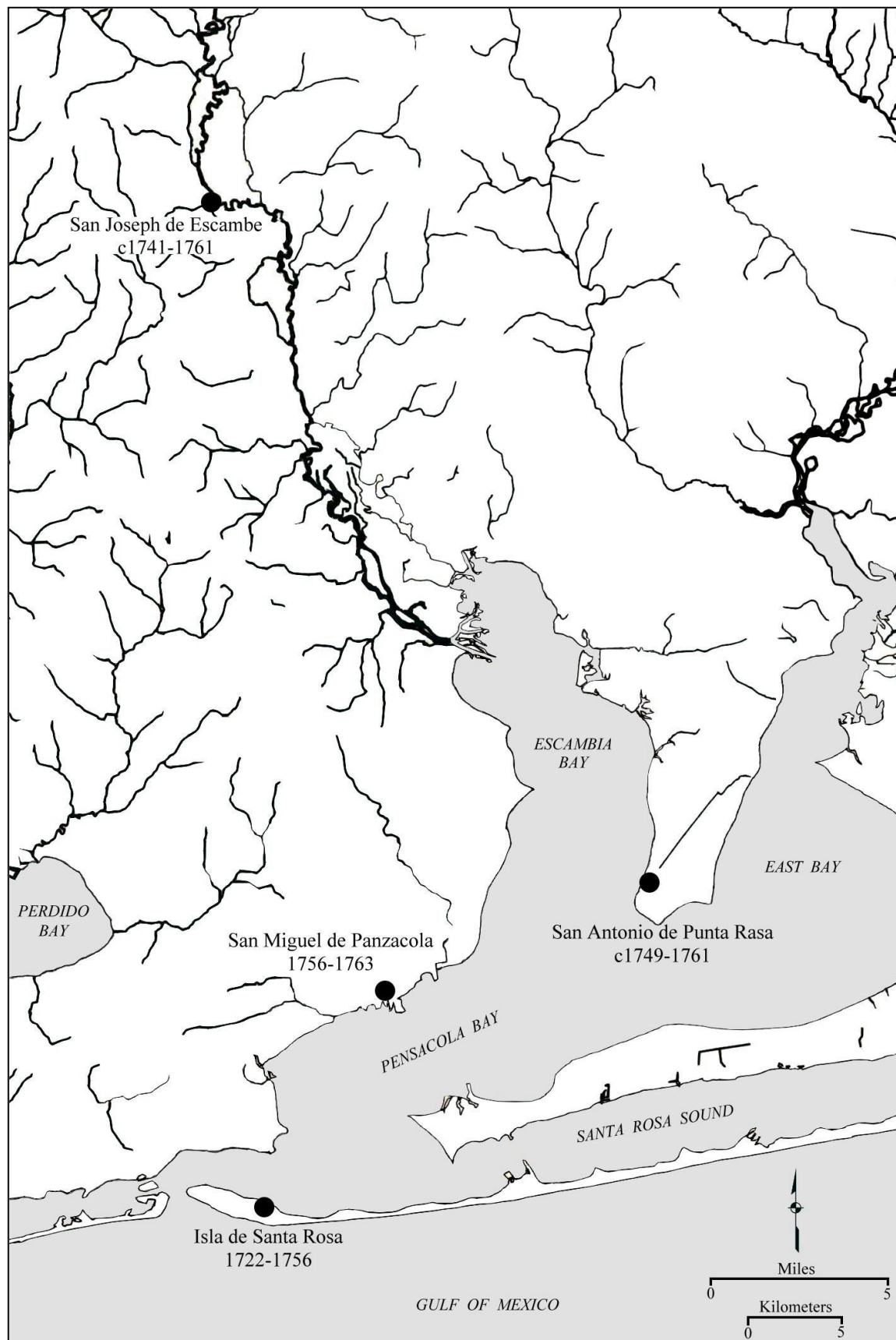


Figure 2: Native American ceramic temper, Mission Escambe, 2009 Excavations.

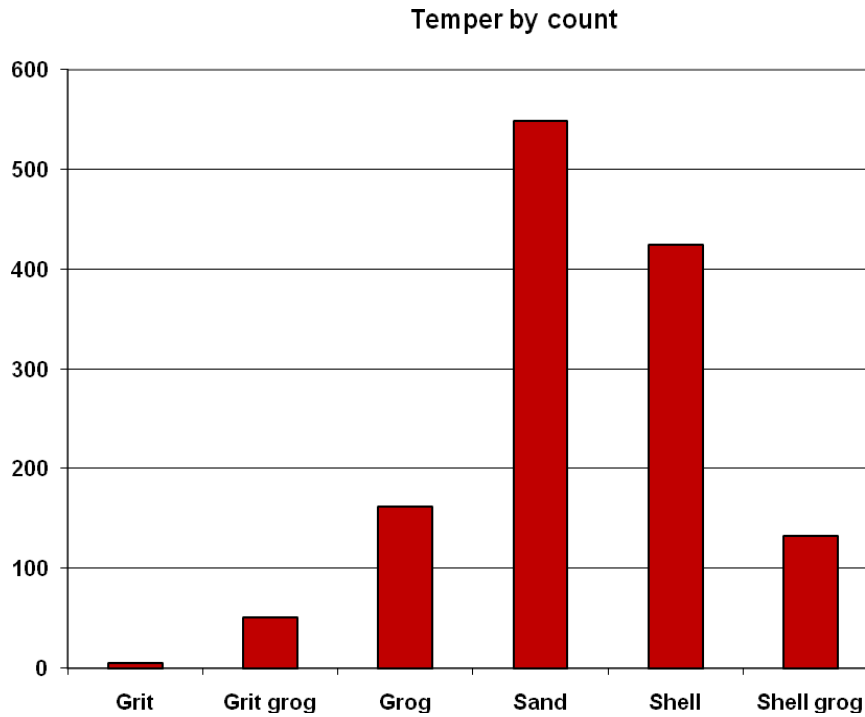


Figure 3: Native American ceramic decoration, Mission Escambe, 2009 Excavations.

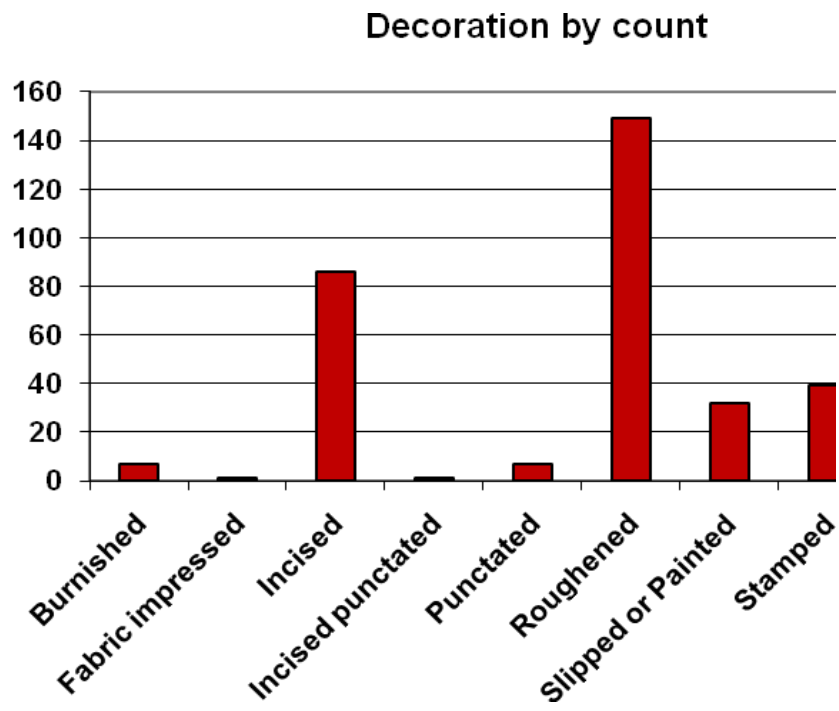


Figure 4: Native American ceramic temper, Escambe vs. Santa Rosa.

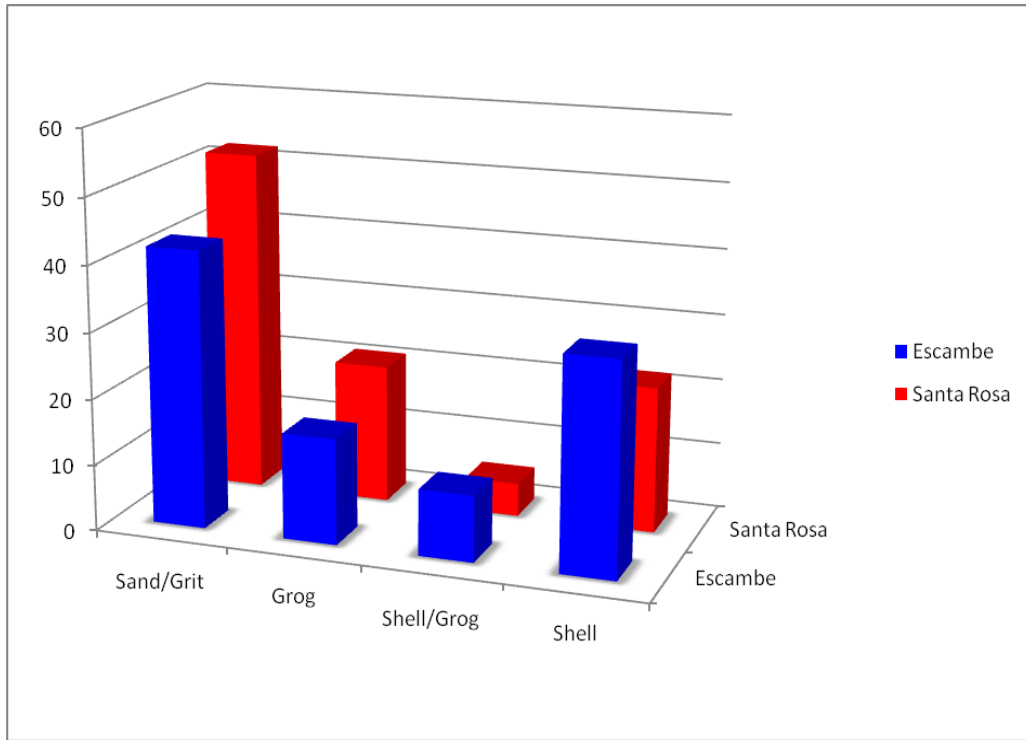


Figure 5: Native American ceramic decoration, Escambe vs. Santa Rosa.

