

# Anthro Notes

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## THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LIFE

Excavations of slave cabins in the late 1960's marked the beginning of a new and important field known as African American archaeology.

African American archaeology studies the daily lives of past African American communities through the analysis of the tangible material remains recovered from the places where members of these communities once lived and worked. From the careful study of broken pottery, mortar, food bone, tools, buttons, beads, and other objects, archaeologists are able to piece together information on the ways African Americans built their houses, prepared their food, and crafted household equipment and personal possessions.

Archaeologists engaged in this research are ultimately seeking answers to questions such

as: How was an African heritage transplanted, replaced, or reinterpreted in America? In what ways are the recovered artifacts from African American sites the reflection of cultural patterns or of social conditions--poverty and restricted access to material goods? What are the differences in the material lives of slaves, free blacks, and tenant farmers and of African Americans living in urban versus rural communities? How did African Americans survive the rigors of everyday life?

Archaeologists first began to study African Americans as part of a growing scholarly interest emphasizing the history of people who created or left behind few written documents. Enslaved African Americans were generally denied the opportunity to learn reading and writing skills. Even after emancipation, many former slaves, lacking



other alternatives, were forced to return to plantations as wage laborers and land renters, where they remained poor and illiterate. Thus, most written records used to examine the five hundred year history of African Americans are the products of European Americans whose understanding of African American culture was often flawed. Additionally, these records are one-sided as these contain only information that interested the author. For example, slaveowners and plantation managers generally recorded information on slave health, his or her capacity to perform work, and behavior considered deviant. These documents rarely contain descriptions of objects slaves made and used or of other cultural expressions.

The archaeological record is also biased. The archaeologist can only interpret abandoned, discarded, or lost objects preserved in buried deposits. This leaves out any object that may have been kept through the years and handed down from generation to generation or any object made of materials that do not preserve well underground. Moreover, artifacts provide the basis for inferences about particular aspects of behavior, not direct evidence of behavior. Therefore, the interpretation of the material record requires archaeologists to incorporate historical and ethnographic descriptions of behavior derived from written sources and oral tradition.

#### The Search for an African Heritage: Ceramics, Mud Houses, and Ritual Items

In the archaeological study of African American sites, archaeologists are particularly interested in artifacts suggestive of either an African heritage or of newly created African American traditions. Although the evidence thus far uncovered is fragmentary, and interpretations are tentative, these finds supply empirical data for the widely held view that enslaved Africans and their descendants nurtured and sustained cultural traditions in spite of the oppressive, dehumanizing conditions of slavery. Some of the most convincing evidence that supports the persistence of African heritage includes: slave-made ceramics recovered from plantations in South Carolina and

Virginia; the building of African-style mud-wall houses on 18th century plantations in South Carolina; and ritual paraphernalia of a traditional healer recovered from a cabin in Texas occupied during and after slavery.

The most frequently recovered artifacts produced by African Americans are ceramics used for preparing, serving, and storing food. So far, ceramics produced by African Americans have been recovered from numerous sites in South Carolina, Virginia, and several islands in the Caribbean. In the southern United States, these ceramics called "colonoware" are low-fired, unglazed earthenware that resemble traditional pottery produced by Native Americans. Until the past decade, archaeologists thought that only Native Americans had produced colonoware, and it still seems likely that Indians created certain European-styled vessels such as shallow plates and bowls with ring feet that English settlers would have valued. But now most scholars agree that African slaves produced a special variety of this handbuilt pottery, particularly the rounded forms, because much of it has been found at sites that date long after the demise of local Indians.

In South Carolina, the first real clue that African Americans made their own pottery came when fragments turned up that appeared to have been fired on the premises of Drayton Hall, a plantation located west of Charleston, South Carolina. Colonoware often comprises 80 to 90 percent of the ceramics found at sites occupied by slaves in the 1700's. Further research by Leland Ferguson, an historical archaeologist at the University of South Carolina, has shown that some of the South Carolina forms resemble pottery still made in parts of West Africa today. More recently, he has identified markings on some pottery fragments that are similar to the cosmograms used in the traditional rituals of peoples in the Congo-Angolan region of Africa. Cosmograms symbolize the way a society perceives the universe. The markings consist of a cross enclosed in a circle, which represents the daily course of the sun and the continuity of life: birth, death, and rebirth.

Why is evidence of pottery making among enslaved African Americans important? The use of this pottery suggests that enslaved African Americans prepared food to suit their own taste, perhaps incorporating aspects of traditional African cuisines. Additionally, slaves also used these ceramics to prepare food for their masters, as colonoware accounts for a significant portion--sometimes more than half--of the ceramics used in planter households. This suggests that culinary techniques used by slaves influenced local southern white cuisine as well.

Excavations at the sites of Curriboo and Yaughan, two former indigo plantations in Berkeley County, South Carolina, revealed what may have been rectangular African-style houses designed and built by slaves. These slave quarters consisted of mud walls, presumably covered with thatched palmetto leaves, similar to thatched roof houses in many parts of Africa. Although no standing walls exist, archaeologists have found wall trenches containing a mortar-like clay. The presence of numerous pits, apparently used to extract clay, found throughout the sites, further suggests the use of clay as the primary construction material.

Since this discovery, a careful examination of written records has revealed several scattered references to slave-built, mud-walled structures. Indeed, previously unnoticed written descriptions seem to suggest that these African-style houses may have been commonplace. W.E.B. DuBois offered a description of palmetto-leaf construction in his 1908 survey of African and African-American houses. "The dwellings of slaves were palmetto huts," he wrote, "built by themselves of stakes and poles, with the palmetto leaf. The door, when they had any, was generally of the same materials, sometimes boards found on the beach. They had no floors, no separate apartments."

The mud houses at Curriboo and Yaughan plantation were built and occupied between 1740 and 1790. They were abandoned and replaced with European-American style framed dwellings in the early 1800's. This change in housing styles coincided with a period when many European Americans

came to view anything African as backward and inferior, and in the case of housing, unhealthy. As a result, many slave-holders began to impose their standards of appropriate housing upon slaves.

At the Jordan Plantation, approximately 60 miles south of the modern city of Houston, Texas, archaeologist Kenneth Brown uncovered an assemblage of artifacts apparently used in healing and divination rituals. The Jordan plantation operated as a slave-worked plantation from 1848 until emancipation, and continued with wage laborers, many of whom were former slaves of the plantation, until 1890. Nine cabins were excavated and the materials from several individual cabins revealed evidence of the specialized activities of a carpenter, seamstress, cattle herder (cowboy), and of a shaman/healer. The materials from the shaman's cabin consisted of the bases from cast iron kettles, pieces of utilized chalk, fragments of a small scale, bird skulls, animals paw, medicine bottles, ocean shells, doll parts, spoons, nails, knives, and chert scarpers. Many of these objects could have functioned in other activities and most likely did at various points in their lives. But when the artifacts are taken together, they suggest some form of ritual use. Support for this thesis comes from abundant ethnographic studies conducted in the Caribbean and parts of Africa that describe the use of wooden or metal trays, white chalk or powder, metal staffs, bird symbolism, and other objects used in healing rituals.

The assemblage of artifacts from the Jordan Plantation presents an excellent example of African Americans using mass-produced and reworked objects for a special African American meaning. Another example of the special use of manufactured objects is the occurrence of colored glass beads, particularly blue beads, that are found on slave sites throughout the south from Virginia to Texas. William Adams, an archaeologist at Oregon State University recently suggested that blue beads may be related to a widespread belief in the Moslem world, including parts of Africa, that a single blue bead worn or shown on clothing protected the wearer against the Evil Eye. Undoubtedly, other artifacts uncovered

from African American sites have been ignored by archaeologists who have been unable to decipher the special function certain objects occupied in African American culture.

#### Archaeological Evidence of Free and Freed African American Communities

Slave sites, the primary focus of African American archaeology, sometimes contain deposits that date after emancipation. Plantation sites containing deposits dating from before and after emancipation often reflect continuity from slave to free labor as was the case at the Jordan Plantation. However, a wide variety of African American sites have been studied; in fact, archaeological investigations at African American sites have been undertaken in at least 30 states, Canada, and several Caribbean islands. These investigations range from the home sites of well-known, often prominent individuals like Benjamin Banneker, Frederick Douglass, and W.E.B. Dubois, to entire towns such as Allensworth, California and Buxton, Iowa. Archaeologists have also examined African American neighborhoods in several cities and isolated rural settlements. For many of these sites, archaeology is the only source of information that describes the everyday lives of people who once lived at these locations.

Studies of free and freed African American communities have addressed questions similar to those of slave sites: What were the living conditions and basic material culture of these communities? What aspects of the archaeological record related to ethnic behavior and what aspects to economic and social conditions? Unlike the growing evidence at slave sites for ethnic behavior in ceramic production and use, architecture, and ritual objects, archaeological evidence of ethnicity at non-slave sites varies from site to site and is much more subtle. In some cases, for example at Benjamin Banneker's home site, no evidence of Banneker's ethnicity is revealed from the archaeological record. The assemblage from his 18th century farmstead in rural Maryland was found to be identical to those recovered from sites of European American settlers of similar social and economic status living at the same time

as Banneker. This degree of assimilation may characterize many other free African Americans living during the time of slavery who owned property and enjoyed a material life beyond bare necessities. However, bound by race, free blacks occupied a tenuous position, where they were at the constant mercy of whites, regardless of their material wealth.

Comparison between poor African Americans and poor European Americans suggests a similar pattern. Archaeology at Millwood, a plantation worked by tenant farmers and wage laborers from 1865 to 1925, revealed that the quality of material life was not based upon ethnicity or race but upon one's position in the plantation hierarchy. Archaeologist Charles Orser identified five classes of occupants living on the plantation (landlord, millwright, tenant, servant, and wage laborer), and observed that blacks and whites of the same class experienced similar material conditions.

Archaeological studies of African American neighborhoods in Alexandria, Virginia and Washington, DC suggest that ethnic behavior is most evident in food preferences. In both studies, the archaeological records of the African Americans were compared with those of European Americans of similar economic status. Although subtle differences were evident in purchased ceramics and other artifacts, the most striking difference was found in foodways (encompassing everything from food procurement, preparation, and consumption habits), an aspect of culture that frequently indicates ethnic preferences. The African Americans at both sites consumed much more pork than European Americans and displayed a particular preference for pigs' feet. Floral and faunal analyses indicated that an African American community in Washington also consumed collard greens and opossum.

Archaeology can also be used to examine material conditions associated with special circumstances experienced by African Americans. For example, preliminary work I conducted on sites associated with recently emancipated slaves suggest that ex-slaves along the Georgia coast were, in some cases,

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("Archaeology" continued from p.4)

materially "worse off" in the first years of freedom than they were as slaves. Structural remains from the cabins of freed men and women indicated that the chimney was constructed of reused brick, haphazardly built on a bed of oyster shell. Tools were used until they were completely worn, and occupants of the site subsisted almost entirely upon wild game--turtle, fish, and small mammals. A recent excavation of another refugee camp of ex-slaves should provide additional information of the immediate material effects of emancipation.

### The Diet and Health of Slaves and Free Blacks

Archaeological studies of nutrition are particularly important to discussions of slave nutrition, a realm of slave life that has been greatly debated by students of slavery. One school of thought suggests that slave diet was nutritious and that caloric intake often exceeded modern recommended levels of chief nutrients. The more accepted view is that slave diet was inadequate and malnutrition was a frequent problem reflected in high child mortality and in the prevalence of diseases resulting from nutritional deficiencies. The analysis of food remains can contribute to this discussion by documenting the kinds of foods slaves consumed. Studies conducted by zooarchaeologists (archaeologists who analyze food bone) indicate that slaves supplemented their mundane plantation rations of cornmeal and fatback with small mammals they hunted and fish they collected in nets. Several studies of faunal remains collected from sites in the southeastern United States suggest that food collection activities of slaves accounted for 35 to 40 percent of the meat in slave diet.

Analyses of human remains provide a wide range of information on nutrition, pathologies, and occupational stresses. One of the largest skeletal samples of African Americans was unearthed from an abandoned cemetery of Philadelphia's First African Baptist Church (FABC), which served as a burial ground for free African Americans between 1823 and 1843. More than 140 adult and children skeletons were

analyzed and reburied. Analyses revealed that the quality of life and the health status of free black Philadelphians and various slave populations were similar. These conditions were particularly evident in the analysis of dental enamel undertaken by Michael Blakey, a physical anthropologist at Howard University. Blakey introduced a new method that gives a record of fetal and childhood health by measuring defects in the dental enamel of adult skeletons. Results show that their lives were particularly harsh, especially as fetuses (linked to maternal health) and as children. This finding came as a surprise to Blakey who thought that free African American children would have had somewhat better health than did slave children.

Occupational stress in the FABC population was particularly evident among females, many of whom were laundresses. The stress of laundering is evident in their well-developed triceps and pectoral muscles and fingers. One individual displayed evidence of cervical breakdown, perhaps from carrying the laundry as a head load, and of bending stress on lower vertebrae. Tuberculosis, iron deficiency anemia, arthritis, and cholera are among the diseases the cemetery population suffered.

The healing paraphernalia uncovered from the Jordan Plantation in Texas suggest the kinds of folk medicine sought by African Americans, but excavations of slave cabins and plantation infirmaries give indications of the kinds of medications slave owners administered to the slaves. Excavations of slave cabins along the Georgia coast indicate that slaves regularly consumed patent medicines with high alcoholic contents and brewed alcoholic beverages. While some of this consumption was perhaps recreational in nature, the plantation records of a slave site I excavated indicated that patent medicines and homemade rum regularly were dispensed to the slaves as a preventative for rheumatic diseases. Future excavations of plantation infirmaries will possibly turn up medical instruments and other objects used to treat slaves.

From this brief overview of African American archaeology, it should be apparent that this research presents new and

provocative information on the lives of African Americans. Critics of historical archaeology often claim that all this information is in the written record; I challenge them to find it.

#### Suggested Readings

Kelso, William. "Mulberry Row: Slave Life at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello." *Archaeology* 39:5 (1986).

Orser, Charles E, Jr. "Artifacts, Documents, and Memories of the Black Tenant Farmer." *Archaeology* 38:4 (1985).

Parrington, Michael and Daniel G. Roberts. "The First African Baptist Church Cemetery." *Archaeology* 37:6 (1984).

Singleton, Theresa. "Breaking New Ground." *Southern Exposure* 16:2 (1988).

\_\_\_\_\_, editor. *The Archaeology of Slavery and Plantation Life*. Orlando, FL: Academic Press, 1985.

A comprehensive bibliography on African American Archaeology is in preparation and will be available from the Society of Historical Archaeology, Spring 1991. Write: Society for Historical Archaeology, P. O. Box 231033, Pleasant Hill, CA 94512.

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