

## African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

---

Volume 8

Issue 4 September 2005

Article 11

---

9-1-2005

### Van Winkle's Mill Update: 2005 Excavations at the Blacksmith Shop

Alicia B. Valentino

*University of Arkansas*

Jamie C. Brandon

*Arkansas Archeological Survey, jcbrandon@saumag.edu*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Valentino, Alicia B. and Brandon, Jamie C. (2005) "Van Winkle's Mill Update: 2005 Excavations at the Blacksmith Shop," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 4 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol8/iss4/11>

This Articles, Essays, and Reports is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

## **Van Winkle's Mill Update: 2005 Excavations at the Blacksmith Shop**

**By Alicia B. Valentino (University of Arkansas)  
and Jamie C. Brandon (Arkansas Archeological Survey)**

**When average Americans think of the Arkansas Ozarks, they do not think of industrial enterprises, captains of industry, racial diversity or African-American heritage. Rather, they probably think of the Ozark stereotype -- a region of the upland South that was historically inhabited by predominately poor, backward and white subsistence farmers. In a word, they think of "hillbillies."**

**On the other hand, researchers who have become involved with the history of the Arkansas Ozarks commonly encounter a much wider variety of historical characters. The nineteenth-century Ozarks were, in fact, home to not only southern white immigrants (the so-called "Scotch-Irish"), but also Midwestern immigrants, Germans, Poles, Italians, indigenous Native groups (such as the Osage), recently immigrated Native Americans (such as the Cherokee), free blacks and the enslaved African Americans brought in bondage by their masters to the mountains of the Ozarks. There were large disparities in wealth and occupation resulting in a wide variety of social positions and opinions not always visible in our collective historical memories.**

**Van Winkle's Mill, which has been the focus of historical and archeological research for the past nine years, is but one example of a place which points to a more nuanced understanding of Ozark history. It is also a site that is in a unique position to help scholars and managers interpret this hidden diversity to the larger public.**



**Founded in the 1850s, Van Winkle's Mill (Figure 1) was a booming sawmill community centered around an enterprise owned and operated by Peter Van Winkle, a New York-born Arkansan of Dutch descent who rose from making a living breaking prairie and building wagons to the highest levels of Northwest Arkansas society. Upon his death in 1882, he owned and operated the dominant lumber concern in the region (including Van Winkle's Mill, several satellite mills and lumber yards) and an elegant three-story hotel in downtown Fayetteville, Arkansas. His obituaries proclaimed him the "Lumber King of Northwest Arkansas" (Easley and McAnelly 1996:156-7) and later newspaper articles would frequently refer to him as "the greatest genius and captain of industry that the hills of Northwest Arkansas ever nurtured" (Elliot 1959; Funk 1962:7). Moreover, Peter was widely considered a principle force in the modernization of the region through his advocacy of railroads, telephone lines and other progressive technologies.**



**Van Winkle's Mill also points toward a doubly silenced racial diversity in the nineteenth-century Arkansas Ozarks. The labor force at Van Winkle's Mill included enslaved African Americans before the war, and several wage-earning African-American families following emancipation (Figure 2). Taken together with the skilled white labor (i.e., sawyers, bookkeepers, etc.) and unskilled labor pulled seasonally from the surrounding farmsteads, Van Winkle's Mill provides researchers with a more representative cross section of a nineteenth-century Ozark community than is provided by the predominate hillbilly stereotype.**

**Van Winkle's Mill -- and the community associated with it -- died in the early years of the twentieth century, but the site is now a part of Hobbs State Park and Conservation Area (HSPCA). HSPCA was created as a wildlife management area in the 1980s and is only now being developed as a state park that emphasizes interpreting its historical and natural diversity to the public. Fortunately, the managers and personnel of HSPCA have been proactive in regards to the park's historical interpretation and archeological resources. Park personnel initiated archeological investigations by contacting the Arkansas State Archeologist in 1997, and they have been supportive of archeological work and special interpretive programs since that initial contact (e.g., Bowers 2003; Brandon 2005; Brandon and Davidson 2003, 2005; Brandon and Hilliard 1998; Brandon et al. 1999, 2000).**



**Fieldwork in 1997 began with a site survey, identifying 24 features, and limited testing at the Van Winkle house site (Figure 3). Work extending into 1999 focused on a single-family residence, perhaps that of one of the freedmen and their family. Continued work into 2003 included a cultural resource inventory of Van Hollow and survey of the mill complex. This included the identification of an additional 6 features, including a probable dump dating to the late 1800s-1920s, a second dump dating to the 1940s-1960s, a gasoline-powered portable mill location, unidentified structure, blacksmith shop, and mule paddock.**

**During the summer of 2005, field school students from the University of Arkansas excavated the remains of a nineteenth-century blacksmith shop at Van Winkle's Mill. While previous archeological work on the site has focused on excavations of the slave and freedmen quarters (with some limited work with the industrial components), this year's excavations mark the beginning of an extended effort to concentrate on the industrial complex with a particular eye toward understanding the mill complex as a social articulation point across racial and class boundaries. Excavations at the blacksmith shop dealt with the forge and soil analyses for a cursory hypothesis of the locations of various work areas, while mill excavations concentrated on the flywheel trench and boiler platform.**

**Excavations in 2005 uncovered most of the blacksmith shop in an attempt to 1) define the layout of the structure; 2) collect objects made by the blacksmith; 3) uncover the entirety of the forge box; and 4) test the magnetic fractioning percentage study which had been**

conducted in order to identify work areas within the shop (Brandon and Davidson 2003:48-50). Fieldwork met each of these objectives.

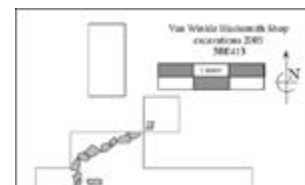
Continued excavation of the back foundation wall of the shop revealed a 45-degree turn in the northwest corner, and no turn in the southwest corner (Figure 4). However, due to the arrangement of larger rocks, it is possible that posts set on rocks supported the side and front walls. Also, it is hypothesized that the need for a substantial back wall was due to the constant erosion of the slope behind the shop -- the substantial stone foundation prevented the erosion from running into the shop.



Through examination of the recovered metal artifacts, it may be possible to establish the types of work performed on site. Particularly, it may be possible to follow technological evolutions in the blacksmith trade.



The forge box was situated near the center of the shop -- roughly square with a stone footprint and brick walls (as indicated by the brick rubble lying all around the forge; Figure 5). The forge's stone chimney has since fallen in a linear pattern to the west of the box.



Use of magnetic fractioning in 2001 (see Brandon and Davidson 2003:48-50) helped locate work areas in the shop using hammer scale and iron shavings present in the soil. Soil samples were collected and the percentages of hammer scale and/or iron shavings were determined for that sample. This is charted throughout the shop, differentiating heavy iron working areas from non-iron working areas. The magnetic fractioning done in 2001 indicated that the anvil was situated southwest of the forge box, and the 2005 excavations found what is probably the feature associated with the anvil (Figure 6, Feature D). This corresponds well with the magnetic fractioning data.



Perhaps one of the most interesting elements of the excavation was the discovery of distinct antebellum and postbellum occupation levels (Figure 7). As excavations proceeded, what was thought to be subsoil was actually a layer of sterile deposits intentionally placed on top of the burned pre-Civil War occupation. Upon Peter's return to the hollow, workers covered the antebellum layer with subsoil and reconstructed the building. The discovery of those two discreet strata leads to an observation about the

different types of fuel used in the shop. Prior to the Civil War charcoal was the fuel of choice, while following the War the smithy switched to coal. The switch from charcoal to coal typically occurred during the last quarter of the nineteenth-century (Light 1987). This switch also explains the rebuilding of the forge since a coal forge is built differently than a charcoal forge. These two occupation levels have much potential for our analysis of pre- and post-War use of the shop and the rate at which new technologies reached the Ozarks.

For more information about the Van Winkle Archeological Project -- including updates and news -- visit our website: <http://www.projectpast.org/vanwinkle/index.html>

## REFERENCES

**Bowers, Robin F.**

**2003** Ozark Industry: The Van Winkle Saw Mill, 1857-1890. Unpublished Master's thesis, Department of Anthropology, University of Arkansas, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

**Brandon, Jamie C. and James M. Davidson**

**2003** Archeological Inventory and Testing of Cultural Resources at Van Winkle's Mill (3BE413) and Little Clifty Creek Shelter (3BE412), Beaver Lake, Benton County, Arkansas. Report to the US Army Corps of Engineers, Little Rock District, Little Rock, from the Arkansas Archeological Survey, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

**Brandon, Jamie C. and James M. Davidson**

**2005** The Landscape of Van Winkle's Mill: Identity, Myth and Modernity in the Ozark Upland South. *Historical Archeology* 39(3):113-131.

**Brandon, Jamie C. and Jerry Hilliard**

**1998** The Van Winkle Mill and the Anderson Slave Cemetery: African-American Related Sites in Northwest Arkansas. *African-American Archeology* 22:1.

**Brandon, Jamie C., Jerry E. Hilliard and James M. Davidson**

**1999** Return to Van Hollow: 1999 Excavations at a 19th Century Mill-Worker's Residence. *Field Notes* 282:10-12.

**Brandon, Jamie C., James M. Davidson and Jerry E. Hilliard**

**2000** Preliminary Archeological Investigations at Van Winkle's Mill (3BE413), Beaver Lake State Park, Benton County, Arkansas, 1997-1999. Report to Arkansas Department of Parks and Tourism, Little Rock, from the Arkansas Archeological Survey, Fayetteville, Arkansas.

**Light, John D.**

**1987 Blacksmithing Technology and Forge Construction. *Technology and Culture* 28(3):658-665.**