

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 4

Issue 2 December 1997

Article 3

12-1-1997

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Roger Coleman

Ouachita National Forest

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Recommended Citation

Coleman, Roger (1997) "Slave Cabin Excavations at Rocky Shoals (3MN1708), Montgomery County, Arkansas," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol4/iss2/3>

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Slave Cabin Excavations at Rocky Shoals (3MN1708), Montgomery County, Arkansas

Roger Coleman, Ouachita National Forest

Archeological investigation at Rocky Shoals, a Forest Service campground in Montgomery County, Arkansas, was undertaken in 1996. The site contains the remains of a mid-19th century domicile, believed to have been a slave cabin. The terrace at Rocky Shoals had never been farmed and accordingly the site possessed a rare degree of integrity. Forest Service Archeologists were assisted by dedicated Arkansas Archeological Society volunteers who donated over 560 hours to the project. Over 30 square meters of the site were excavated, resulting in the recovery of 884 historic artifacts.

The 40 acre tract containing Rocky Shoals was patented on March 1, 1855, by John Cook, a prosperous farmer and mill owner. Cook died 3 years later and probate records indicate that he owned four slaves. The historic component at Rocky Shoals is believed to have resulted from a brief occupation by one or more of Cook's slaves, who may have provided labor for a nearby mill. Rocky Shoals is perhaps the second rural slave residence to be excavated in Arkansas.

Excavations revealed a five-meter square, single room, log structure with pen chimney on one gable, and a before-hearth cellar. Log sills rested directly on the ground surface. Two distinct fireplace hearths were identified. The first, at historic ground level, indicates that the cabin initially had a dirt floor. The second hearth, raised 30 cm with embankment from the cellar, which would have necessitated the addition of a wooden floor. This latter hearth supported an ash-filled basin, interpreted as part of a bake oven. The yard surrounding the residence contained a diffuse sheet midden. Many of the artifacts were burned, suggesting their disposal from the fireplace. One other historic feature, a flat-bottomed pit was located five meters downslope. It is interpreted as a storage pit.

The faunal assemblage is consistent with other slave sites and includes inexpensive cuts of meat: mostly forelimbs and heads, highly fractured for marrow extraction. Cow, pig and deer are represented. Venison cuts were also from the extremities of the animal, suggesting that the inhabitants were not hunting for their own use. Gun parts and bullets are conspicuously absent, and glass from commercial potables is very rare. Ten glass sherds represent a minimum of four containers.

A substantial collection of mid-19th century ceramics was recovered that is atypical of plantation assemblages where inexpensive hollow-wares are the norm. The

Rocky Shoals inhabitants possessed a variety of vessels, ranging from inexpensive moca ware bowls to more costly transfer-printed plates. Identifiable formal vessels include a teapot, four saucers, a bowl, two cups, and eight plates. It is possible that these ceramics were originally purchased for use in John Cook's own household prior to making their way into slave households, in contrast to the practices of large plantations, where less costly ceramics were specifically purchased for slave use.