

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 4

Issue 2 December 1997

Article 7

12-1-1997

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Recommended Citation

Sanford, Douglas W. (1997) "African-American Archaeology at Stratford Hall Plantation, Virginia," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol4/iss2/7>

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African-American Archaeology at Stratford Hall Plantation, Virginia

Douglas W. Sanford, Mary Washington College

Stratford Hall Plantation, owned and operated by the Robert E. Lee Memorial Association, is best known for its premier Georgian architecture and as the home of several generations of Virginia's Lee family, including signers of the Declaration of Independence and the Confederacy's leading general. From the standpoints of history and archaeology, it embodies over two hundred years (1710s-1910s) of plantation economics, society, and culture. Surprisingly enough, for all its fame Stratford possesses little surviving documentation for on-site events, physical features, and social arrangements. Hence the need for archaeology has long been recognized and supported by the Memorial Association, mostly in terms of locating and defining extant archaeological resources on its land holdings, and similarly, examining the structure and evolution of the landscape surrounding the plantation core, consisting of the mansion house, its supporting outbuildings, and a mixture of formal gardens and utilitarian yards.

Major archaeological campaigns occurred in the 1930s and 1970s, with the former concentrating on information for the mansion complex's reconstruction, while the latter emphasized probability-based sampling of the modern plantation's 1,700 acres. More recently, Mary Washington College's Department of and Center for Historic Preservation implemented both resource specific searches in the 1980s and more recently a landscape sampling program. Given the prevailing survey and sampling-based approach employed at Stratford, the theme of African-American archaeology, while constantly present and considered, has never been the sole focus of research. That situation may change in the near future as survey and data compilation efforts come to a close and bear fruit, including the need and opportunity to name a more specific research agenda. Nonetheless, certain now familiar facets of African-American and plantation archaeology have arisen in the research efforts to date at Stratford.

An inclusive approach to the topic of landscape within the plantation core, wherein this realm is conceived as encompassing people, work, and social relations as well as gardens and plant communities, has promoted the inclusion of African Americans in a number of ways. First, as the prime constituents of the plantation's labor force African Americans actually constructed much of the historic landscape. Second, these people exerted a constant presence within the landscape, whether as workers and/or residents, or as slaves who could effect their own vernacular landscapes at given times and places. Third, as essential components of the

plantation's political economy, slaves and slave-related spaces were planned for and the latter were materially instituted, and subsequently, these spaces should reflect changes in plantations' relations of production as well as the variable circumstances of plantation economics and ideologies.

Artifact assemblages derived from the 1990s landscape testing operations index a number of work spaces that likely were dominated by African-American slaves. As usual in plantation studies, problems concerning the separation of enslaved from non-slave contributions to these area assemblages remain. Similarly, other, more concentrated domestic middens on the property incorporate the variable mixture and influences from slaves, servants, hired workers, and Lee family members. For example, a diffuse midden or artifact scatter characterizes the area now termed the "West Garden", but which functioned originally as a service yard framed by such utilitarian outbuildings as a stable, store, office, and coach house. Recent field information and artifact analyses demonstrate that this multi-purpose work space contained materials and features for brick making, animal butchery, and architectural chores. The regular presence of domestic artifacts within the service yard assemblage suggests that slaves lived in some of the outbuildings that held other primary functions. While corresponding to a residential pattern recorded in documents and by archaeologists at other plantation sites, this particular finding is noteworthy for Stratford's future interpretive and research plans that concern slaves' varying living conditions.

On the opposite side of the mansion house, a building complex that contained a smokehouse, meathouse, well, and a laundry/kitchen structure represents another work area at which slaves comprised the primary labor force. Preliminary testing here has revealed a high degree of stratigraphic and organic material preservation, with the latter condition made possible by extensive deposits of ash and charcoal. This area forms a prime opportunity to look closer at foodways for the plantation community in general, but also for which slaves were responsible for most preparation, storage, and food preservation activities. Refuse middens in yards adjacent to this complex should provide additional information about foodways and meal preparation processes.

So far only one documented slave residence area within the plantation core has been investigated in any detail. The single documentary reference for this site is an 1801 insurance plat that records two "negro quarters" measuring 15 x 32 feet each. The quarters were described as single story buildings of stone with wood roofs, while a surveyor's sketch indicated central chimneys. The structures' more substantial material and in-line orientation were in keeping with the formal brick buildings of the nearby mansion complex, and all together this evidence suggests that, as on other "great" plantations, these "home house" quarters served as residences for slaves who worked in domestic or artisan trades. Currently, two quarters reconstructed in the late

1930s dominate the site area and unfortunately, these restoration period buildings' installation probably destroyed the foundations of the original quarters. Based on the recovered artifacts, the quarters is estimated to have been occupied between the late 18th century (post-1770) and the early 19th century (ca. 1820).

While the area today can be characterized as a picturesque setting of grass and scattered trees, archaeological testing demonstrates that a much different landscape once prevailed here in the form of large, but relatively shallow, ravine. During the latter half of the 18th century the ravine was backfilled with a variety of deposits, such as substantial domestic assemblages sandwiched between layers of architectural refuse from the mansion complex and leftover soils and materials from nearby brick making. Given the distance from other residential sites, the domestic artifacts (ceramics, glass, personal items, and faunal remains) should correspond to the quarters' occupants. A few fragments of colonoware are present as well, further supporting an African-American association. Of interest in this respect is the overall lack of colonoware within the plantation core, including the areas closer to the main house.

Finally, previous survey work at Stratford has located several other domestic sites elsewhere on the plantation situated at varying distances from the mansion complex. None of these sites has undergone more than a preliminary assessment, and consequently, while some correspond to slave quarters, others could represent tenant farmer residences. Stratford is now considering a comparative research agenda that would involve examining a number of these archaeological sites that, as the quarters for various laborers, index a considerable portion of the plantation's spatial and temporal range. In this case, the known sites date between ca. 1740 and the mid-19th century and correspond to a tidewater, Chesapeake plantation context. Archaeological and historical research at Stratford by Fraser Neiman in the 1970s already suggests one pattern of change for these sites, namely the removal of outlying slave quarters in favor of quarters placed closer to the main house, but at a distance that maintained the separation from the plantation core. This movement occurred during and after the Revolutionary War era and, in part, denotes how Chesapeake planters adapted to new agricultural markets and practices. Changes in quartering arrangements also instituted a new ideology of slavery more concerned with control and rational management. Conversely then, the earlier quarters presumably encoded a different style of management and living conditions for enslaved African Americans.

For the near future, more detailed analyses of the artifact assemblages generated to date and initiating the quarters comparison mark the directions for African-American archaeology research at Stratford. Since several of the assemblages and sites are not documented as to the ethnic affiliation of the people who occupied the buildings, the usual nagging question of "Whose stuff is this?" will remain an

interpretive issue. Most likely the Stratford evidence will neither resolve that question in all cases, nor the methodological issue of confidently ascertaining from artifacts who, within the overall lower class, was free, enslaved, European-, or African-American. Nonetheless, combining the circumstantial attributions of the Stratford sites with the comparative approach advocated here and employed elsewhere by other researchers, offers a means for producing meaningful cultural statements and for constructing a data base with regional implications about working class society.