

African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

Volume 10
Issue 2 June 2007

Article 21

6-1-2007

Plantations without Pillars: Archaeology, Wealth and Material Life at Bush Hill

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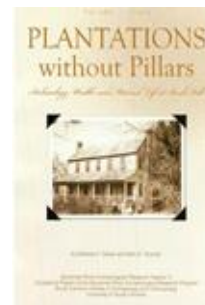
Recommended Citation

Cabak, Melanie A.; Groover, Mark D.; and Pitts, Jacqueline (2007) "Plantations without Pillars: Archaeology, Wealth and Material Life at Bush Hill," *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 2 , Article 21.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol10/iss2/21>

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Book Review

Melanie A. Cabak and Mark D. Groover. (2004). *Plantations without Pillars: Archaeology, Wealth and Material Life at Bush Hill*. (Volume I). Savannah River Archaeological Research Program, South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology: University of South Carolina.



Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Jacqueline Pitts, an Independent Scholar.

Plantations without Pillars: Archaeology, Wealth and Material Life at Bush Hill, primarily serves as an archaeological report on the Bush Hill plantation located in Aiken County, South Carolina, near the Savannah River. The research conducted by Melanie Cabak and Mark Grover made Bush Hill the first archaeologically investigated antebellum plantation site in the middle Savannah River valley. The authors used Bush Hill as a case study to reconstruct the standard of living of southern planters in the region. The research also provided an opportunity for Cabak and Grover to assert their arguments, develop a research design that includes a typology of plantations, test their hypothesis, and interpret data.

Cabak and Grover developed a plantation typology that is a synthesis of research designs from other disciplines. Time periods, crop regimes, and geography are the foundation of the typology and were used to explore other variables. Although the typology is dispersed throughout the text identifiable by sub-headings, the authors also provide a dedicated list within the text.

The underlying premise of *Plantations without Pillars* was to illustrate that plantations and the materiality of plantation life were not monolithic for planters and possibly not for enslaved laborers, along with dispelling the myth that all or most planters lived an existence reminiscent of the opulence depicted in *Gone with the Wind*.

The monograph informs readers that the site was occupied by the Bush family from circa 1807-1920, and owned by the Bush family from circa 1790 until 1951 when the property was purchased by the United States Department of Energy. Excavations were conducted on the site in 1996 and 1999, prior to the government's plans for further development in the area, which impacted the area of the main complex of the former plantation.

The family's oral history identifies a 17th century individual named John Bush as the ancestor who migrated to Virginia from Bristol, England. The authors tell us that the historical record does not confirm this, but that John Bush was likely a relative. Theoretically, I think we may accept the family's oral history since these traditions tend to contain some accuracy and historical studies do record a migration and active economic connection between the South Western part of England (which includes Bristol) and the Carolinas during the time period.

Historical documents identify Bush Hill as a 3,000 acre cotton plantation by 1850 with the family occupying a two-story, central-hall "I" house on the site for over 100 years. During the antebellum period in the Savannah River region the Bushes were among the area's socially prominent and wealthy families. However, the archaeological evidence indicates that they lived below their economic means and were voracious consumers of inexpensive goods.

Returning to the underlying premise of the monograph, Cabak and Grover assert that most plantations were not estate-like show-places, but fairly small landholdings worked by fewer than 20 enslaved persons (2-1). The authors argue that to continue the unrealistic characterization of southern plantations as large-scale and opulent inadvertently de-emphasizes the true contours of the harsh institution of slavery (1-1). With that said, the authors do not explain why we should think that a slave owner's opulence had a trickle-down effect, and their argument opens the question of what determined the amount of material possessions owned by enslaved persons. Let us keep in mind that the enslaved were an investment. The object of wealth-maximizing investment is typically to expend the least to get the most. That basic economic formula can hold true for both small and large-scale investors. What might alter the formula positively or negatively, perhaps, would be the investor's point of view, disposition, or a matter of conscience.

The authors further state that a "very small portion of white males in the Old South were ever slaveholders. Among this small portion of slave owners, an even smaller fraction of individuals were large-scale planters" (1-1). Cabak and Grover support their statement by citing Kirby (1989:27),

"Of 8,039,00 whites living in the 15 slave states in 1850 only 384,884 owned any slaves at all of these 46,274 possessed 20 or more. Only 2,500 had 30 or more. Only a handful of 'great-planters' owned 100 or more slaves" (1-1).

Somehow Kirby's use of the words "only" and "any" for approximately 1,000,480 enslaved people seems minimizing on several levels. Cabak and Groover could have elaborated this point further to address why it was that most whites owned no slaves. Did they oppose slavery on principle? Were enslaved laborers too costly? Were the holdings of such white investors too small to make possession of slaves profitable? Or were they afraid to own enslaved persons? There was clearly a fear factor at work in the Old South as evidenced by the creation of military academies such as the Citadel in Charleston after the Stono Rebellion. Further, when using census and probate records to determine the number of slaves owned, we may need to remember that enslaved laborers, as taxable commodities, may have often been under-reported. Cabak and Grover observe that "colonial laws placed a low tax rate on land and a higher tax rate on personal property and slaves" (4-2).

While seeking a more accurate picture of our country's antebellum period we must be mindful of how we express our interpretations; subtle forms of minimization, such as seen in Kirby's text, even when followed by statements that appear contrary, may place events out of context and lead to an erasure of sorts in the minds of those whose revisionism would minimize the effects of social inequities and institutions such as slavery.

***Plantations without Pillars* is somewhat dissertational in style. Nonetheless, it is a comprehensive, detailed, and clearly written study, providing very good reading and resources as an archaeological report and as an instructional manual.**