

## African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter

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# Oxon Hill Manor: The Archaeology and History of "A World They Made Together"

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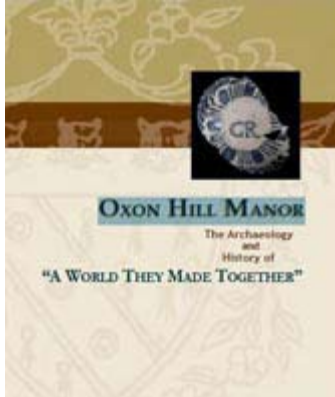
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## June 2011 Newsletter



John P. McCarthy. *Oxon Hill Manor: The Archaeology and History of "A World They Made Together."* St. Leonard, Maryland: Jefferson Patterson Park & Museum and the Maryland Historical Trust, 2010. 32 pp., illustrations, maps, bibliography, open access pdf format, <http://www.jefpat.org/Documents/AddisonReport-Final.pdf>, ISBN 1-878399-88-8.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archeology Newsletter by Carol McDavid, PhD.

This review is a bit unusual, because it is about a booklet – a 24-page booklet written to report publicly on the archaeological work that took place at Oxon Hill Manor, a 17th century plantation in Virginia, from 1980-1988. The primary author, John P. McCarthy, was one of the many archaeologists who worked at the site, where a variety of CRM projects took place over the period. Even though the final phase of archaeology “was halted due to financial difficulties of the company funding the work,” another corporation (Peterson Companies) funded the booklet as part of a subsequent development project on the same land where the plantation once existed. Therefore, the resulting booklet is a collaboration between McCarthy, John Milner Associates, Peterson Companies, and the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory at Jefferson National Park and Museum.

A cynic might have predicted that such a venture might be produced “on the cheap,” to meet some unstated (in the booklet itself) legal obligation – but this was clearly not the case here. This four-color, glossy-paper, richly illustrated booklet has a clean, professional look, with high production values and interesting, even elegant graphics. The collaborators chose the many photographs, maps, and background drawings thoughtfully, with taste and an eye for both design and story telling. There are even a number of “shadow” drawings (the founding family’s coat of arms) that ghost behind the various bits of text, resulting in a textured, varied, but still easy to

read and unified layout. There are number of things to like about this project – the first that it was done at all. The bonus is that it was done very well.

The booklet begins with a one-page explanation of the subtitle, “A World They Made Together.” This small section is very useful – not only does it tell us more about the person who actually did the writing, it also reveals the ethos that underlies the entire booklet – that both enslavers and enslaved created plantations *together*. In this small section of text, McCarthy is able to connect the ways that historical archaeologists write about such things *now* to the approaches that were more dominant when the site was originally excavated – without doing either at the expense of the other.

The booklet is organized into three main areas, following a brief introduction to the site’s history (Oxon Hill Manor: A Plantation World). First up is “Landscape: Houses and Gardens,” where McCarthy sets the physical stage for what follows. Here he discusses house construction and the overall landscape of Oxon Hill, illustrating this with historical and contemporary photographs as well as excavation drawings and photos. The second section, “The Planter Lifestyle,” focuses on culture and behavior – particularly material culture of course, given that this is about an archaeological site, but McCarthy makes clear and useful linkages, throughout, to what material culture reveals about everyday human decision-making. The final section, “The Enslaved,” is notable in its emphasis on *people* – real people, with real names and real jobs. There is no mention of the living descendants of the historical people he mentions (Dick, Jinny, George, and Beck, to name a few) – but then, descendant research was not common in the 1980’s, when this site was excavated. This is by no means a shortcoming of the booklet, and on the whole McCarthy is very successful in situating two-decades-old archaeology – very solid archaeology, but obviously somewhat dated in approach – within modern ways of conceptualizing (and writing about) the lives of enslaved people. In particular, I was happy to see that he never used the word “slave” to refer to any person – this alone represents a shift in language that is still in transition within historical archaeology, and it was most welcome here. His writing showed clearly that this particular language choice – a choice which subtly reinforces the reality that enslavement was not something someone “was,” but something “done to” someone – does not have to be clunky or overly wordy. McCarthy took great care with the language here, and in the aforementioned introduction, and was successful in communicating a nuanced, layered way of looking at plantation archaeology. His discussion of African Diaspora

archaeology, especially with regard to spirituality and the connections between both sides of the Black Atlantic, was extremely well done. Because of this discussion, the material record he describes in this booklet, even though “discovered” in the 1980’s, is now part of our contemporary conversation about the African experience in the Americas. Archaeological information is merged with historical and architectural information very gracefully in all three sections, and again, illustrations were informative and well chosen.

In addition to the primary text, the booklet contains several sidebars that illuminated various topics in more detail. The first was about Maryland’s tobacco economy and culture over time, including a colorful illustration of a flowering tobacco plant – there were nice graphic touches like this scattered throughout the booklet. The second sidebar discussed the timeline of the various archaeology projects that took place at Oxon Hill. This section would be particularly useful for anyone who wished to learn more about the many site reports that McCarthy apparently had to digest in order write the booklet – this feat alone is worth mention. Another highlighted the Addison family, who first lived at the site; another described what “Oxon” means, yet another discussed what a “Georgian” house plan is, and why it was important. One of the more interesting sidebars was about flintlock guns, and another was about the composition of pewter and why archaeologists do not find it often, despite its common use in everyday items for over two centuries. Throughout, the text kept the purpose of the booklet up-front – to talk about Oxon Manor as an *archaeological* site – but the text makes it clear that many different types of data had a role in understanding it.

As alluded to above, McCarthy had a very difficult writing job here – to merge different site reports from different archaeologists over a fairly long period, to update them with respect to how we do and talk about plantation archaeology now, and then to make it interesting to the lay reader. I use the term “lay reader” advisedly – there are a few bits of jargon and overly formal word use, but very few, and McCarthy takes great care to define (without being overly pedantic) the obscure terms that were sometimes necessary. His descriptions of various artifacts were very good, as were the explanations of what they revealed about culture and the personal choices of those who used them. My only quibble (and it is a very small one) is that there were perhaps a few too many passive-voice constructions. This is an incredibly hard writing habit to get out of (my grammar-checker tells me that several found their way into this review!), and in this case the difficulty of summarizing the work of many different archaeologists must have made that task all

the more difficult. Overall, the writing was excellent, the content was interesting, and the booklet looks terrific. It was a successful attempt to extend professional “insider” conversations about archaeology (that is, site reports from CRM excavations) to non-professional readers who would normally not have the opportunity to learn about this archaeology at all. *Oxon Hill Manor: The Archaeology and History of “A World They Made Together”* provides an excellent model for taking the stories that CRM archaeologists write – and all of us pay for – to a wider public. In this, it represents excellent public archaeology – both in the original sense (public archaeology *as* CRM) and in our more contemporary usage as well.

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