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Preliminary Results of the 2006 University of Florida Archaeological Field School Excavations at Kingsley Plantation, Fort George Island, Florida

By James M. Davidson, Erika Roberts, and Clete Rooney

The earliest attempt at an African-American archaeology in the United States that specifically addressed issues pertaining to slave life was conducted at Kingsley Plantation in 1968 by Dr. Charles Fairbanks, of the University of Florida (Fairbanks 1974) (click on the images below to see larger illustrations by the authors). However, after a brief 2-week summer field season excavating within Cabin W-1 (and to a minor extent, E-1), Fairbanks never returned to Kingsley and instead continued his exploration of plantation archaeology in the Sea Islands off the coast of Georgia, most notably on St. Simons Island (Ascher and Fairbanks 1971; Fairbanks 1984). His graduate students John Solomon Otto (1984), Theresa Singleton (1985), Sue Mullins Moore (1981, 1985), among others, went on to define plantation archaeology in the 1970s and early 1980s. What began as plantation archaeology has expanded well beyond the confines of antebellum plantation contexts, and is now more appropriately termed the Archaeology of the African Diaspora.

When Charles Fairbanks began his work at the slave cabins of Kingsley Plantation in the summer of 1968, his goal was in part to aid in architectural reconstruction, but primarily he sought evidence of "Africanisms." In his own words (1984:2):

"Kingsley had been a slave importer, with perhaps an unusually permissive attitude towards his charges. I had done what appeared to be an adequate amount of research to establish a number of things that I hoped to demonstrate. Among these were the search for Africanisms among the material artifacts of those newly arrived slaves, evidence of adaptation in housing, dress, behavior to the new situation, and data on lifestyle. At Kingsley we studied much of two slave houses, both probably of slave drivers or foremen, identified a well, and found that most of our assumptions were false. No evidence of Africanisms was found, even though we were digging in the structures of an unusually permissive slave owner, dealing with newly imported slaves. Belatedly realizing that the slaves came naked and in chains, I still could not understand why they did not recreate some African artifacts."



Although Dr. Fairbanks' work at Kingsley Plantation in 1968 was largely unprecedented, it was not performed within a theoretical vacuum. Rather, it was grounded in the work of social anthropologists, most notably Melville J. Herskovits. Herskovits was a pioneer in Black studies who with his 1941 work, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1990), almost single-handedly dismantled the long-standing belief that people of African descent did not retain any remnants of African culture or beliefs. These cultural retentions were termed by Herskovits to be "Africanisms." At the very beginning of African Diaspora

Archaeology, researchers began with the premise that given a shared set of cultural traditions and belief systems, a material culture assemblage distinctive to Africans and their descendants would be revealed. These early efforts instead revealed only subtle distinctions between Euro-American and African-American material assemblages in most instances (Fairbanks 1974; Baker 1980; Orser 1990:122-124).

Because Dr. Fairbanks did not find what he recognized to be any elements of African culture, or so-called "Africanisms," at Kingsley Plantation, the later research he pursued in the Sea Islands of Georgia followed a model formulated by his Ph.D. student, John Solomon Otto, which emphasized socioeconomic patterns and status differentiation, based largely on table ceramics (Otto 1984). It would be up to other archaeologists (e.g., Brown and Cooper 1990; Ferguson 1980, 1992, 1999; Fennell 2003; Galke 2000; Russell 1997; Young 1996; Wheaton and Garrow 1985; Wilkie 1995, 1997) in the 1980s and 1990s to make the case for the recognition of evolving African cultural traditions in the New World.



Cabin W-1, where most of Fairbanks' efforts in 1968 were focused, had been occupied more or less continually since its construction in circa 1814 to its abandonment by circa 1900 (Fairbanks 1974). By the late 19th century, the cabin had even been converted to a mule stable (Stowell 1996:74). Further, as one of the four larger cabins believed to have been used by an enslaved foreman or "driver," the occupation was arguably the most public and atypical of the slave quarters generally (Wilson n.d.; Wilson 1952). The unusual status of the resident in Cabin W-1, as well as the continual occupation and accumulation of both artifacts and later disturbances of earlier features likely rendered any "pure" antebellum signature difficult to see archaeologically.



As part of a long-term, multi-year reassessment of this early work by Fairbanks and his students, the Department of Anthropology at the University of Florida held an archaeological field school at Kingsley Plantation in the summer of 2006, with the senior author of this work serving as director, assisted by Erika Roberts and Clete Rooney, doctoral students. Just as Dr. Fairbanks articulated in 1968, one of the goals of the 2006 field school was to examine the complex social relations that occurred in the first decades of the 19th century within this decidedly unique context, where numerous African born men and women labored under a white planter who respected their heritage and culture to the extent that he apparently gave them the autonomy to express it in their own manner (Kingsley 1828, see also Stowell 2000; Child 1970 [1845]). While the search for "Africanisms" -- material evidence of African cultural retentions -- is an outdated term and goal, implying a static and timeless quality to a

rapidly evolving and dynamic process, a major part of our research was to establish the root metaphors and symbols at play within several different West and Central African cultures from the 19th century onwards, to establish a baseline or comparative to better recognize similar elements or mutable metaphors that might be encountered within similar contexts.

Between May 15 and June 23, 2006, the University of Florida Department of Anthropology conducted an archaeological field school at Kingsley Plantation located on Fort George Island, Duval County, Florida. Three areas received archaeological investigation in one form or another: the west arc of slave cabins, the open yard space south of the Fort George Club, and the shoreline along the Fort George River adjacent to the main plantation house. Archaeological techniques included surface collection, extensive horizontal excavations, limited shovel testing, and geophysical prospecting.

During this 2006 field season, 11 students and several volunteers opened up a total of 47 1x1 meter units in the slave cabin area, each dug between 10 and 40 cm below ground surface, within Cabins W-12 and W-13, with an additional 1x1 meter unit placed within Cabin W-15. Additionally, one 1x2 meter unit was excavated to the depth of 30cm below surface on the beach/shoreline along the Fort George River.



Preliminary results of this investigation have been revealing. First, archaeological data and a re-appraisal of archival evidence establish that Cabins W-12 and W-13 were occupied very early in Kingsley's tenure on the island, arguably circa 1814 -- when Kingsley and his slaves first arrived. This contradicts previous interpretations, which have argued that the cabins were not built and occupied until the early 1820s or later (Davidson 2006).



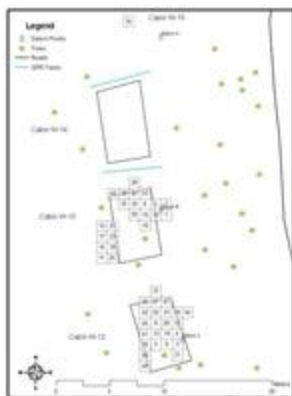
Second, all of the manufacturing ranges of the recovered artifacts from cabin interior and floor contexts have end of production or popularity dates in the 1820s and 1830s (e.g., French gunflints, 1750-1820; pearlware ceramics, 1780s-1820s; tombac buttons, 1700s-1820s; specific clay pipe motifs, 1800-1830). To bolster this, several forms of utilitarian artifacts that would suggest an occupation into the 1840s and later are entirely absent, such as Prosser porcelain buttons (introduced in 1840), short stemmed clay pipes (introduced in 1840s and later), whiteware ceramics (introduced in the 1820s and gained popularity in the 1840s) and ironstone ceramics (introduced in the late 1840s). The full suite of artifactual evidence suggests that cabins W-12 and W-13 were no longer occupied after circa 1840. Additionally, a reappraisal of archival evidence all but proves that of the west arc of slave cabins, cabins W-6 through W-15 were abandoned and uninhabitable by 1853, if not

earlier. The archaeological dating corresponds with Kingsley's selling of the plantation to his nephew Kingsley Beatty Gibbs in 1839, and the reduction of the number of slaves on the island by half (Davidson 2006).

A third revelation uncovered during the 2006 field school was the discovery of strong evidence for a porch on the back of Cabin W-13. This evidence is in the form of two dressed tabby blocks, in the proper placement to one another and in alignment with the west wall of the structure, to serve as piers for the placement of a wooden deck or porch addition. Importantly, the porch is on the back of the structure, or on the exterior of the arc, and is not facing the main house. This means that Kingsley could not directly observe activities on the porch from his main house and second story/roof observation deck.



A fourth result was overwhelming evidence of the presence of firearms within each of the cabins investigated archaeologically to date. Cabin W-12 held two intact French gunflints, lead sprue (from lead casting), a fragment of raw pig lead, and finally, several pieces of small caliber cast lead shot. Cabin W-13, which did not have as extensive excavation as Cabin W-12, still revealed an intact French gunflint. All of these artifacts were found within interior units, and in floor contexts. Charles Fairbanks' initial investigations of Cabin W-1 and an associated well in 1968 also revealed lead sprue, cast lead ball (approx. .44 caliber), and a gunflint. Thus, every cabin subjected to intensive archaeological investigation to date has revealed the presence of firearms. Importantly, two of the gunflints are of diminutive size and were primarily designed for use with pistols (Cabins W-12 and W-13), while the third gunflint was very large and would have been used with a large musket or trade gun (Cabin W-12) (Davidson 2006).



A fifth find of major import is the apparent chicken sacrifice and intentional burial of the chicken and associated objects under the floor of Cabin W-15. Designated as Feature 4, it is arguably the most unique single find of the field school. Feature 4 was derived from a 1x1 meter test unit excavated within Cabin W-15, and consists of an intact and completely articulated chicken (sexed as a female) placed atop a broken but still in situ egg, along with other associated artifacts. This hen and related artifacts were buried within a simple pit dug into the sterile sand/sub-floor of the cabin, just inside the front door of the structure.

Feature 4 is a very deliberate inclusion, and strongly suggests a belief and practice derived from specific African traditions. The bird was either a hen killed with an egg still in her body, or what appeared more likely, a hen buried atop an intact egg. A complete faunal

analysis will be completed in the Fall of 2006, and the results will aid in the interpretation of this feature. Beyond the egg, the artifacts associated with the hen are also very interesting; a glass amber-colored seed bead (perhaps one of several; since the associated float samples have not yet been processed), and a very odd object that is probably a natural concretion with irregular surfaces, approximately 5 to 6 cm in length and 2 to 3 cm in thickness. It is a mottled brown in color and likely a piece of ferruginous sandstone, a type of concretion or precipitate often formed in latteritic soils subjected to rapid episodes of wetting and drying. This concretion was placed beneath and in alignment with the chicken and the adjacent wall.



Feature 4, consisting of an articulated chicken (hen) with egg and associated objects, buried under the floor of Cabin W-15 at Kingsley Plantation

The enslaved Africans that Zephaniah Kingsley had with him between 1803 and 1839, which encompasses his tenure at Fort George Island (1814 -1839), were virtually all African born, or were the children of Africans (Walker 1988:60; Kingsley 1828, in Stowell 2000). While we do not have a list of those enslaved on Fort George Island and their origins or cultural/language groups, we do have as a proxy, an extremely valuable list of all Africans lost by Kingsley to Seminole raiders from his Laurel Grove Plantation in 1812, just one year prior to his arrival on Fort George Island. This list does miraculously give nationalities or language groups, including: Eabo, Calaban, Rio Pongo, Soofsoo, and Zinguibar (or Zinguibari). Additionally, two possible nation or cultural designations are given: "Mguinda" and "Mouse."

With the caveat that these period slave inventories often assign the point of embarkation as an identifier, which is not always reflective of the individual's true cultural group, Eabo and Calaban are clear references to the Ibo and Calabari peoples of the Niger River Basin and Calabar and Cross River Basin on the Nigerian coast. The Rio Pongo is in Guinea, the mouth of which drains into the Atlantic Ocean near the port city of Boffa. There is also a reference to the Soofsoo, a distinctive people (also known as Susu) also located in Guinea and portions of Sierra Leone and Liberia (Gomez 1998:88-89). Finally, "Zinguibar" is a likely reference to Zanzibar, an island off the coast of Tanzania. The name for the island is derived from the Persian word, "Zangibar," which means "coast of the blacks." It is almost a certainty that the three slaves referred to as being from "Zinguibar" in the Kingsley 1812 list, were from the island of Zanzibar or at least the east coast of Africa, which was heavily dominated by Arab speaking groups since the early Middle Ages (Alexander 2001). This is all but confirmed in Kingsley's own writing (1828, in Stowell 2000; Walker 1988:61-62).

In summary, the vast majority of identified cultures or language groups come from a somewhat restricted space within West Africa (for specific regional definitions and geographic boundaries, see Singleton and Bograd 1995:6). Specifically, of the 18 adults with known identities, 61% were from the Bight of Biafra (Calaban, N=8; Ibo, N=3), while a minority were from Upper Guinea (11%) (Rio Pongo, N=1; Susu, N=1) or from the East African coast, identified as Zanzibar (16.7%; N=3). The Zanzibar slaves were almost certainly not native to that region, but were brought in from the interior of Africa by the slave trade. For example, we know that "Gullah Jack," one of the Zanzibar identified individuals, was an Angolan speaker from a culture described by Kingsley as "M'Choolay Morcema" (Kingsley 1828; reprinted in Stowell 2000:68). Overall the relative rates of geography and cultural group essentially match those established by David Richardson (1989:13) in his exhaustive study of slave exports from Africa between 1700 and 1810, with the greatest numbers coming from the Bight of Biafra (43.8% of total exports), especially in the 1800-1807 period, when Zephaniah Kingsley would have been acquiring slaves for his Florida holdings.

Although this discussion of the ethnicity and cultural origin of Kingsley's slaves involves only those who were stolen by Seminole raiders from his Laurel Grove Plantation in 1812, as originally argued by Walker (1988:65), it is highly likely that when Kingsley arrived on Fort George Island in early 1814, the remaining 66 slaves that he brought with him were of a similar ethnic composition, in roughly the same numbers. This would be keeping with the trend of slave importation generally, with most enslaved peoples in the 18th and early 19th century coming from West Africa and particularly the Bight of Biafra, Gold Coast and Guinea Coast regions (Walker 1988:61; Richardson 1989:13). Thus, we have a rare insight into the probable cultural origins of the initial slave population at Kingsley Plantation on Fort George Island in the 1814 to circa 1820s period.

Animal sacrifice was and is currently very commonly practiced in numerous cultures throughout the continent of Africa, and fowl, including chickens and guinea fowl, are some of the most common sacrificial animals. This is perhaps especially true of the Ibo and related cultures in present day Nigeria. Chickens are routinely sacrificed to mark births,

deaths, dedication of houses or other structures, purification rites, and as general sacrifice to specific deities, among other acts (Thomas 1917; Parrinder 1961; Awolalu 1973; Ikenga-Metuh 1985; Njoku 1991; Christoph et al. 2000).

These forms of sacrifice also occurred in the Americas, as Africans (and later their descendants) were abducted into the Slave Trade and transported to the Caribbean or the east coast of the Americas. For example, one early illustrated reference to chicken sacrifice as part of a greater ceremony of an "oathing and divination ritual," was published in 1836 as a part of Richard Bridgen's book, *West Indian Scenery with illustrations of Negro Character . . . the island of Trinidad* (cited in Chireau 2003:59). One early 20th century reference to chicken sacrifice was collected under the auspices of the WPA Federal Writer's Project. In the late 1930s, federal workers interviewed elderly black informants in Georgia, most of them former slaves, and their stories and descriptions of folk beliefs were collected in the 1940 book, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*. In this volume, a woman named Sarah Washington described to the interviewer the events that occurred with the death of an individual in the community; ". . . in the old days, after the mourners had arrived, a chicken was killed. Neither Aunt Sarah nor Uncle Ben, however, knew the reason for this" (Johnson 1940:136); and also "...They kill a white chicken when they have set-ups to keep the spirits away" (Johnson 1940:167; cited in Thompson 1984:135).

Similar rituals continue into the present day, primarily through such creolized religions or collection of beliefs and practices as Santeria or Regla de Ocha, Haitian Vodou, Obeah, among others (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2003). In particular, Santeria is a well documented example of a creolized or syncretic religion, formed in Cuba and other islands of the Caribbean, and combining elements of West African traditional religion and cosmology with Catholicism and belief in the saints (Lefever 1996). This modern practice can be directly traced to the 1700s and early 1800s, when African slaves from different cultures began to be imported into the region and exposed to Catholicism. Santeria commonly uses chicken sacrifice, but to describe the chicken burial in Cabin W-15 as an example of Santeria would be incorrect, since the myriad West African practices and beliefs that combined with elements of Catholicism to form what would become known as Santeria were just beginning to coalesce in the late 1700s and early 1800s, exactly when the ritual act invoked in Cabin W-15 occurred (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2003).

As a material correlate of African religiosity and social practice, this discovery is exactly what Dr. Fairbanks was searching for in 1968, and serves, in part, as a vindication of his original hypothesis regarding Zephaniah Kingsley and his relationship with the enslaved population on the island. After the artifact and faunal analyses have been completed, even more information will be revealed regarding consumer choice, dress and attire, and subsistence and foodways, among other insights.

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