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**BLACK FOLKS
AND POOR BUCKRAS**
**Archeological Evidence
of Slave and Overseer
Living Conditions
on an Antebellum Plantation**

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In the historiography of the antebellum South, researchers have traditionally used narrative sources, exhaustively explored. These sources are usually written by members of the upper class or by people striving for upper-class status. Not surprisingly, such documentation reflects the perspective of its writers. Their impressions of the South's inarticulate masses are thus suspect, and a correctively their views is not available in traditional written records. The masses of Southerners, overwhelming illiterate, simply did not record their experiences. As John Blassingame (1972: 230) argued:

AUTHORS' NOTE: *Buckra* is a Gullah word for white man, commonly used in the South Carolina and Georgia sea islands. It is derived from the Ibo and Efik word *|m₁ba₁ka₂ra₂|*—"he who surrounds or governs" (Turner, 1949: 191).

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Probably no historian . . . will ever know how much our portrayal of Southern society would have been altered if small planters and poor whites [and slaves] had left as many records as the large planters have. In a sense, all studies based on literary sources are selective, the people they describe are selective, the generalizations apply only to that small percentage of the population which has left written records.

What the documents do not reveal, therefore, must be found elsewhere. It is here that historical archeology can provide vital information. The land itself may hold the mute testimony of the Southern masses. Since so few black and white Southerners left written or oral testimonies, the ruins of their dwellings and their household artifacts become their only legacy. And by excavating household sites once occupied by poor blacks and whites, archeologists can recover this lost legacy, thus illuminating the lives and sometimes even the thoughts of ordinary people (see Walker, 1974: 184).

Both archeologists and historians search for patterns "in the natural course of human social life" (Mead, 1964: 90). These patterns may be revealed in written, spoken, or pictorial survivals from past social life, or they may be revealed in the structural ruins and artifacts at household sites—the "concrete results of human happenings gathered in one place more or less by chance (Ascher, 1974: 10).

Moreover, people living in a society do not record all the details of its basic economic, political, social, and ecological structure, since they may be but dimly aware of such patterns and processes, or they may take them for granted (see Schuyler, 1970: 86). Thus, at times, historical archeology can go beyond historical methods, revealing aspects of past daily life that were never consciously perceived and recorded for posterity.

An early attempt to view the Southern masses from an archeological perspective was Charles Fairbanks's excavations of a ruined slave cabin on Kingsley Plantation, Ft. George Island, Florida, in 1968. By excavating a slave household site,

Fairbanks hoped to recover fresh information about black housing, possessions, foods, crafts, and daily activities (Fairbanks, 1974: 62). The following year, Fairbanks and Robert Ascher excavated a second cabin on Rayfield Plantation, Cumberland Island, Georgia, again to examine in detail the daily life of the slaves who occupied the cabin (Ascher and Fairbanks, 1971: 3). In his pioneering efforts, Charles Fairbanks presaged American Historians' present concern for the daily living conditions of Old South slaves.

Those slave living conditions touch upon a current historical controversy. Historians are engaged in vigorous debate as they assess the relative quality of slave life. Economic historians, Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, whose *Time on the Cross* (1974) ignited the current controversy, argued that the data from census returns and plantation accounts demonstrate that slaves had adequate housing and diet, stable family lives, and working conditions comparable to those of many white workers. Other historians, relying on such sources as travelers' accounts and the testimonies of ex-slaves, have stressed the harshness of Old South slavery. The controversy continues, for the written sources which describe American slavery emphasize the legal and social aspects of slave treatment and often neglect the material conditions of slave life (see Genovese, 1974; Ransom, 1974; Stamp, 1956; Elkins, 1959; Blassingame, 1972; Owens, 1976).

To properly evaluate the material living conditions of Old South slaves, historians require information about the quality and quantity of slave food, housing, clothing, and possessions. Such data is often not found in written sources. Archeology, however, can furnish both qualitative and quantitative evidence about slave housing, household possessions, and even diet. By excavating slave cabins it is possible to determine construction materials and building techniques as well as available living space, the expected durability of structures, and the amenities available to the occupants. Refuse disposal areas should reveal the discarded, nonperishable remains of

material possessions as well as the foods that slaves once ate. Material possessions could include artifacts used in work (hoes, for example), household utensils (such as ceramics), and artifacts used in recreation and status consumption (beverage bottles and clay tobacco pipes perhaps). Food remains could include the bones of domestic and wild animals as well as traces of domestic and wild plant foods (see Genovese, 1969a: 203, 1974: 49-63; Ascher and Fairbanks, 1971; Fairbanks, 1974; MacFarlane, 1975; Otto, 1975).

Because archeological excavation of slave sites was not anticipated by the site's original inhabitants, falsification and bias in the materials discovered are not problems in archeological research (Ascher and Fairbanks, 1971: 3). Archeological findings, nevertheless, do have their own inherent limitations, for many of the material items once used by slaves have vanished in time, lost to the archeological record. Decay and corrosion are not the only enemies, of course. Postbellum occupation, salvage, and disturbance of sites also hinder archeological researchers.

But in spite of these limitations, slave cabin archeology can provide evidence about the material conditions of slavery that rarely appears in other sources. And since assessing the living conditions of slaves without reference to the living conditions of free people is difficult if not impossible, archeology can offer comparative information. Archeological excavations can disclose the conditions of housing, diet, and the general standard of living experienced not only by slaves, but also by free blacks, poor whites, yeoman farmers, and overseers (see Genovese, 1969a: 15).

Frequently, black slaves and white overseers (who were usually the sons of yeoman farmers) could be found living on the same plantations in the Old South; such antebellum plantations offer rare opportunity for comparing the living conditions of slave and free people. One example of such a plantation, the Cannon's Point estate on St. Simons Island, Georgia, has been extensively excavated. Cannon's Point was a sea island cotton plantation where documents revealed the presence of slaves, white yeoman overseers, and a white planter

family—the Coupers who owned Cannon's Point from 1793 to 1866 (Scarborough, 1966: 5; Otto, 1975).

At Cannon's Point, household sites once occupied by slaves and overseers were identified from documents and by comparisons with the settlement patterns of other plantations. The ruined dwellings and associated refuse disposal areas at the slave and overseer sites were dated with documents and artifacts to insure that the archeological evidence from the sites matched the antebellum period of occupation, 1793-1861 (Otto, 1975).

THE SLAVES

Researchers at Cannon's Point excavated the third slave cabin in the northern set of four slave buildings. The site included the ruins of a one-room frame dwelling and its associated refuse disposal area. In use, the dirt-floored cabin had measured approximately 17' × 20', roughly 340 sq. ft. The cabin possessed at least one glazed and shuttered window, at least one door with a plate stock lock, and a brick chimney with a dirt-floored brick hearth. Possibly as many as seven or eight slaves may have crowded into the cabin, which may have had a sleeping loft for the children (Otto, 1975).

Though the cabin may have been somewhat crowded, the construction materials and the amenities of the cabin were somewhat atypical for Old South slave cabins. Most antebellum slave dwellings measured about 16' × 18' or less, and most cabins possessed only stick and clay chimneys and unglazed windows (Genovese, 1974: 524-525).

The field slaves who lived in the northern third cabin spent most of their lives cultivating the plantation cash and food crops: long-staple cotton, corn, sweet potatoes, and cowpeas (Hazzard, 1825). A visitor to Cannon's Point in 1828, Basil Hall, noted that "full hands" cultivated between one-half and three-fourths of an acre per day. Other slaves, rated as "partial hands," performed less than a full task. Hall claimed that most Cannon's Point slaves finished their tasks by "midday,"

devoting the remainder of the day to “fishing and dancing” (Hall, 1829: 3, 218-223; Otto, 1975).

This reference to fishing was corroborated by the slave cabin refuse, which revealed a lead slip-sinker weight used in hook and line fishing. With hooks and lines, the slaves could have caught most estuarine fish, excepting mullet; and by using nets, they could have caught mullet in the tidal streams surrounding Cannon’s Point peninsula. The slaves apparently caught most of their fish and turtles in Jones Creek and Hampton River, rarely venturing into the sounds or landward marshes. As a result, the slaves collected a rather limited range of the available fish and turtle species in the Altamaha estuary. Only fifteen genera and species of fish and two species of turtles were present in the slaves’ antebellum refuse (Otto, 1975).

The biggest surprise of the excavation came when researchers found lead shot, a gunflint, and a percussion cap in the slave refuse; presumably, the slaves had access to both percussion-lock and flintlock firearms. Such a presumption is consistent with indirect evidence of slave-owned firearms which has appeared at other slave cabins excavated on the Georgia and Florida coast. The state of Georgia never enacted any laws against slave ownership of firearms; and throughout the Old South, “with or without legal sanction . . . the sight of slaves hunting with guns rarely raised eyebrows” (Ascher and Fairbanks, 1971: 13; Fairbanks, 1974: 87; Flanders, 1933; Genovese, 1974: 488). With their firearms, and possibly with traps, the Cannon’s Point slaves collected the opossums, rabbits, wood rats, raccoons, minks and clapper rails which appeared in the antebellum refuse.

The slaves collected game and fish in order to vary and supplement the rations they received from the Couper family. According to Basil Hall, adult slaves on Cannon’s Point in 1828 received nine quarts of corn per week, while the children received from five to eight quarts. The slaves could substitute a bushel of sweet potatoes or two pecks of unhusked rice (“paddy”) for the corn. In addition, the Couper family cultivated a special patch of cabbage and cauliflower for the slaves, who also had their pick of the turnips and the rutabagas

from the fodder crop (Hall, 1829: 3, 224; Editor, 1833: 252; Otto, 1975). Finally, the Cannon's Point plantation accounts recorded bulk purchases of rice flour, "2nd quality" and "small rice," and molasses for issue to the slaves (Couper, 1826-1852).

Purchases of commercial meats, however, appeared but rarely in the Cannon's Point accounts which James H. Couper kept. Only after 1853 did the Coupers begin regular purchase of hogsheads of bacon for slave issue. In 1828, Basil Hall claimed that the Cannon's Point slaves received no "bacon," although they received some salt fish and occasional salt beef. In addition, the food bones from the slave cabin refuse indicated the slaves may have received the less desirable cuts and elements of cattle, sheep and possibly hogs, when the planter family butchered animals for their own use. These sources of meat, however, were only sporadic; therefore, prior to 1853, the Cannon's Point slaves provided much of their own protein by hunting and fishing or by keeping their own domestic animals (Couper, 1839-1854; Hall, 1829: 3, 224; Otto, 1975).

The Cannon's Point slaves used surplus corn or vegetables from their rations to feed their hogs and poultry, which they were always "allowed to rear on their own account." Marked or branded slave hogs could have ranged through the live oak hammocks of Cannon's Point, visiting the slave cabins for corn or refuse; or, the hogs could have been penned or even tethered. Although many of the hogs were butchered and eaten by the slaves, other could have been sold to local merchants or to the planter family. Domestic fowl provided another source of food and income for the slaves. In 1828, Cannon's Point slaves sold chicken eggs at 12.5 cents a dozen, chickens at 12.5 cents, (guinea?) fowls at 20 to 25 cents, and ducks at twice that amount. The selling of eggs suggests that slaves built pens or coops to prevent hens from hiding their egg caches. Also, the slaves had to provide hutches for the domestic rabbits which they kept (Hall, 1829: 3, 224; Woofter, 1930: 30-31; Otto, 1975).

Cannon's Point slaves even grew some domestic crops in their garden plots. In 1828, the slaves could plant as much land

as they chose; usually, a slave family cultivated one to two acres, planting the same crops as they received as rations: corn, sweet potatoes, cowpeas, turnips, and greens (Hall, 1829: 3, 224; Hilliard, 1972: 60, 183).

Although the slaves had a variety of domestic and non-domestic foods, cooking utensils were in short supply. The slave cabin refuse contained only fragments of cast iron cooking pots. Given the paucity of pots and pans, the slaves may have relied heavily on one-pot meals. Corn, the primary foodstuff, could have been cooked as hominy, cornmeal mush, or as pottage by adding whatever meat was available. Rice could have been cooked as rice pileau or perlou—boiled rice with fish, game, salt meat or vegetables—a dish still regarded as a delicacy in tidewater Georgia. Other dishes could have been “Hopping John”—cowpeas (blackeyed peas today) combined with rice and salt meat—and garden greens, turnips, cowpeas and even sweet potatoes cooked with salt pork and beef. An ex-slave from South Carolina described such one-pot meals: “The whole stew had been boiled . . . until the flesh had disappeared from the bones, which were broken in small pieces—a flitch of bacon, some green corn, squashes, tomatoes and onions had been added” (A.S.D., 1838: 80; Hilliard, 1972: 49; A Planter, 1836: 582-583; Genovese, 1974: 548; Ball, 1859: 139).

The slaves ate these soups and stews in hemispherical bowls; they sopped up the pot liquor with bread made from cornmeal and rice flour, baked on the hearth or on a hoe. At the slave cabin site hemispherical serving bowls were almost half of the identifiable tableware shapes. The Couper family appears to have issued stocks of ceramics to the slave families. Though most of the ceramics were tableware items such as bowls, plates, and platters, the slaves also received teacups and saucers, a few storage vessels, and even chamberwares.

The slave cabin refuse also yielded numerous fragments of medicine bottles. The bottles once contained “plantation medicines” such as castor oil, spirits of turpentine, blue mass, quinine, laudanum, paregoric, liniment, vermifuge, and epsom

salts. After diagnosing the slaves' illnesses, the overseers administered medicines to the slaves in order to restore the balance of their "bodily humors," or to purge their bodies of "morbific matter" (Otto, 1975; Flanders, 1933: 163-164; Simons, 1849: 208; Duffy, 1959: 53-72).

And from time to time, the slaves received seasonal issues of clothing. In 1821, for example, each male slave received seven yards of white Welsh plains, for winter clothes, the women six yards, and the children in proportion. In addition, each man received a cap, each woman acquired a headkerchief, and both received "a pair of strong shoes." For summer wear, the slaves were issued equivalent yards of coarse cotton or Osnagurgs. The Cannon's Point accounts also contained lists of other textiles, including "Jeans" for warm weather wear and red flannel for the colder months. The clothing issues included quantities of thread, needles, and buttons to allow the slave families to fashion their own garments. A pair of scissors and brass thimbles appeared at the slave cabin site, documenting clothing manufacture and repair by the slaves (Hall, 1829: 3: 225; Couper, 1839-1854; Otto, 1975).

Although the slaves received issues of food, some household articles, and clothing, they appear to have purchased their own liquors and other luxuries, using funds obtained from the sale of livestock, garden produce and handicrafts. Most of the liquor bottle fragments found in the slave refuse were from dark olive-green bottles, which often held brewed beverages such as porter and ale. Fragments of lighter olive-green bottles, which held wines, were less common, as were fragments of case bottles, which usually held gin. The archeological evidence suggests, therefore, that slaves drank brewed beverages much more often than other liquors.

Clay pipe fragments, far more common in the slave refuse than in the white overseer refuse, suggest that slaves smoked pipes as their principal use of tobacco. Newspapers of the time corroborate this view, as they referred to the clay pipes as "Negro pipes," suggesting that coastal whites preferred other ways of taking tobacco (Otto, 1975).

THE OVERSEERS

Not surprisingly, white overseers, who supervised the field slaves at Cannon's Point, occupied a status higher than that of the slaves. In the 1840s and 1850s the overseers received yearly salaries ranging from \$200 to \$400 (Couper, 1839-1854). Additionally, the overseers received the use of a house, located about one mile south of the northern set of slave dwellings. The overseers' site comprised the ruins of a frame dwelling with brick pilasters and chimneys, the ruins of a possible frame kitchen, a ruined frame provision house, a well, and a refuse disposal area. When extant, the one and a half story overseers' house measured roughly 34' × 36'. The dwelling had a broad central hall, four small rooms, and two interior chimney stacks with four shallow fireplaces. The overseers occupying the dwelling may have enjoyed up to 790 square feet of living space on the ground floor, excluding the hall; in addition, there may have been a loft for sleeping.

The overseer's house was larger than most overseers' dwellings in the Old South—such structures seldom had more than three rooms. Despite their relatively comfortable housing, however, the overseers on Cannon's Point rarely worked more than a year or two before being discharged. The work was burdensome and the conditions difficult. Overseers had to rise with the slaves, assign work tasks, police the slave quarters and inspect slave dwellings; they "physicked" sick slaves and punished malingers; they had to prevent slaves from sabotaging or stealing plantation property; and finally, they had to punish rebellious slaves, their most offensive and dangerous duty (Otto, 1975; Couper, 1839-1854; Scarborough, 1966: 93).

To maintain a working relationship, planters often forbade overseers from fraternizing with slaves or from entertaining guests. They lived in a virtual social vacuum, overseers often complained. Nor could overseers leave the plantations without the consent of their employers. Planters usually assigned one of the servants to aid overseers in their household work, which did leave time for such pastimes as hunting and drinking. As the overseers had to buy their own food, hunting and fishing

could help supplement and vary their diets. Like the slaves, Cannon's Point overseers caught a limited range of fish and turtles in the Altamaha estuary; they rarely had the time to visit the sounds and landward marshes to collect a greater diversity of fish and other seafood (Scarborough, 1964: 13-20; A Well Wisher, 1836: 509; Otto, 1975).

Not surprisingly, the overseers' site contained artifacts used in hunting and trapping: lead shot, a gunflint, a percussion cap, and an element from a spring trap. Trapping was the best way to catch nocturnal animals, such as opossums, raccoons, rabbits and wild rodents. Firearms were necessary only for hunting squirrels.

Overseers supplemented their food purchases—corn, molasses, salt pork and beef (Couper, 1839-1854)—by raising some domestic animals. Remains of hogs, cattle and chickens were all found at the overseers' site in addition to a broad hoe, which may have served in cultivating a garden.

The documents and refuse thus suggest that slaves and overseers ate similar foods prepared in similar fashion: one pot specialties, often with bones cracked open to increase nourishment from the meat. Like the slaves, overseers often ate their stews, pottages, and perlous from hemispherical bowls, with cornmeal and rice flour bread baked in a Dutch oven or a frying pan.

Yet, bowls were less common in the overseer refuse than at the slave site, and serving flatware was more common, suggesting that more food was cooked and served separately. Glass medicine bottles were also more plentiful than at the slave cabin. The presence of medicine bottles at the overseer site, however, confirms the known distribution pattern of medicines on ante bellum plantations. The planter families provided overseers with stocks of medicines to treat the slaves. But bottle fragments from such patent medicines as "Genuine Essence" of Jamaica Ginger, may document the overseers' attempts to cure their own illnesses (Otto, 1975).

Finally, in smoking and drinking, overseers established patterns of indulgence different from the slaves. Liquor bottle fragments were primarily light olive-green wine bottles or

fragments from case bottles which contained gin. The absence of clay pipes in overseers' refuse also suggests that overseers smoked cigars and chewed tobacco rather than "taking a pipe."

An additional, possibly significant difference should be noted. As previously observed, the slaves received rations of foodstuffs and clothing, while the overseers had to purchase their own food and clothing. Consequently, much of the overseers' income went for subsistence and a few luxuries, leaving relatively little for the purchase of land or slaves (Otto, 1975). The slaves, however, could use the funds obtained from the sale of livestock to purchase luxuries—liquor, tobacco, pipes, ornaments and fabrics. Thus, through a combination of their planter-provided rations and their own efforts, slaves could acquire foods and artifacts which approximated those of the white overseers.

ARCHEOLOGY AND THE INARTICULATE

The evidence of living conditions from Cannon's Point demonstrates that both slaves and overseers were exploited economically, receiving rather meager returns for their labors. Were they likewise oppressed socially? In *Time on the Cross*, Fogel and Engerman suggest that the two terms are not synonymous. Economic exploitation, explain the authors, is a material phenomenon: "an unjust, unfair or improper use of another person for one's own advantage"; oppression, which has social and psychological dimensions, is a symbolic phenomenon. And although the archeological record can reflect the living conditions and exploitation of slaves and overseers, it is mute on the question of oppression. Only such sources as ex-slave autobiographies and letters written by overseers can speak of the humiliation, fear, and rage which slaves and overseers felt, and such documents do not exist for Cannon's Point (Fogel and Engerman, 1974: 2, 87-90; Blassingame, 1972; Scarborough, 1966).

Historians have established that not only slaves, but white “plain folks” as well—including overseers—felt oppression in a variety of well-known ways. Such oppression was mitigated—for the whites—through an “impressive degree of class collaboration and social unity” in regions producing cash crops. Here, planters performed many services for their poorer white neighbors, and often hired their neighbors’ sons as overseers. In turn, the poorer whites often respected and emulated their more successful neighbors (Ransom, 1974; Genovese, 1975: 331-342). Moreover, all antebellum whites, no matter how exploited or oppressed, enjoyed the privileges of free status: they were not whipped, sold or restricted in movement. And although many poorer whites may have endured living conditions comparable to or even inferior to those of black slaves, they received immeasurable symbolic rewards from having skin color identical to the planters. On Cannon’s Point, the white overseers, ignoring their many common interests with the black slaves, collaborated with the planter family in preserving the slave system.

Materially, as Avery Craven observed nearly fifty years ago, yeoman farmers, landless whites, and slaves experienced a basically similar existence. Craven’s observation finds no refutation in the history of Cannon’s Point, nor in the archeological evidence unearthed there (Craven, 1930: 16-18). Although Southern whites had a higher racial and legal status than slaves, this higher status did not necessarily guarantee material superiority over the slaves.

Additional archeological excavation of yeoman white and slave sites will provide further evidence with which to measure status differences. Archeologists may conclude that symbolic and legal differences, rather than differences in material living conditions, constituted the only significant disparity between many white and black antebellum Southerners. But we will not know with certainty until additional archeological excavation is done. Relatively few excavations have explored nineteenth-century Southern sites, and most of those have been in areas

important for colonial history. Moreover, excavations have been used primarily to locate architectural features and to recover artifacts. Understandably, historians have found limited historical value in archeological site reports which only describe objects recovered from the earth. Their lack of enthusiasm for this kind of research has been shared by some archeologists. Charles Fairbanks, for example, has long urged historical archeologists to excavate sites which can test hypotheses explaining cultural processes, rather than merely to describe what they find. In such a manner, archeology can enrich history and can find readers among historians (Fairbanks, 1977).

If historical archeology is to have a significant impact on history, it is thus important that site exploration from its inception be strongly influenced by historical questions and hypotheses. Historians, by cooperating with archeologists on historic site projects, can learn to use archeological evidence—an unbiased, unwritten historical source—while also being exposed to anthropological approaches which may lead to new historical perspectives (Wilderson, 1975: 130-132).

Although African, ancient, and medieval historians have long used archeological evidence in historical research, many American historians, usually burdened with an overabundance of written sources, remain unaware of recent trends in historical archeology. As they become interested and involved in the field, historians may find that historical archeology can provide otherwise unavailable information about living standards, material inequality, and social stratification in the Southern past. By excavating sites once occupied by slaves and white plain folk, archeologists and historians can begin to write more accurately about people who left few written records—the powerless, the inarticulate, and the poor—who, as Jesse Lemisch once complained, “have been treated no more fairly by historians than they were treated by their contemporaries” (Finley, 1971: 168-186; Lemisch, 1968: 29).

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