

# THE MYSTERIES AT SITE 6

## Archaeological Clues About Slavery at Monticello

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This summer, Monticello archaeologists, aided by students in the Monticello-UVA Archaeological Field School and by participants in the *Getting Word Oral History Project*, explored a plot of land hidden in the woods. There, in the place known simply as Site 6, a treasure trove of archaeological finds is helping answer new questions about slavery at Monticello.

The artifacts from the two households are surprisingly different. The pottery sherds from the northern household are mostly a ceramic type called pearlware, many of them decorated with fashionable transfer printing and hand-painting. Ceramics from the southern household are mostly undecorated creamware.

How to explain these differences? There are two possibilities. One is that the northern household was occupied later in time than the southern one – pearlware was popular later than creamware. The other is that there was a wealth difference between the two households, with the northern household able to acquire more costly, up-to-date ceramics.

If the first explanation is right, we might expect to see a difference in the proportions of handmade wrought nails versus the machine-made cut nails that came later. However, the actual difference between the two households is negligible.

On the other hand, there is independent evidence for variation in wealth. For example, the northern household has more metal buttons, which would have once secured fashionable vests and coats acquired independently of the clothing provisioned by Jefferson. The northern half of the site is also littered with window glass, indicating that the log house that once stood there had glazed windows.

Finding evidence of wealth differences between two households, all of whose members were agricultural laborers, is a surprise. What processes might have been responsible for the differences? Accounts kept by Jefferson's granddaughters show that an important source of cash for enslaved people was raising and selling garden produce. So far, excavations have turned up evidence indicating that residents of the northern household engaged in this kind of economic activity. Fragments of heavy stoneware storage jars used to store food grown by household members have been excavated in the northern half of the site, where archaeologists have also unearthed a small subfloor pit or cellar, which would have been used for winter storage of root crops.

These discoveries raise the question of why northern household members might have been able to benefit from a household economy fueled by their own gardening efforts. One hypothesis is that they enjoyed greater residential stability than their neighbors to the south, making long-term clearing,



Public historian Niya Bates, *Getting Word* participant Jacqueline Estes and archaeologist Katelyn Coughlin sift dirt through a mesh screen to recover artifacts.

Located about a half mile east of the mountaintop, Site 6 was occupied in the first quarter of the 19th century by enslaved agricultural laborers who worked in the adjacent fields. Archaeologists have turned up tens of thousands of artifacts and, with them, surprising evidence for social inequality among the site's enslaved residents.

Like nearly all slave-quarter sites at Monticello, Site 6 left no trace in the documentary record. This places a heavy interpretive burden on archaeological evidence and highlights the need for representative samples of artifacts. Archaeologists have identified two major hot spots that correspond to the location of two houses, separated by about 100 feet.

planting and maintaining a garden a good investment.

If their southern neighbor's chances of continued residence from one season to the next were lower, investments such as gardens, whose reward could not be reaped immediately, would be damaging.

The study of spatial patterns in the size of artifacts sheds light on this issue. Several decades ago, archaeologists working in small-scale societies across the globe discovered a pattern in how people deal with refuse that transcends time and place. People who live in more permanent settlements tend to move bigger and more troublesome pieces of trash farther away from their living spaces, leaving smaller pieces behind. The result is size sorting. On more temporary sites, people tend to be less tidy and to allow trash regardless of size to accumulate next to their dwelling, since they are not around long enough to be bothered by it.

At Site 6, the telltale pattern of size sorting is seen in the northern half of the site: small artifacts dominate the area where the house was located, while larger artifacts are arrayed around it. In the

southern half of the site, there is no size sorting – big and small artifacts occur in the same place.

The inference is that the northern household was more permanent, likely occupied by family members who shared a reasonable expectation that they would reside at the site from one year to the next. The southern household apparently represents a series of short-term occupations by individuals whose lives were less predictable.

The more uncertain living situations faced by some enslaved agricultural workers may be an outcome of the shift at the end of the 18th century from a tobacco monoculture to a more diversified agricultural regime focused on wheat.

Greater economic complexity meant more short-term variation in labor demands. Planters such as Jefferson met it by moving some of their enslaved workers around the landscape more frequently and, when that did not suffice, leasing slaves from other owners. Discoveries at Site 6 suggest these changes increased inequalities among agricultural laborers.

## DIGGING INTO THE PAST

*Archaeological research at Monticello has three areas of focus:*

### Household Archaeology Initiative

Investigates how residents organized domestic space and their daily lives

### Plantation Archaeological Survey

Seeks to discover every archaeological site on the 2,500 acres currently owned by Monticello

### Historical Ecology Initiative

Explores how tobacco and, later, wheat cultivation altered the landscape and lives of the plantation's residents

## FRAGMENTS OF HISTORY

Artifacts discovered at Site 6 are providing important clues about life among Monticello's enslaved agricultural workers.



### SHUTTER DOG

Hardware that would keep a window shutter in place.

### BUTTONS

Buttons found at Site 6 provide clues about income disparities between households.



### JAW HARPS

Jaw harps are musical instruments played in the mouth.



### PLATE FRAGMENT

This hand-painted Chinese porcelain fragment is part of the base of a small plate, perhaps a dessert plate.



### NAILS

Handmade wrought iron nails are a common find at Site 6.



### CERAMIC SHERDS

Various types of ceramics provide insight into possible wealth differences among enslaved families.

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