



DAACS team gets down to work in Jamaica

By Jillian Galle

Jamaica. The name calls to mind white beaches, coconut palms, reggae rhythms, and nearly continuous sun. It rarely prompts thoughts of the hundreds of ruined sugar plantations whose

archaeological resources hold a wealth of information about the cultural and economic dynamics of 18th-century slave societies.

Earlier this year, archaeologists with the Monticello-based Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery spent five months in Jamaica working with Jamaican archaeologists and historians

to shed new light on this long-hidden history.

Over the past decade, historians have begun to document the critical role slavery filled in the creation of wealth across the nations and colonies of the Atlantic world and in funding the cosmopolitan aspirations of their citizens, including Thomas Jefferson. DAACS is helping archaeologists enter this dialogue by giving researchers access to data from excavated slave sites.

DAACS currently provides detailed artifactual, contextual, and spatial data from 17 slave-quarter sites in the greater Chesapeake region through its Web site, www.daacs.org. In December, archaeological data will be made available from nine sites in Jamaica and Nevis – two former British colonies in the West Indies that were dominated



An 18th-century British map of Jamaica showing 14 parishes.

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Second-year archaeology students (from left) Vanessa Clarke, Clive Grey, and Leonard Wynter sort artifacts at the University of the West Indies' Mona, Jamaica, campus.

by the industrial-scale production of sugar from the late 1600s into the 19th century – and two sites in Maryland. In 2007, data from 10 sites from North and South Carolina will be added to the Web site. This expansion in geographical coverage offers new analytical opportunities and promises improvements in our understanding of the cultural dynamics of slave societies that evolved in the early-modern Atlantic world.

The expansion of DAACS' scope into the Caribbean began in earnest in January 2006, when a team of three Monticello researchers moved to Kingston, Jamaica. Between January and June, the DAACS team analyzed over 20,000 artifacts excavated from six 18th-century slave-quarter sites located on two north coast sugar plantations, New Montpelier Plantation, outside Montego Bay, and Seville Plantation, near Ocho Rios. DAACS' Jamaica research was conducted in conjunction with the Department of History and Archaeology at the University of the West Indies' Mona campus and the Jamaica National Heritage Trust, which curates the artifact collections.

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The DAACS Jamaica project emphasized collaboration. The Monticello archaeologists' activities included teaching an undergraduate course on archaeological methods at UWI, presenting papers at several local history and archaeology conferences in Kingston, and working with archaeologists at the Jamaica National Heritage Trust on the analysis of locally manufactured coarse earthenware ceramics.

“Exposure to a wide range of locally made ceramics is helping us think about the use and manufacture of locally produced ceramics in the Chesapeake and Carolinas in new ways,” said Leslie Cooper, a DAACS archaeological analyst. “Working with staff at the Jamaica Trust was great. They generously offered us not only their lab space and archaeological knowledge, but they also shared many culinary tips and patois lessons.”

The inclusion of sites from the Caribbean in the DAACS database is also helping archaeologists at Monticello understand how Jefferson's plantation fits onto a larger historical canvas that includes not just plantations elsewhere in the Chesapeake region, but in the Caribbean as well.

“Our goal is to enhance our understanding of the ecological and social dynamics revealed in our ongoing archaeological research at Monticello.” said Fraser D. Neiman, Monticello's director of archaeology. “For example, our work at Monticello is revealing how the transition from tobacco to wheat and the larger process of economic diversification fundamentally altered slave work routines and lifeways.

“Our work on sugar plantations in the Caribbean promises to throw into sharp relief exactly which aspects of plantation organization were adaptations to the work demands of these different crops, and how the life experience and strategic opportunities of slaves differed as a result.”

The expansion of DAACS outside of the Chesapeake is funded by a 2004 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Over the next few years, the data generated under the grant will allow researchers to accelerate the process of untangling the effects of slave origins in Africa, crop mix, labor processes, and demographic

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regimes on regional variations in slave adaptations to the New World.

The work of DAACS, Neiman said, is essential to this process because “comparative archaeological research is the only way to begin to evaluate objectively hypotheses about the causes of variability in slave lifeways among and within these regions.”

Jillian Galle, project manager of the Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery, directed the DAACS research activities in Jamaica.

COMMENTS? newsletter@monticello.org