

DAACS takes to the field at sugar plantation in Jamaica

By Jillian Galle

THE DIGITAL Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery has dug deeper into the nature of slavery in the Caribbean.

In May, participants in the first DAACS-University of Virginia Field School in Historical Archaeology spearheaded a novel approach to Caribbean slave archaeology with excavations at Stewart Castle, a sprawling 18th-century sugar plantation on the north coast of Jamaica. The team – 12 students and two volunteers representing five universities and three countries – began a multiple-year, systematic survey by digging more than 200 shovel test pits on the plantation’s grounds.

Approximately 11,000 artifacts were recovered from these pits, dug near Stewart Castle’s main house complex and the site of a slave village. Some of these artifacts – such as beads, buttons, musical instruments, and tools related to sugar production – speak to the social and economic activities engaged in by slaves at Stewart Castle, while the wide range

of ceramics and faunal remains offer clues to the diet and dining habits systematic spatial coverage of slave villages on Jamaica and Nevis.

The DAACS-UVa Field School was not only novel in its approach to the archaeological record but also in its effort to create an integrated and rigorous learning environment. The field school was run in conjunction with UVa’s Field School in Historic Preservation, based in the historic Jamaican town of Falmouth, so students in both programs had the opportunity to learn about and participate in the other discipline.

The 2007 DAACS-UVa Field School in Historical Archaeology was made possible by a grant from The Reed Foundation and funding from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Support from The Reed Foundation



UWI-Mona archaeology student Lauren Burn and UVa architecture student Jasper Adams examine a wine bottle shard excavated at the Stewart Castle main house.

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made possible the participation of students from the University of West Indies campus at Mona, Jamaica, providing them with an educational experience traditionally unavailable on the island.

“I had experience with excavation and surveying prior to participating at Stewart Castle, [but] nothing I had done prepared me for what was learned on site and inside the laboratory. Stewart Castle was a whole new experience,” said Vanessa Bonner, a third-year archaeology student at UWI-Mona. “Not only did I meet and interact with people from a different culture, Stewart Castle really helped me to recognize

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A pair of sugar nippers (left) unearthed at the Stewart Castle slave village and a page from an 18th-century pattern book showing a variety of the devices, which were used to cut pieces from cones of sugar.

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Jamaican sugar plantation

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the core value of what it means to be an archaeologist and it brought my career goals into focus.”

Leslie Cooper, a DAACS analyst and field supervisor, seconded Bonner’s sentiments. “Excavating at Stewart Castle was an unforgettably rich archaeological and cultural experience,” she said. “The field school afforded both Jamaican and

“Stewart Castle really helped me to recognize the core value of what it means to be an archaeologist.”

VANESSA BONNER

American students the unique opportunity to live and work together on an incredible site.”

As with all projects undertaken by DAACS, data from the Stewart Castle excavations will be available on the project’s Web site. DAACS currently contains data from 30 excavated slave sites in Virginia, Maryland, Jamaica, and Nevis. Data from sites from South Carolina will be added in early 2008.

“The DAACS fieldwork in the



Field school students and staff members gather on the final day of excavation at the Stewart Castle slave village.

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Caribbean enriches our Monticello and Chesapeake research,” said Fraser Neiman, director of archaeology at Monticello. “DAACS gives us a unique comparative data set without which it would be impossible to isolate and explain the features of Chesapeake society that were unique to this region, and not shared with other regions of the slavery-based Atlantic

world.”

DAACS will continue to bring together American and Jamaican students during a collaborative field program in Jamaica in 2008.

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

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