

Thomas Jefferson MONTICELLO

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The Mountain Is the Site

THE DOCUMENTARY RECORD left behind by Thomas Jefferson reveals Monticello as a working plantation. Jefferson carefully recorded births, deaths, work assignments, and food and clothing allotments to his slaves, along with observations on the weather and crops. Combining Jefferson's writings with accounts from other family members, a picture begins to form of a bustling plantation.

While Jefferson was a meticulous record keeper, there are "missing" pieces of the puzzle. Throughout his lifetime, Jefferson owned more than 600 slaves. Where did they live? What items did they have in their homes? How and why did their lives change during nearly six decades of Jefferson's tenure at Monticello?

The answers to these questions as well as an interesting story of altering landscape, crop changes and a possible relationship to slave independence are beginning to emerge, through the work of Monticello archaeologists.

"Our motto is 'the entire mountain is the site,'" said Fraser Neiman, the Thomas Jefferson Foundation's director of archaeology. "Our goal is to understand the entire plantation landscape and the linked ecological and social dynamics that played out on it during Jefferson's lifetime."

In 1997 Monticello's Archaeology Department began the process of digging shovel test pits, or STPs for short, across the mountain. An STP is a hole roughly 1.5 feet deep and wide. Archaeologists sift STP contents through a quarter-inch screen looking for artifacts. So far, there



Archaeologist Sara Bon Harper surveys land near a slave home site at Monticello. T.J.F.

are roughly 18,000 of them, dug 40 feet apart, covering about 500 acres on the slopes of Monticello Mountain.

The spatial scale of the project, dubbed the Monticello Plantation Archaeological Survey, and the number of STPs are unprecedented. The project is producing exciting insights into the initial settlement of the mountain in the 1740s by Peter Jefferson's slaves, the establishment of Monticello Plantation by his son Thomas, and the subsequent switch in staple crops from tobacco to wheat in the 1790s. The STPs provide archaeologists with a picture of where slaves and overseers lived and

how site locations changed over time.

"A couple of unexpected trends pop out from our data on changing settlement locations," says Neiman. "The average distance among slave houses increases and so does the average distance from slave houses to the overseer's house. We think the changes point to marginal increases in slave independence, which may be linked to changing labor demands associated with the switch to wheat."

That's a hypothesis that Neiman and his team look forward to testing. "Our STPs cover about 75% of Monticello Mountain, but we have not yet extended them to the

three other quarter farms that comprised Monticello Plantation: Tufton, Shadwell and Lego. Will the patterns match? There is only one way to find out!”

The STP survey is only the beginning of the research process. Once archaeologists locate discrete clusters of artifacts indicating a habitation site, they then investigate them more intensively using 5-foot-square excavation quadrats. These quadrats oftentimes yield larger artifact samples and information on the location of subsurface features like cellars and hearths.

Over the past several summers, Monticello archaeologists and students enrolled in the Monticello-University of Virginia Archaeological Field School completed the excavation of 266 quadrats at Site 8, located on a rare level patch of ground about a half-mile east of Monticello mansion.

Archaeology findings suggest Site 8 was home to enslaved field laborers from about 1770 to 1800, when it was abandoned to make way for crops. That 30-year period witnessed significant changes in the lives of its occupants. For example, the size of the small cellars associated with four houses discovered at the site increased over time. The latest and largest cellar was brick-lined.

“Since Jefferson’s rationing system did not change, this points to higher levels of independent food production and storage by slaves. This hypothesis receives some independent support from the increase over time in the frequency of utilitarian ceramics at the site, designed for use in bulk processing and storage of food,” said Neiman.

To find out if these trends continued after 1800, field work began at Site 6, an early 19th-century slave settlement on a steep slope to the southeast of Site 8, in the summer of 2010. Archaeologists have excavated 31 quadrats. Spatial patterns in the density of artifacts across the site hint at the existence of three houses, occupied at different periods between 1800 and 1830. No cellars have been found yet; however, one part of the site has produced a large and diverse assemblage of shards from stoneware storage jars that hint at the continuation of the trend discovered at Site 8.

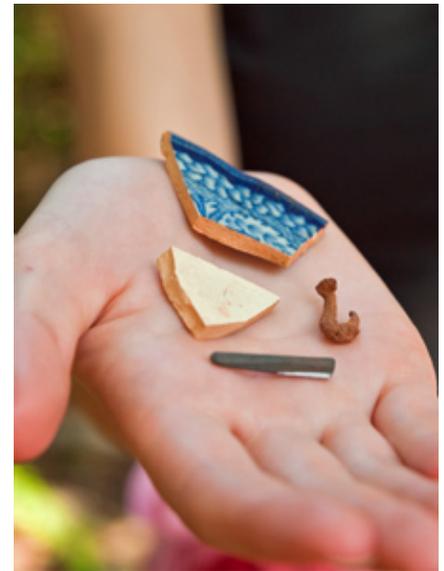
In addition to broken pieces of pots, individual small discoveries help the archaeologists tell the story. “It’s definitely a special find,” said archaeology research

manager Sara Bon-Harper as she lifted a small envelope holding a tiny handmade fishing hook found at Site 6. Unlike commercial hooks of the day, which are made from round wire, the hook is square and manufactured from the same type of nail rod from which enslaved boys and teenagers forged nails by hand at Monticello. Bon-Harper said she likes to picture a boy making the hook in the Nailery and slipping it into his pocket for later use.

In the summer of 2011, archaeologists plan to return with the field-school students to Site 6. “We need to dig a lot more quadrats to figure out what’s going on with storage cellars,” said Neiman. “In addition, our early results point to significant differences in date or wealth or both between at least two of the households on the site. Sorting that out is a priority as well.”

Back in the Archaeology Lab, tables are covered with artifacts from the summer’s fieldwork, washed, labeled, and ready to be digitized by Karen Smith, curator of archaeological collections, and her staff. This critical step helps convert mute artifacts into meaningful historical data, which will be available to researchers across the world via the DAACS website (www.daacs.org).

From STPs to quadrats to digital data, for Monticello’s archaeologists they are all part of the process of unearthing history. Neiman sums it up like this:



While Jefferson was a meticulous record keeper, there are “missing” pieces of the puzzle.

“Our ongoing research continues to yield new insights into Monticello, not just as a house, but as a plantation landscape that was in continuous flux, along with the daily lives of the people who helped to create it.”

Monticello archaeologists survey land near the site of a slave home. T.J.F.

