

Th: Jefferson

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Meet Fraser Neiman, Director of Archaeology

This summer, we sat down with Monticello's director of archaeology, Dr. Fraser Neiman, to learn a bit more about the role of archaeology at Monticello. Neiman, Ph.D. Yale, 1990, is also a lecturer in the Departments of Anthropology and Architectural History at the University of Virginia, where he teaches courses in archaeology and quantitative methods. He is a specialist in the archaeology of the slave-based society of Tidewater Virginia, and was instrumental in creating a digital archaeological archive of colonial slavery, DAACS.org. His work has been pivotal to The Mountaintop Project, the current, multiyear effort to restore Monticello as Jefferson knew it.



What do you do at Monticello?

I run the archaeology program, which has two parts. The first is a research program that is devoted to the little-over two-thousand acres of land that the Thomas Jefferson Foundation owns. Our goal is to understand changing patterns of settlement and shifting lifeways of all the individuals who lived here during the 18th and 19th centuries, during Jefferson's tenure.

The second component is the Digital Archaeological Archive of comparative slavery – “DAACS” for short, which is an attempt to facilitate the comparative archaeological study of slave lifeways throughout the early modern Atlantic world, and ultimately to try to understand Jefferson's Monticello plantation in its larger historical and spatial context.

Why is archaeology important?

Well, archaeology is cool. I think one of the things that makes archaeology cool is the fact that the archaeological record, the creation of the archaeological record, is the inadvertent result of people's day-to-day behavior. So in contrast with documents, whose creation requires a motivated, literate person and then, of course, the survival of a piece of paper across the centuries, archaeological sites are just the result of people living. So, potentially, archaeological sites are essentially, or statistically, less-biased samples of past human behavior than offered by documents—which is good.

There is, however, a downside. The archaeological record is, unlike documents, at least from colonial America, not written in

English. So its meaning is a little less transparent.

So that then raises the question of “How do we make archaeological evidence meaningful?” If we are smart enough in designing our excavations so that we take advantage of this unbiased representative sample, we can thereby, hopefully, come up with a more inclusive view of variation within societies and how they change over time.

Can you give me an example of a time when historians and archaeologists at Monticello corroborated evidence from the two fields?

One of the ways in which archaeological evidence shines is the way

it allows us to detect patterns of change that were so foundational to everyday life that historical actors took them for granted. Therefore, we might see an occasional mention in the documents, but you would never guess from the documentary evidence that something important had happened.

So one example that is pretty obvious from our examination of, say, slave housing on Mulberry Row, is a shift that apparently occurs in the late 18th century from situations in which many enslaved people have little control over who their co-residence partners are to situations in which they have more of a choice to live in family-based units. We see this archaeologically in changes in house size and also in an accompanying shift in the frequency of small storage cellars or subfloor pits under slave houses. In the larger comparative frame, it's clear that this change is not unique to Monticello. It's happening all across the Chesapeake in the late 18th century.

Documents are important in

trying to understand how and why that change occurs, but not directly. There's no place in which we find Jefferson writing to an overseer saying, "Please rebuild the slave houses so that families can live in a more autonomous living situation." But we do know from documents that this is a period of transition from hoe-based tobacco monoculture to more diversified agriculture, and changing slave work routines. So you can begin to build an argument that maybe these two shifts are related and perhaps the mediating factor is a change in the kind of management strategies that slaveholders, like Jefferson, were using.

What has your role been in *The Mountaintop Project*?

Well *The Mountaintop Project* involves a lot of excavation by huge machines, of large, deep trenches in which many pipes are placed. One of the trenches for the new HVAC pipes ran right across Mulberry Row and down into Jefferson's terrace vegetable garden. We were able to, in

the process of excavating for that, uncover a stratified sequence of layers that record much of the history of the occupation of the mountaintop. In another year, when these results are analyzed, we will have new insights into the changing lifeways on Mulberry Row and, in particular, shifts in vegetation and the environment on the mountaintop.



Slate pencil and copper upholstery tack from an excavation at Monticello.