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December 2009 Newsletter

Coming to America:
The First West African Farm Exhibit in the United States

By Edmund Gabay, Jr.



Frontier Culture Museum exhibit
(all images and photos by the author).

Introduction

In the unlikely yet appropriate location of small town Virginia, a modest, state-run museum has embarked upon a most fascinating and audacious project. The staff of the Frontier Culture Museum located in Staunton, Virginia, at the intersection of State Routes 81 and 64, have spawned the concept of augmenting their inventory of frontier style exhibits by including a replica of a West African village compound (Figures 1 and 2). Specifically, the earthen wall dwellings are to be modeled after those built in a typical 16th to 18th century Igbo village of southeastern Nigeria. The museum directors were advised by various scholars to use the Igbo ethnic group of Nigeria since it was believed that a large number of the Africans brought to America as slaves were from that region and also based on the port of origin in Africa. In fact, modern research estimates that as much as 38% of the Africans brought to Virginia were from the Igbo ethnic group.

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Figure 1. Regional map, with Staunton marked by red star.



Figure 2. Vicinity map of Museum location near Staunton.

In the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries the west coast of Africa, or Atlantic coast, was divided into a number of 'coasts' -- namely the Upper Guinea coast, Ivory Coast, Lower Guinea Coast, Gabon Coast, and Angola Coast. The Lower Guinea coast was composed of two parts; the Gold Coast, which corresponded with the eastern part of modern day Ivory Coast and modern Ghana, and the Slave Coast which included the Bight of Benin and the Bight of Biafra in what is now southeastern Nigeria. It was from the ports of Calabar and Bonny in the Bight of Biafra where Igbo and Ibibio slaves began their journey to the English speaking Americas. Table 1 below shows a portion of the data related to the regional origins of enslaved African Americans in Virginia as published in *The Cambridge Economic History of the United States*:

Region of Origin	**ca 1700**	**ca 1750**
Senegambia	4.0	15.4
Sierra Leone	1.0	0
Gold Coast	20.0	28.6
Bight of Benin	0	0
Bight of Biafra	60.0	39.4
Angola	5.0	16.7

Table 1. Regional origins of enslaved African Americans in Virginia by percentage.

Historical Perspectives

Staunton, Virginia (located about 180 miles southwest of Washington D.C.) could be considered an unlikely location for this type of project if one considered the small town to be too parochial or culturally rigid to support such an apparently radical or controversial undertaking. Not long ago, this kind of project would have been deemed inappropriate and, in fact, the overt expression of African culture would not have been tolerated. And even earlier in history Virginia was once an early stronghold for Confederate soldiers and sympathizers who, throughout the Civil War, were fighting in part for the right to uphold the institution of slavery. Echoes of the rebel yell can still be perceived in Virginia life, to this day, in the names of many highways and public buildings. For example, Jefferson Davis Highway was named after the Confederate President Jefferson Davis as is the Jackson monument in Manassas named after the intrepid Confederate General Stonewall Jackson. Perhaps this most recent addition to the museum's collection of exhibits may ironically represent a kind of rebellion against the status

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quo by the mere fact that this modest museum has mustered the audacity to display such a progressive exhibit.

The latter statement, however, is not meant to ignore the advances that have been made in the area of historical interpretation by museums. During the last fifty to sixty years there have undoubtedly been significant advances in the field of interpreting early African American life at historic sites. Directors and other museum professionals have observed that recognition of the contributions of under-represented population at historic sites and museums, such as those at Williamsburg, Mount Vernon and Monticello in Virginia, has "moved from absence to (the) generic to (the) specific because sites are learning more about the enslaved community thanks to new scholarship."[1] The Frontier Culture Museum is taking the task of historical interpretation a step further based on the volume and significance of research and scholarship in the fields of African American archeology and history.

Being the first of its kind in the United States, the West African Farm exhibit could not be in a more appropriate location since, throughout history, Virginia has been a State of many firsts. It was in Virginia where the first permanent English settlement in North America was formed and given the name of Jamestown. Much later, in the nineteenth century, it was in Virginia that the first major battle of the Civil War occurred, on July 21, 1861, when Union soldiers clashed with Confederates at the First Battle of Manassas. An equally important event in the history of Virginia and the United States, for that matter, occurred when the first Africans were brought to North America to work in Virginia as indentured servants.[2] Surviving documents tell us that in 1619 a Dutch frigate discharged twenty Africans at Jamestown, Virginia. At that time, these Africans were treated as indentured servants, not slaves, much like many other laborers of European heritage.

The arrival of that early African population in Virginia is memorialized, in a sense, by the construction of this unique exhibit, especially since the newcomers probably brought the knowledge of earth building technology with them. Although the early African transplants to

[1] Quoted from September 15, 2008 internet article by Max van Balgoov, entitled *Strategies for Interpreting Slavery at Historic Sites.*

[2] People who came to America and were placed under contract to work for another over a period of time, usually seven years, especially during the 17th to 19th centuries. Generally, indentured servants included redemptioners, victims of religious or political persecution, persons kidnapped for the purpose, convicts, and paupers.

Virginia were unwillingly subjected to indentured servitude they may, nevertheless, have enjoyed a certain amount of latitude to speak their native language, share their knowledge of folk medicine, cooking and even earth building technology. It is also quite likely that they even were allowed to build West African style earthen wall buildings for themselves – unlike the captive Africans brought over much later during the days after slavery had been codified. Nevertheless, even in the eighteenth century, although societal and psychological conditions had changed for the worst, "some plantation owners still encouraged mud walled buildings for slave quarters as well as other service buildings" (Vlach 2006). In Leland Ferguson's archeological study entitled *Common Ground: Archeology and Early African America, 1650-1800* the same ideas are echoed.

> It is true that in their efforts to dominate slaves and appease abolitionists, some nineteenth century planters tried to erase African features, making their plantations conform to an "Anglo" ideal. But, in the pioneering days of the previous century, planters and overseers probably appreciated and encouraged traditional African architectural skills. For example, an eighteenth century Virginia planter advertised for a slave who "understood building with mud walls . . . an Artist, not a common Labourer."[3]

Project Concept

According to Eric Bryan, deputy director of the Frontier Culture Museum, the idea for the West African hut exhibit was conceived several years ago under the leadership of a different museum director. Although directors changed over the years and the institution's policies and focus shifted, the concept of the African style exhibit managed to survive. Part of the reason for the idea's perseverance sprang from an increased awareness of the role that Africans and African Americans played in the early development of North America. Recent archeological discoveries of living quarters of slaves have shed new light on and provided fresh insight into the preferred form of abode for enslaved African Americans and into some heretofore unknown practices. Practices such as ritual offerings have been uncovered at various locations in the Americas and clearly mirror similar practices in Africa. An interesting article in the November/December 1996 issue of *Archeology* magazine illustrates this point. The article describes evidence, in the form of several caches of artifacts, uncovered in a historic house in Annapolis, Maryland that provide insight into a secret religious life of enslaved African Americans.

[3] Leland Ferguson quotes John M. Vlach from his work entitled *Afro-American Traditions in the Decorative Arts* who in turn quotes Gerald Mullen (1972).

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Currently, the Frontier Culture Museum displays exhibits from the English, Irish, German and early American cultures that existed in Virginia between the 1600s and the 1800s. The early immigrants from the European cultures came to the New World in search of a better life and to escape the oppression and disease affecting their countries of origin.

The Museum is, in fact, set up as a living history museum situated on 184 acres of farmland not far from downtown Staunton. As a living history museum, visitors will enjoy the opportunity to learn from docents and observe interpreters depicting the people of each culture functioning in their typical style of abode. Now, the latest addition to the museum's exhibits, the West African compound, will afford visitors a chance to appreciate the cultural heritage of Africans and African Americans.

Compound Design

The layout of the Igbo compound at the Frontier Culture Museum is patterned after one of a number of compound layouts that were prevalent in Igboland (Figure 3). The compound type that is exhibited typically can be inscribed roughly within a triangle. The size of the triangle

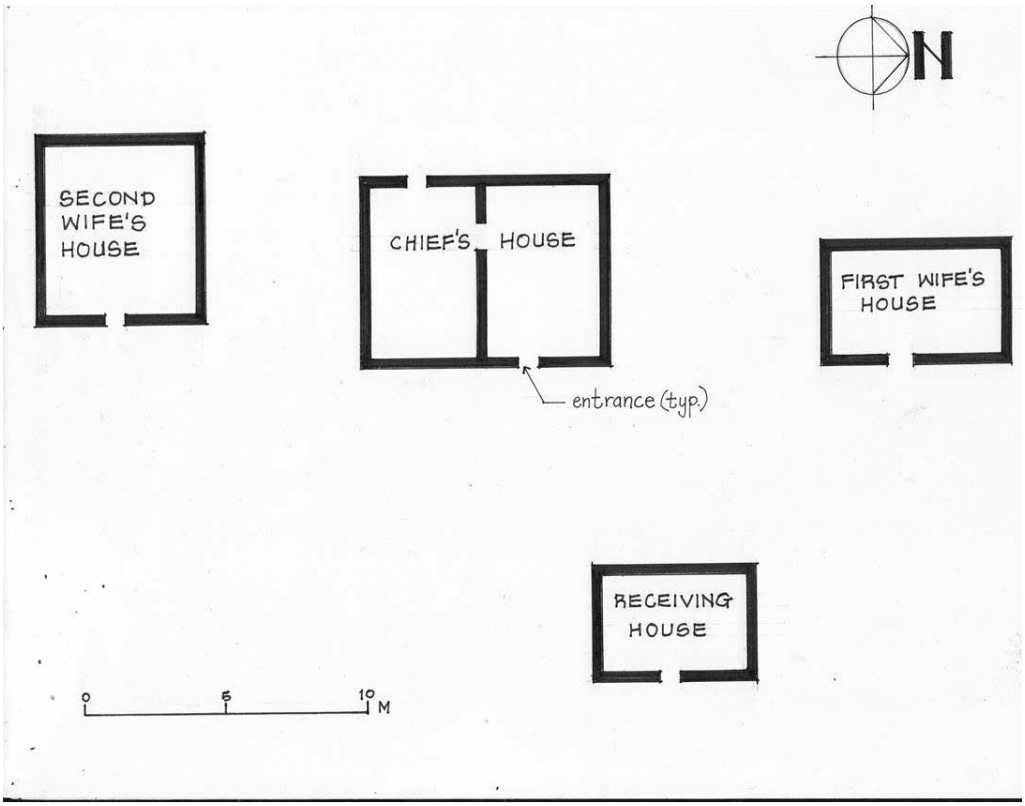


Figure 3. Site plan of exhibit of West African compound.

could vary with some compounds being encompassed within a very elongated triangle. Also typical of compound designs was the location of the chief's house on a longitudinal axis with the gate. The receiving house, which was usually closest to the entrance gate, existed for the purpose of receiving or meeting with visitors and friends.

Construction Project

At the time of the writing of this article the earthen walls of the receiving house were complete. This first building is one of a compound of four such clay walled buildings and is intended to function as a reception area. The receiving house has a small wooden door adorned with traditional Igbo style carved design. In fact, the door had been manufactured in Nigeria prior to being imported into the United States by the Frontier Culture Museum. Generally, Igbo carved doors are made from a single plank of wood by chipping away material from both sides until the desired thickness is achieved. The carving on Igbo wood doors functions as a work of decorative art and carved designs can be found in many variations.

Exterior rendering with mud plaster produced a smooth and regular exterior finish for the earthen walls. The other buildings will include the chief's house and the wives' quarters. The walls of each building will be approximately twelve inches thick enclosing modest spaces ranging in size from approximately 194 to 520 square feet.

The principal building material used to construct the walls of each building is a specific mixture of soil and sand intended to approximate the consistency and structural properties of the 'laterite' soil of southern Nigeria because the local clay, by itself, could not develop the necessary compressive strength required to support wall construction. Laterite is brittle red clay found in the ground in Nigeria and contains iron and iron oxide. For the exhibit, soil used to build these structures was excavated at a local site near the museum and stockpiled in a staging area close to the construction zone. Some of the soil is loaded into a motorized sieve to filter out stones and other impurities. After that initial filtering, a small amount of the soil is passed through a hand held screen and deposited into a wheelbarrow. The filtered soil is then transported to an area close to where sand has been stockpiled, in close proximity to a puddling pit and the actual construction work. The sand and filtered soil are combined in the proportion of three parts soil to one part sand after which the mixture (three or four wheelbarrows full) is

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deposited into a shallow puddling pit lined with 6 millimeter thick sheet of plastic. Water is



Figure 4. Dr. Ogbonna in front of partially completed Reception House.

subsequently added to the sand/soil mixture while several people stamp or knead the composition with their feet until it develops a thick, paste-like consistency. Subsequently, portions of the mixture are scooped up by hand and molded into brick sized lumps approximately 12 inches long before being handed over to the master builder, Father Maduawuchi 'Stan' Ogbonna. Dr. Ogbonna or Stan, the name by which most people address him, installs the moist lumps of clay or 'wet bricks' with the skill and accuracy of a master mason by dropping or throwing them into place one after the other in order to build up the wall (Figure 4). After the walls had been erected the roof framing and thatching was fabricated on the ground from bamboo rods and palm tree fronds prior to being installed.

Project Manager and Master Builder

Dr. Ogbonna was retained by the museum in July 2009 after an unsuccessful attempt a year earlier to construct one of the clay walled buildings with the help of a different consultant. After the museum's attempt to hire artisans from Nigeria were stymied by the denial of visas by the immigration section of the Department of Homeland Security, the museum administration focused their efforts on finding a resident expert already living in the United States. Fortunately, Dr. Ogbonna's name was referred to the museum staff as an expert in the Igbo style earthen wall buildings. In fact, Dr. Ogbonna comes to the project with a very interesting background. He currently works in the New York State prison system as a chaplain owing to his



Figure 5. One course of blinding installed over rock foundation.

background as a Roman Catholic priest with a PhD in Counseling Psychology from Seton Hall University of South Orange, New Jersey. Dr. Ogbonna was born in Ehime, Imo State, Nigeria, where he later taught in secondary schools and seminaries for a number of years. He was a high school principal in his native Nigeria for seven years. It was in Onitsha as a young boy that Dr.

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Ogbonna learned Igbo style earth construction technology by participating in house building activities along with the rest of the community.

Details of Building Technology

Construction of the compound of earthen wall buildings requires more planning and attention to detail than we might at first imagine. In the first place, since the buildings will be inhabited and used by cultural interpreters or museum guides on the days and during the hours that the museum exhibit is open to visitors its construction will be regulated by the applicable Virginia State and local building codes. The footings of each building, which are made up of a bed of rocks, must be placed at a depth of at least 2' to 0" below grade so that they are located at the frost line as required by the City of Staunton building code. This would prevent damage to the walls of each structure due to frost heave. In Nigeria and other tropical regions the issues of freezing temperatures and related frost heave of the ground would not be a concern since

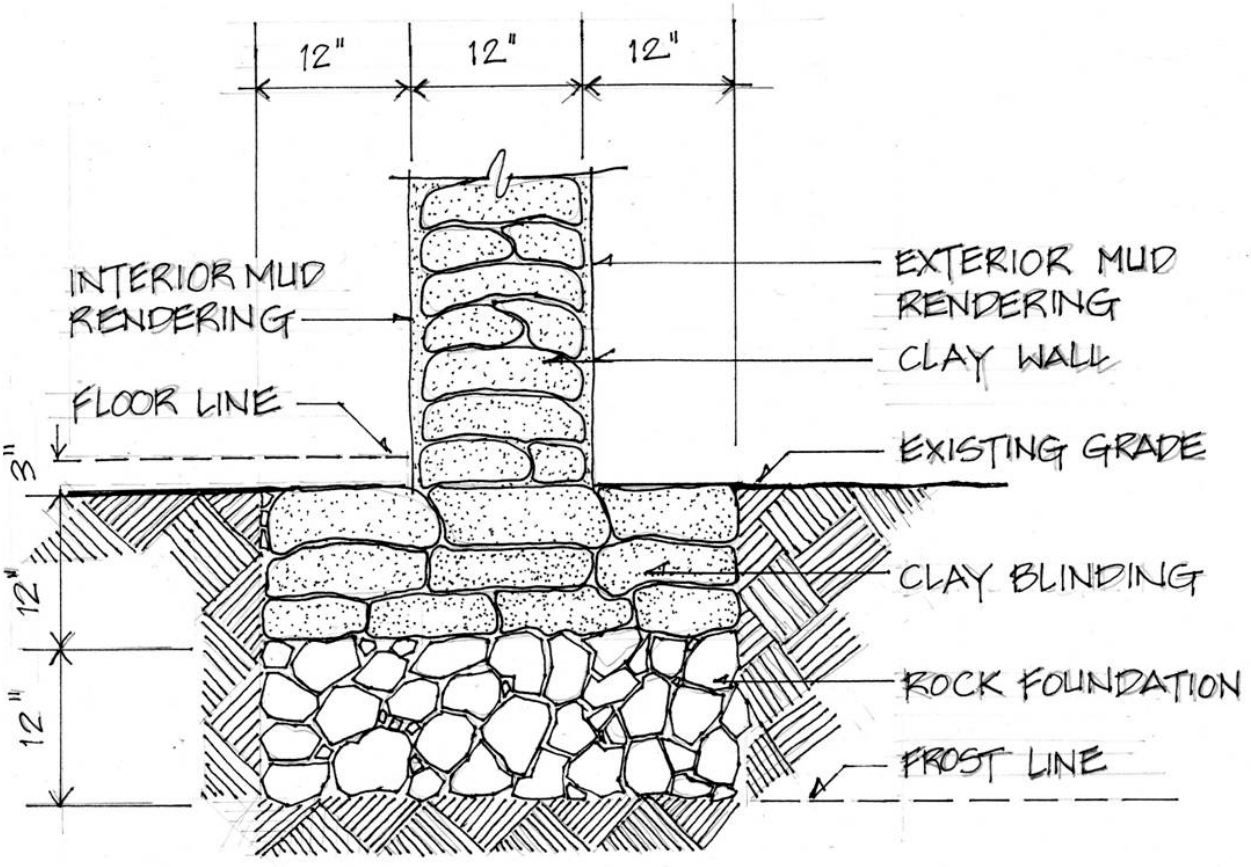


Figure 6. Typical wall footing detail.

temperatures remain warm all year round. Simple as the buildings are in plan, they nevertheless must be laid out accurately so that they will have the appropriate orientation, spatial relationships, and size. Although the walls are built out of the imprecise material of clay earth, proper setting out of the buildings will ensure that the walls of each structure are as square as possible. Conventional building construction methods such as use of batter boards, levels and string lines were used to locate the walls of each building prior to excavation and construction.

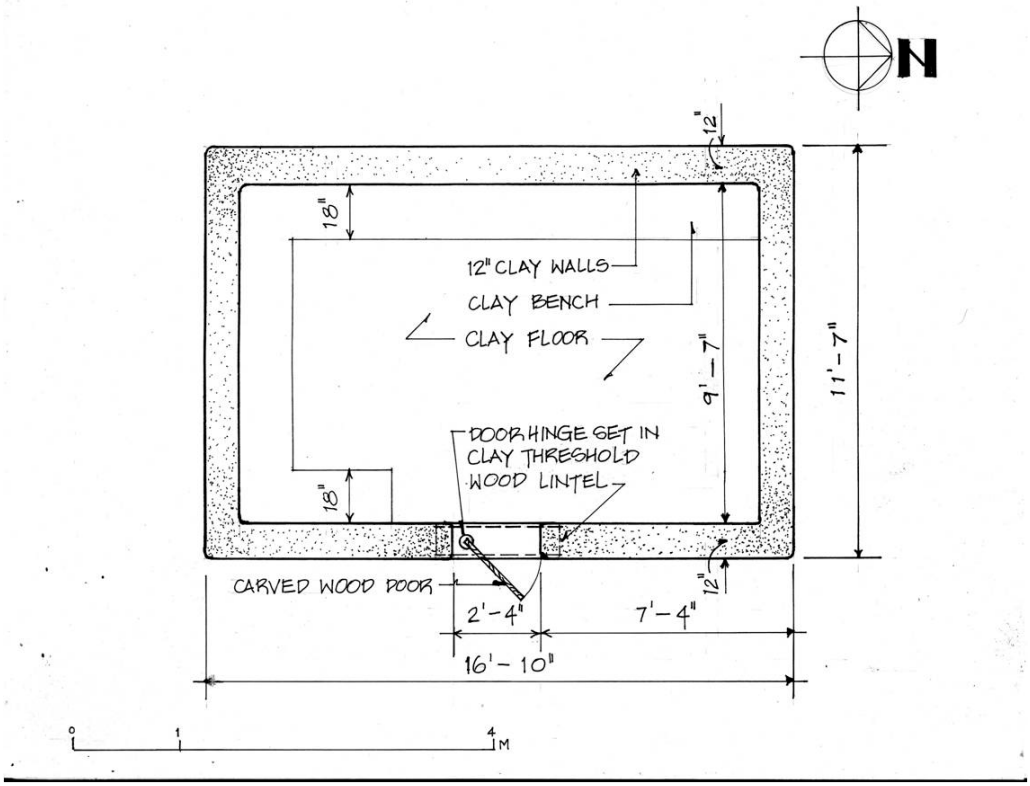


Figure 7. Plan of Reception House.

The footings of each building were sized in relation to the wall thickness. According to Dr. Ogbonna, the width of the footings traditionally extends on either side of the wall by as much as the width of the wall that they support. In this case, since the wall is 12" thick the footing would extend 12" on either side of the wall for a total footing width of 36" (Figures 5 and 6). Furthermore, a layer of clay blinding is placed on top of the clay footings in order to provide a level base on which to start constructing the clay walls and also acts as a barrier between the sub-soil moisture and the structure's walls (Figure 6). The blinding material, which is made from the

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same material as the clay walls, must be installed in stages in order to allow proper curing and acquisition of strength.

During construction, when the wall of a particular building is erected to approximately 6" above grade the door opening is located so that the door hinge can be set into the clay while it is still soft and workable. The hinge is simply a hollow cylinder approximately 6" long and 3" in diameter. Simultaneously, a wood frame is installed where the wood door will be located. The purpose of the wood frame is to serve as formwork while the clay walls are built up around it (Figures 7 and 8). Once the clay walls reach the level of the head of the formwork it can be removed when the clay has cured and hardened. A wood lintel is then laid on top of the clay walls and over the door opening. The wood door would also be installed at this time. Construction of the clay walls can then continue to their maximum height.



Figure 8. Formwork for door opening of First Wife's House.

The roof framing of the receiving house was constructed of dried bamboo rods which comprised the framework onto which the roof covering materials are attached. All the roof

construction materials were imported directly from Nigeria, and those imported materials bring a certain level of authenticity to the exhibit. The thatching materials used are palm tree leaflets while the bamboo framework itself is secured to wall supports or forked posts using straps made from the skin of the mid-rib of palm tree fronds. The forked posts are a standard element of Igbo construction. In the buildings of this particular exhibit the forked posts will be cast into the 12" clay walls with only the forked portion of each post exposed. The roof thatching materials used the leaflets of palm tree fronds. In Z. R. Dmochowski's third volume of the series entitled *An Introduction to Nigerian Traditional Architecture* he discusses Igbo architecture and two different roof thatching techniques:

> The favored species of frond was from the *ngwaw* palm (Raphia vinifera). Sometimes the fronds were laid horizontally along the roof with their mid-ribs nearly touching each other. The superior and very laborious method, however, was by making rectangular panels, sometimes called 'bamboo mats' (abanya or atani).

At the Frontier Culture Museum the latter method was employed with most of the work taking place on the ground before the roof assemblies were hoisted into position on the building (Figure 9).

Significance and Symbolism

Edward A. Chappell in his article entitled "Museums and American Slavery" states the following with regard to museums dealing with American history:

> There are several reasons why American History museums should be in the business of dealing with slavery in a forthright and substantive manner. Literally, millions of people visit museums each year, most of them ready to think and learn. Too often, they find institutions functioning as a refuge from the realities of modern life.

The Frontier Culture Museum, in exhibiting the West African Style buildings, is directly addressing the early beginnings of slavery in this country while also illuminating our understanding of material culture and traditions that early Africans brought with them. As indentured laborers, they may have had some degree of freedom in expressing, sharing or passing on their cultural traditions in agriculture, pottery, cooking, folk medicine and perhaps even earth building technology wherever these may have proved useful. Archeological

discoveries at African American slave quarters are increasingly providing evidence of these cultural influences and practices. The volume of such evidence is gradually increasing as more African style artifacts at old slave quarters are uncovered and as more African American oral traditions are carefully scrutinized.

The significant percentage of Igbo people among captive Africans brought into the mid-Atlantic and Chesapeake regions has been established by a number of studies (Chambers 1997; Gomez 1998; Northrup 2000; Walsh 2001). Douglas Chambers' 1997 study entitled *Murder at Montpelier: Igbo Africans in Virginia* provides support for the likely influences of Igbo culture among Africans in Virginia. Gloria Chuku, in her review of that same work, skillfully summarized the key observations:

> The charter generation of Atlantic Africans marked the development of Mt. Pleasant as a regional slave community of the Madison family with twenty-nine slaves. It was an era when enslaved Africans employed their cultural heritage to adapt to their new environment. They not only employed their expertise in tropical agriculture to cultivate tobacco and corn, but also put into use their knowledge of herbs and plants to make preventive, curative, and poisonous medicines.

The West African exhibit promises to be a significant step towards building a stronger connection with the cultural and ancestral heritage of African Americans.

This exhibit can supplement or spark efforts to uncover or connect with cultural roots through the technology of DNA analysis. Although such analyses can provide persuasive evidence of ancestral heritage, the feeling of detachment or estrangement from that heritage still persists. Although archeological fieldwork can turn up broken shards of bowls and other utensils used by enslaved laborers, those materials still seem somewhat distant and unconnected to us today. On the other hand, there is probably no comparison to actually seeing with one's own eyes and touching with one's own hands the smooth, cool, burned ochre walls of a traditionally built West African clay walled building. There is also no substitute for experiencing the cool, comfortable interior of one of these clay walled huts on a hot summer day. Undoubtedly some captive Africans built and enjoyed the benefits of this suitable structure for the stifling hot summers of South Carolina as suggested by excavations at sites like the Curriboo Plantation in Berkeley County, South Carolina. Leland Ferguson gives a detailed treatment of this and other

archeological sites in his book entitled *Common Ground*: *Archeology and Early African America*.

The exhibit can promote and foster a greater interest and renewed appreciation for West African traditional architecture, building traditions and vernacular technologies. This is particularly important for West Africans living in Africa as well as abroad since there is an unfortunate trend of abandoning traditional building methods in the wake of 'better' modern materials and building techniques. Z. R. Dmochowski, in the Preface to his series on *Traditional Nigerian Architecture* offers the following statement: "among all the arts, architecture is the most firmly linked with human life and reflects its dynamics most faithfully."

Ironically and conversely, the trend in the United States and other developed countries toward green and sustainable design and construction is borrowing the tried and tested lessons of traditional, indigenous and vernacular architecture to create a better coexistence of natural and human-made systems. Green building techniques such as adobe, straw bale, earth sheltered and rammed earth construction are gaining greater attention and wider acceptance as modern building science begins to recognize the genius and logic of the ancient building methods and technologies. We are now able to take the lessons learned from these enduring techniques and integrate them into modern architectural design as part of a strategy for sustainability. Use of



Figure 9. Completed Receiving House and First Wife's House.

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products containing rapidly renewable materials such as bamboo and cork, use of building materials and products free of toxic ingredients, and reuse of existing materials, are a few of the vernacular practices now included in sustainable design principles.

Concurrently, we should remain cognizant of the fact that while the Frontier Culture Museum exhibit provides the opportunity to experience some of African material culture, in particular the Nigerian (Igbo) culture, it is to a large extent symbolic since the ethnicities and tribal origins of the captive Africans brought to the New World were many and varied. There were deliberate efforts on the part of slave traders and plantation owners to sever family bonds as well as cultural and linguistic relationships by mixing enslaved laborers of different regions, ethnic groups, languages, and customs. This was a purposeful strategy of divide and conquer employed by slave dealers and plantation owners. One compelling reason for this practice no doubt related to the lessons learned by planters from the frequent rebellions and incidences of coordinated escapes, especially in South America and the Caribbean.

Although the Frontier Culture Museum exhibit's material manifestations of Igbo culture are symbolic in nature, and the exhibit could be viewed as representative of numerous African cultures at the roots of African American heritage, it is no less of a poignant experience to behold the West African architectural forms in the middle of rural Virginia (Figure 9).

Conclusion

The West African style exhibit will undoubtedly be of immense interest to the American public but will have special meaning for West Africans, African Americans, and the legacies of the diaspora. The exhibit will manifest, in concrete form, the cultural roots of West Africans and African Americans. Z. R. Dmochowski in the Preface to his series entitled *Nigerian Traditional Architecture* explains that,

> all over the world familiarity with the architectural achievements of one's country, an understanding and appreciation of its traditions through the ages, is now almost considered to be an elementary means toward the formation of national consciousness and self-assertion.

The West African compound exhibit promises to be one more step for African Americans toward re-establishing the links with their cultural heritage. Owing to the circumstances under which Africans came to this country it has been difficult to express and maintain their architectural

traditions. One notable exception to this phenomenon has been the proliferation of shotgun style house in New Orleans and other parts of the South. Several studies have been published examining the African origins of this unique architectural style which, it is believed, was brought to Louisiana by free and enslaved Haitians of African descent. Other traditions in music, art, decorative and culinary arts have been easier to sustain and subsequently integrate into mainstream American culture partly because they were not seen as a threat by the ruling class.

Since African Americans had been denied the chance, in the past, to fully express their culture and heritage through architecture, perhaps this ground breaking exhibit by the Frontier Culture Museum, while expanding the museum's subject matter, represents a concrete step toward addressing the wounds of the past and going above and beyond mere rhetoric.

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