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Jefferson's Poplar Forest

Submitted by Barbara Heath, Poplar Forest

Archaeologists at Jefferson's Poplar Forest are currently excavating the site of an early nineteenth-century slave cabin located approximately 650 feet east of the octagonal dwelling house which Jefferson constructed in 1806 to serve as "an occasional retreat." Artifacts recovered at the site from feature fill and the plowzone suggest that the cabin was occupied from the mid 1790s through the first decade of the nineteenth century. The artifactual data combined with documentary evidence suggests that the building may have been torn down during Jefferson's campaign to reorganize the plantation landscape in 1812-1813. Still later in the nineteenth century, the site was plowed.

The site was discovered during testing of Poplar Forest's property boundary during the spring of 1993, when a test pit came down on the corner of what turned out to be a root cellar. Testing to the north and south have identified the limits of the site and the probable location of another dwelling on an adjacent knoll. The site sits on a gentle slope, and the predicted location of additional buildings at the top of the knoll lies on land no longer owned by Poplar Forest. To date, archaeologists have uncovered the footprint of a building that measures roughly 15 by 25 feet. Three shallow, unlined pits, or root cellars, sat within the structure. No in-situ evidence of chimneys was preserved; however, the presence of daub in the fill of the root cellars suggests the presence of wooden chimneys at each gable end of the structure. Like most piedmont Virginia dwellings, this structure was probably built of log.

A variety of artifacts have been excavated from the root cellars, including buttons (bone, silver plated and brass), a small assemblage of glass beads, architectural debris and hardware, imported ceramics, bottle glass, what appears to be the bowl of a pewter spoon, a small faunal assemblage and a collection of charred seeds. Faunal analysis conducted by Susan Trevarthen Andrews of Poplar Forest resulted in the identification of one cow, one pig, one chicken, one turkey, one white tailed deer, one opossum, one eastern grey squirrel, one eastern cottontail rabbit and unidentified fish. Eggshell was also recovered. Floral analysis undertaken by Leslie Raymer of New South Associates will be completed this winter.

Excavations have continued around the structure in an attempt to document the layout of the yard. A total of 30 ten-foot units have been excavated to date. All units have been subdivided into five by five foot units for removal of plowzone, and all have been screened through one-quarter inch mesh.

Artifacts recovered in the plowzone indicate both domestic and industrial activities occurring at or near the site. A quantity of clinkers, pieces of iron waste and tools that appear to have been reworked suggest that a blacksmith's shop was near the dwelling. No structural remains of such a building have been located.

Sixteen fragments of soapstone tobacco pipes have also been recovered from the site, one of which came from the fill of a root cellar. Two larger pieces of broken soapstone may be byproducts of pipe making on the site. Research into these objects is currently underway. The

archaeology department has recently received a two year grant from the Henry Luce Foundation, half of which will support continued investigations at this site.