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Kerri S. Brarile
University of Texas at Austin

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Testing the Oral History at Middleburg Plantation, Berkeley County, South Carolina

Kerri S. Barile, University of Texas at Austin & University of South Carolina, Columbia

Middleburg, a rice plantation near Charleston, South Carolina, was home to the Simons, Lucas, and Ball families from 1699 through the 1970s. The families themselves, however, comprised only a small percentage of the plantation's historic population. Middleburg was also "home" for several hundred enslaved Africans. As with many plantations, many of the former slaves took up residence on land directly surrounding the estate upon emancipation. The continued presence of both the white owners and the free blacks fostered a rich and detailed oral tradition, which illuminate persisting racial conflicts in the area.

In his 1992 work *Uncommon Ground*, Leland Ferguson discusses his search for the slave quarters at Middleburg. Archaeological excavations and documentary research revealed their location east of the main house and the period of occupation from around 1770 through the first quarter of the 19th century (Adams 1990:93). Sometime after the quarters were removed, a large two and a half story structure was built on the site (Figure 1). This building is colloquially referred to as the Commissary, a name derived from the period in the early 20th century when the structure served as a local store (Hill 1988). It is believed to have served as a storage building during the 19th century. The ground level is made up of a single large room to the west and two small (three feet by five feet) exterior chambers that open on the east elevation (Figure 2). It is these exterior rooms that have been the focus of a growing oral tradition. Among white descendants, these two rooms were believed to have been used to teach new slaves English. The new slave would be put in one room and an American-born slave would be put in the other, with the slaves divided by a wall of brick. They would be let out of their "school-rooms" when the lessons were over.

A very different tradition exists among black descendants who continue to live in the area. Their belief, passed down through generations, is that these two rooms were, in fact, the plantation jail cells used for holding and inflicting harsh punishments (Ferguson 1998: personal communication). These two traditions mirror the way each group of descendants differentially, and even oppositionally, interpret the history of slavery at Middleburg. In *Slaves in the Family*, Edward Ball (1998) collected oral histories from the descendants and relations of both white owners and black slaves to explore his family's heritage. A 90-year old white family member said: "We lean over backwards where the Negroes are concerned. But they live like animals, you know" (Ball 1998:53-57). The descendants of the Middleburg slaves who still live in the area told Ball of the splitting and selling of families, the beating and flogging, and the harsh work conditions. As one said, "that was an awful time. I'm glad I wasn't there then" (Ball 1998:395).

In January and February, 1999, archaeological excavations and architectural analysis were undertaken to answer some of the contrary interpretations of the Commissary. Two excavation units were placed around the exterior of the Commissary foundation to answer questions about the building's construction and the deconstruction of the slave quarters below. One unit was placed inside the southern exterior chamber to reveal construction details and insights into the

room's purpose. The two units at the Commissary foundation revealed that the slave quarters in the area were purposely burned to clear the area and the Commissary was immediately constructed on the spot around 1820 (Barile 1999). The interior of the structure revealed a different picture. Upon investigation, the interior dividing walls that separate the two exterior chambers from the large main area were found to have a "cold" joint with the exterior foundation walls on both sides and, further, these walls are not tied into the roofing members. Archaeologically, the builder's trench in the unit inside the southern chamber contained fragments of aqua bottle glass, which has a terminus post quem of 1860 (Jones and Sullivan 1985:13-14). Together, the archaeological and architectural analyses show that not only were the walls that create the two exterior chambers added after the initial construction of the building, but these changes were made after 1860. During the period of slavery at Middleburg, the Commissary appears to have had only one large room on the ground floor, not three. With this knowledge, these chambers could be neither schoolrooms nor jail cells.

As both oral traditions regarding the Commissary appear to be inaccurate, what can this say about the validity of oral histories on archaeological and architectural research? Anne Yentsch (1988:5,16) makes a point to note that many times, such traditions were not truths to be passed down as completely factual histories, but were instead methods of "binding society and promoting solidarity" among different societal factions. For this reason, architectural historians and archaeologists have been hesitant to include this information in their studies. She also recognizes, however, the inherent value in the hidden meaning of oral traditions, for "encoded within them is ethnographic information on social values and folk ideas about kinship, community identity, society, history, culture and nature" (Yentsch 1988:5).

It is with this idea that the oral histories of the Commissary at Middleburg reveal the past. Even though the chambers were found to have been constructed after emancipation, the oral traditions themselves divulge a plethora of information about the 18th-, 19th -, and 20th-century relations among the white and black populations in the area. This information can be used to decipher meanings among the plantation landscape and the dissemination of power among its' inhabitants. It can also yield possible clues to living conditions, social actions, and the daily lives of both the white elite family and their enslaved African-American workforce that are not seen in the written record and cannot be determined archaeologically or architecturally. Like many aspects of researching the past, archaeology can benefit from a multidisciplinary approach so that an attempt can be made to illuminate the past in the present.

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