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# Plantation Archaeology: Where Past and Present can Collide

*Submitted by Laurie A. Wilkie, Institute of Archaeology, UCLA*

December, and the Christmas lights are lit at Poplar Grove Plantation. Since 1990, a preservation group has outlined the remaining, dilapidated buildings of the plantation quarters with Christmas lights, producing an nostalgic holiday display. Recently, school children from the area have added painted cut-out figures of African-American tenants involved in different plantation activities, such as slaughtering hogs, cutting sugar cane, tending to children, sitting on porches, cooking, etc. To the average visitor, the light display presents a cheery portrait of yesteryear gone by. So convincing is the display, that it is easy to ignore the broken down trucks and cars parked by the houses, the tattered clothes lines hanging in the backyards, and the scattered children's toys on the porches. If approached in the daylight, however, it is this present reality of Poplar Grove that must be seen.

The African-American families that now live on Poplar Grove are squatters, tied to the land not through legal holdings, but through years of association and occupation. They are the living legacy of the collapsing plantation system, and are increasingly trapped between the goals of developers, and, ironically, historical preservationists. Poplar Grove is a plantation indispute. The plantation lands were originally acquired in the 1820s, but the plantation operated most successfully as a sugar plantation from the 1880s through 1982. Quarter houses built as early as the 1870s still stand as part of one of the most intact plantation complexes from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries.

A non-profit organization has been attempting to purchase the site to create an interpretive center/museum complex. The owner of the land, a descendent of the planter family who ran Poplar Grove, does not want to sell the land despite the urgings of other family members, but rather, wants to raze most of the complex to build a warehouse facility. It is unclear how this dispute will play out. One aspect is clear, however, whether the buildings are razed or made into a museum complex, the lives of the current squatters, the living representatives of the Poplar Grove community, will be impacted.

As an archaeologist, it would be desirable to ensure that some sort of archaeological testing and excavation could take place at this valuable site before any demolition might occur. However, as an anthropologist, such research may serve to facilitate or quicken one conclusion or the other. The preservation group is dedicated to preserving a portion of the African-American historical experience through the buildings and plantation complex, but to do so may be at the expense of the living members of that community.

Given the nature of negotiations at this time between the preservation group and the landowner, it is possible, that if the preservation group successfully purchases the property, somehow the needs of the modern community at the plantation will be addressed and incorporated into the interpretive development as has been publicly stated. However, previous cases in Louisiana have had a very different outcome.

Poplar Grove is not the only plantation where preservation conflicts with the needs of contemporary communities. In 1992, another historical group based in Baton Rouge purchased four standing antebellum cabins from Riverlake Plantation in Pointe Coupee Parish. The cabins were constructed circa 1845, making them rather rare. Three of the four cabins were in an advanced state of disrepair, but the fourth was still occupied. It was the hope of the preservation group to move the four cabins to Baton Rouge, to create 2 or three complete cabins from the four and lay them out in a row pattern behind another historic plantation house.

The intent was to create an interpretive exhibit focused on African-American plantation life, certainly a laudable goal. The land owner planned to plow the land where the houses stood to plant more sugar cane. Living in the fourth cabin was a seventy year old African-American squatter and his female companion. The two were evicted from the house during the Christmas of 1992.

Archaeologists from LSU were contacted by the architectural historian overseeing the house moving after it was suggested that archaeological testing of the site may be appropriate. Paul Farnsworth and myself, agreed to run volunteer excavations at the site as a salvage operation. We worked closely with the former tenant population, gathering oral histories and perspectives on plantation life. Having been brought into the project at a very late stage, we were very distressed to learn that the offer by the preservationists to purchase the buildings had led to the eviction of the elderly couple. We were able to build strong ties with the former community of the plantation despite this, but became very aware of the conflicting goals of the project.

There is an additional element of the Riverlake story which makes it more sardonic. Riverlake Plantation was the boyhood home of world-renowned African-American author, Ernest J. Gaines. Riverlake Plantation and its community was the inspiration for much of his literary work. In his novels, *A Gathering of Old Men*, and *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Gaines discusses the plight of older African-Americans living as squatters on plantations where they once worked, dependent upon the whim of their former employer for their homes. The connection between the cabins, the author, his writing and the plantation landscape would have made this a valuable site to preserve. Instead, the cabins have been removed from a significant historical context. In preserving only the architectural remains from the plantation, the remains of the community whose history is to be told through the interpretation of the houses, have been forced from their homes.

Conflicts between the interests of landowners, squatters and preservationists are likely to increase in frequency as interest in interpreting the African-American past for the public grows. The issue is not new however. The state of Louisiana, in 1947, purchased Oakley Plantation and began to develop the land as a State Commemorative Area, which it still is. In 1949, Sam Scott, who had lived on the plantation for thirty years, and two other elderly tenants, were evicted from their homes, which were located within the new state park. From 1991-1992 I conducted excavations at Oakley Plantation. As part of the park's interpretive plan, they are interested in adding interpretive themes related to the African-American experience at the plantation. The only remaining African-American house in the park, however, is the one Sam Scott built in the 1920s. The older slave cabins and outbuildings had been demolished in the early 1950s as part of park development. Materials were stripped from the cabins and used to renovate the Great House

and Planter Kitchen. The Scott house, out of visitor access, is currently used for storing heavy equipment. The front of the structure has fallen from its piers and is likely to completely decay in a few years if no repairs are made. The house has not been lived in since 1949, when the State of Louisiana evicted Sam Scott as part of their preservation plan for the park.

How can we protect the past without sacrificing the present? Increasing discussion and controversy in archaeology about issues such as reburial and the archaeological study of disenfranchised communities has demonstrated that we must work to make the past meaningful to the living representatives of communities we study. As archaeologists we must be aware of the impacts of preservation and living history museum development on the living descendants of the people we study and whose history is to be presented.

In the American South, there is increasing interest in the African-American past. This is a very positive trend, however, in many instances, the past is closely linked to the present. Landowners have already recognized that involving preservation groups and developing historic sites provides a mechanism for removing squatters from old plantation housing. We must not allow our interests as archaeologists to interfere with our role as anthropologists, sacrificing the people of the present for the good of the past.