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Georgia Excavations Yield Look at Slave Life

By Mike Toner
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Slavery left its scars -- physical and psychological -- on generations of Americans. Now, Georgia archaeologists are discovering that it left indelible marks in the landscape as well.

In scattered excavations, from the Sea Islands to downtown Columbus, new glimpses of African-American culture before the Civil War are emerging. They are fragmented but tangible hints of a lifestyle that, until now, has been only thinly documented.

"Not a lot is known about what it was like to be an African-American before the Civil War because historians either didn't record it or they did it with prejudice," says Joe Joseph, vice president of New South Associates, one of several Atlanta-based firms that do contract archaeology for developers and government agencies.

"By looking at the landscapes, the architecture and the material culture that remains, we are getting a more complete picture of what it was really like," he says. "The emerging picture is one of a culture that had much more depth to it than we used to believe."

At its annual meeting this year, the Society for Georgia Archaeology attempted to take stock of the cultural details -- from the African-style home the first slaves built in America to the ceramic traditions they introduced -- that have come to light since the civil rights movement kindled interest in African-American archaeology more than a quarter of a century ago.

There's a lot of catching up to do. America's slave era began in 1619 when a Dutch ship landed in Virginia with 20 slaves. By the time of the Civil War, there were 4 million slaves in the Southern states -- about one-third of the region's population.

Some of the new evidence has reinforced accounts from that time that many people simply refused to believe, such as Frances Anne Kemble's "Journal of a Residence on a Georgia Plantation," a controversial account of antebellum slave life on St. Simon's Island.

Kemble, a British actress who married a wealthy planter, chronicled rapes, whippings and squalid living conditions in the slave community of St. Anne's on St. Simon's in the journal she kept while living at the Hampton Point Plantation in the 1840s. When her journal was published in 1863, it was derided in the South as the distortions of a meddling foreigner. But, in Europe, it was second only to "Uncle Tom's Cabin" in stirring abolitionist fervor.

"We actually dug at the site she talked about in her journal, and everything we found was just the way she described it," says Scott Butler, an archaeologist with Brockington and Associates, who excavated the old slave quarters to clear the way for a real estate development.

"We found the foundations of 16-by-16-foot frame houses that held 10 slaves each, the remains of mud and stick chimneys, the trash pits beside the house, and scissors, thimbles, bone buttons and the other things these people used in everyday life," he says. "There are no photographs of St. Anne's, so the artifacts we found are as close to personal histories as we will ever get."

Some bits of emerging historical mosaics are small and personal, such as the children's toys, jewelry and simple musical instruments excavated in Columbus from the cramped servants' quarters behind the 1830s home of states' rights advocate and attorney Henry Benning.

Others artifacts are more poignant. Slates and writing materials from the Benning compound, for instance, attest that -- despite laws forbidding it -- some slaves were reading and writing.

"In spite of the lack of freedom, these were small signs that these people were nurturing their cultural independence," says archaeologist Rita Elliott, who excavated the site before construction of a new office building in downtown Columbus.

On Ossabaw Island, on land owned by the state of Georgia, archaeologists have been studying slave dwellings built on the island's North End Plantation in the 1840s -- some of which are still standing.

Archaeologist Dan Elliott, working under a grant from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and the nonprofit Ossabaw Island Foundation, was astonished when he dug beneath the floors and found remnants of an even older, pre-Revolution slave population -- buttons, ceramics and harmonica parts that date to the 1760s, when the island had a thriving trade in indigo and sea island cotton.

The cabins themselves were made of tabby, a poured mixture of lime, water, sand and oyster shell. Although tabby was introduced to the Americas by the Spanish, it may have African origins. Some historians believe tabby may have originated on the northwest coast of Africa, been taken to Spain, then finally introduced to the Americas, where it was embraced again by African-American cultures.

New discoveries also are challenging popular notions of how slaves lived on early American plantations, which today are usually envisioned as "the big house," with a cluster of outbuildings and rows of dingy slave quarters.

"In the past, archaeologists studying plantations were interested in the homes of the wealthy and influential -- and they paid little attention to the people who made the plantations run," says Joseph.

In recent years, excavations have suggested that, at least during the 1700s, slave quarters were often built by the slaves themselves and closely resembled traditional West African dwellings -- round houses of clay and sticks built around a central chimney with thatched roofs and dirt floors. "All the evidence suggests that this forgotten architecture was the most common kind of dwelling for African-Americans early in our history, and yet it is hardly mentioned by historians at all," says University of South Carolina anthropologist Leland Ferguson.

Ferguson says African-Americans also put a lasting stamp on the ceramic traditions of colonial America.

Until recently, historians assumed that a brownish low-fired clay earthenware called colonoware that was found in abundance at some plantation sites had been crafted by Indians. Then, archaeologists began discovering it in the remains of slave quarters -- and in homes in downtown Charleston -- sometimes decorated with traditional African symbols.

"We're talking about what, at some sites, was the single most common artifact found -- something that was as familiar to people of the time as the early morning coffee mugs was to us, and until recently we didn't realize it was made by African-Americans," says Ferguson.

Some of the roots of colonial agriculture also have their roots in Africa. Archaeologist Brad Botwick, of New South Associates, says the hollowed out cypress trunks used for floodgates in Georgia and Carolina rice fields were derived from traditional practices in West African rice fields.

So, too, was the practice of harvesting rice in hollowed out logs. "Rice was Georgia's first staple crop," he says. "Rice was introduced to American in the 1690s and traces of the landscape that was created for growing are still visible in some areas."

Not all of the archaeology of pre Civil War African-American heritage, however, is synonymous with slavery. When the city of Augusta decided to build a conference center and hotel along its Savannah River frontage, archaeologists were called in to salvage a largely forgotten chapter of city history -- a community of free African-Americans that took root there after the American Revolution. In 1787 the community founded the Springfield Baptist Church, the oldest independent -- and still active -- black congregation in the country.

At its peak, Springfield was home to at least 112 free blacks who worked at trades, including carpenters, saddlers, blacksmiths and barbers. Beneath the streets and sidewalks, archaeologists turned up bits and pieces of their lives and some new insights.

Joseph, whose firm conducted the excavations, was intrigued by an elaborate white clay pipe bowl -- carved in the form of a human face and detailed in black and gold paint. He noted the irony of such a find in a city where fines of up to \$3 or 30 lashes were possible for any black person caught smoking in public.

He also discovered the intact outline of one Springfield dwelling -- a two-room, 10-by-20-foot house built of clay and wood posts between 1820 and 1850 and surrounded by small earthen pits -- that closely resembled the size and layout of Yoruba dwellings in West Africa.

In Africa, the floor plan allowed the dwellings to be linked or expanded. But Joseph says the architectural style of two or three rooms with no hallway found a place in 19th century America in what would come to be called the "shotgun house."

As more evidence of African-American material culture comes to light, archaeologists say more insights into what remains a sparsely documented culture are inevitable.

"We have only been into all of this for a quarter of a century," says Ferguson. "The archaeology of African-American culture in this country has barely begun."