Report on the Mann-Simons African American Archaeology Project

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The Mann-Simons African American Archaeology Project seeks to understand the strategies employed by the diverse African American community to negotiate the complex and challenging world of urban antebellum life, as well as their adaptation to the changing world of the Jim Crow South. Primary data is drawn from documents, oral histories, and archaeological excavations at the Mann-Simons site (38RD1083), a collection of nineteenth and twentieth century intact and extinct urban, middle-class African American households in downtown Columbia, South Carolina. As the first free African American household archaeologically investigated in South Carolina, this project offers a unique opportunity to contribute to our understanding of African American culture and identity on local and regional scales.

From circa 1825 until 1970, the Mann-Simons site was part a larger collection of properties owned by various members of the Mann-Simons family (Figure 1). Property owners, entrepreneurs, and committed participants in Columbia’s African American community, the Mann-Simons family established a tradition of achieving a diverse range of business and social aspirations and gaining access to the material privileges of citizenship. In 1998, Christopher Clement, SC Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology, conducted a preliminary archaeological investigation of the site (Clement et al. 1999). Today, the Historic Columbia Foundation manages the property, which functions as a historic house museum interpreting African American life circa 1890-1910.
the main Mann-Simons house (pictured in Figure 2) (Sanborn 1904).

While most historical and archaeological research at the Mann-Simons site has concentrated on the lives of the antebellum occupants of the main household (Figure 2), subsequent interpretation of the archaeological materials has focused on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century occupation (Crockett 2005). Using a theoretical lens of material consumption that views consumption as an active component of personal and social identity, this research suggested that the Mann-Simons family and other African Americans in Columbia during this time employed three prominent and distinctive strategies to achieve personal and social aspirations: 1) the ownership and use of property, 2) a cooperative family structure, and 3) the consumption of material goods. Each of these strategies speaks to self-sufficiency and successful negotiation of an oppressive environment.

Fieldwork is scheduled to begin in late July 2005. As this will be the first systematic testing of the site, this initial phase of the project is broad in scope and designed to address basic questions about the occupation and integrity of the site. This will provide a solid archaeological basis for understanding the nature of the site, future research design, and community involvement. Following this investigation, more detailed and specific goals can be defined.

Although this project focuses on a limited number of households, I suspect that the ideas, observations and interpretations can serve as a vehicle to better understand how African Americans and other marginalized social groups used material goods during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century to realize social objectives.
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REFERENCES

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