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March 2007 Newsletter

Agriculture and Slavery in Prince George's County, Maryland

By Christopher I. Sperling [1]

Abstract: As modern construction claims previously undeveloped lands, planners seek methods to identify and preserve those cultural resources deemed critical to understanding the past. The past in Prince George's County, Maryland centered on agriculture, in particular the cultivation of tobacco. No other crop defined the historic development and culture of the Middle Atlantic region as much as tobacco; no institution defined tobacco culture more than slavery. As one step toward a better understanding of how generations of enslaved Prince Georgians lived and contributed to the cultural fabric of the county, the Prince George's County Planning Department of The Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission contracted The Ottery Group in 2006 to create an Antebellum Plantation Research Guide for Prince George's County. The research guide will provide Prince George's County researchers a valuable tool from which to initiate site-specific archeological and historical investigations.

Introduction

When founded in 1696, Prince George's County's sparse population consisted predominately of Britons, both indentured servants and their masters, and a small number of enslaved persons of African descent. One and a half centuries later, by the coming of the Civil War, more slaves lived in Prince George's than in any other Maryland county; only Charles County possessed a greater proportion of slaves to free whites (Fields 1985:13). Over the generations, enslaved Prince Georgians developed intricate family networks. Slave families created communities alongside the prominent white masters whom they served. Descendents of the formerly enslaved represent one component of what today has become a black majority; a social, economic, and political force within Maryland, and the most affluent African American community in the United States.

Modern development now threatens to destroy the physical remains of slavery in Prince George's County. Bordering Washington D.C., Prince George's County has experienced unprecedented growth over the last few decades, transforming large tracts of the rural, agricultural landscape into sprawling suburbs. Housing subdivisions replace the vast agricultural fields of the county's past. The backhoes and bulldozers that serve the demands of a growing population also threaten those archeological deposits laden with some of the best, last, and only clues regarding the everyday lives of enslaved Prince Georgians. As intensive development spreads into the heart of what was the county's prime tobacco growing and greatest slaveholding regions, the Prince George's County Planning Board and the County Council recognized the potential loss of significant cultural resources and enacted legislation in 2004 to require

developers to evaluate the archeological potential properties, in particular focusing on the history of slaves and slavery in Prince George's County.

With notable exceptions, previous studies in the county have largely focused on extant architectural resources. These resources, dominated by the great houses of prominent early- and mid-nineteenth century planters, told only one side of Prince George's nearly 200 years of slave history. The archeology legislation provided the impetus for further archeological studies. The intent of the Antebellum Plantation Research Guide (Research Guide or Guide) is to better understand how the institution of slavery changed through time and differed across the county's variegated regions. When completed, the Research Guide will consist of three separate yet interrelated parts. The first part of the Guide consists of an agricultural context for Prince George's County with an emphasis on slavery. The second part of the guide will entail an analysis of known Prince George's County antebellum plantations within the parameters of the agricultural context. The third task integrates the findings of the first two parts through the development of model plantation layouts. The purpose of the Guide is to provide both county administrators and private researchers with information regarding the historic development of the county and to present an informed picture of the spatial organization of the slaves' world.

The initial task of the Research Guide -- the agricultural context -- is currently in draft form. Although the subsequent tasks -- the analysis of known plantations and development of model plantation layouts -- remain to be completed, the agricultural context represents an important first step in the development of the Guide. The following essay describes the methods and sources used in the compilation of the agricultural context and some of its preliminary findings.

Methods and Sample Findings

The Research Guide's agricultural context divides the history of Prince George's County into three distinct temporal divisions in order to better understand changes through time. The first temporal unit, the Early Period, ranges from circa (ca.) 1675 through ca. 1730. The subsequent Colonial Period dates from 1730 and terminates in 1790. The final, National Period, begins in 1790 and ends in 1864 with the adoption of a new State Constitution. These temporal divisions reflect significant trends in the social, political, and agricultural history of Prince George's County. The documentary base utilized in each of these temporal divisions varies, and includes both primary and secondary sources.

The context consists primarily of the presentation of data collected through intensive research of these source materials. This format is designed to: a) provide researchers with a current bibliography through inventorying the major primary and secondary sources available and, b) present data specific to Prince George's County for comparative purposes. The context considers several factors such as demography, economy, geology, and social geography; however, the context intentionally avoids interpretive inflection because its purpose is to provide a starting point for future studies rather than to influence their direction or dictate historiographic preference.

The first temporal division, The Early Period, begins in the late-seventeenth century, the period of initial settlement and the official formation of the county. Like other locales in the coastal Chesapeake, early Prince George's County settlers sought lands to cultivate tobacco. The county's first planters found the sandy soils and riverine environment necessary to participate in the region's tobacco economy, but like elsewhere, labor proved to be scarce. The pool of British indentures began to wane during the latter part of the seventeenth century, and Prince George's County landholders quickly turned to black labor, forcibly imported from Africa. The terminal date of the Early Period, approximately 1730, holds dual significance. First, it represents the time at which the slave population began to increase naturally, rather than through importation by the Atlantic slave trade. Although the international slave trade continued to contribute culturally to the county's slave population, by around 1730 this natural expansion of the population enabled the development of an African American community. The economics of tobacco agriculture, the consolidation of wealth and growth plantations and slaveholdings contributed to the advent of a slave society (Berlin 1998). Secondly, the emergence of a white, planter gentry class, akin to a local aristocracy, in which relatively few families constituted the social, political, and economic elite, also marks the transition into the Colonial Period.

The second temporal division, The Colonial Period, spans from ca. 1730 through 1790. This period represents a solidification of the institution of slavery as the defining component of wealth and social status. Agriculturally, Prince George's County diverged from the regional norm. Whereas agricultural diversification, in particular a shift toward grain cultivation, occurred in the region during the mid- and late-eighteenth century, Prince George's County clung to the single cash-crop model; tobacco remained the preferred cultigen, the crop of wealth and status. The crop demanded more labor but offered the greatest potential returns. As a result, slavery flourished in Prince George's County. Developments in agriculture and the related social and cultural consequences define the beginning of the Colonial Period; political changes mark its end. Although the United States declared its independence in 1776, emerged militarily over its mother country in 1783, and drafted a constitution in 1787, the year 1790 was chosen as the start of the third, National Period because by this time, the new American government formed and functioned, producing a new range of primary source documents.

The discussion of the Early and Colonial Periods in the Agricultural Context for Prince George's County relies heavily on secondary sources. Allan Kulikof's (1976) doctoral dissertation, *Tobacco and Slaves: Population, Economy and Society in Eighteenth-Century Prince George's County Maryland*, offers the most thorough and most geographically pertinent piece of secondary literature. Furthermore, the data presented in this work, as well as Russell Menard's (1975) article "The Maryland Slave Population, 1658-1730," provide the backbone for the demographic data presented in the context. Selected primary documents, in particular probate inventories, compliment this research. Finally several secondary works, such as *Many Thousands Gone* (Berlin 1998), *Slave Counterpoint* (Morgan 1998), *American Slavery, American Freedom* (Morgan 1975), *Tobacco Coast* (Middleton 1984), *Tobacco Culture and The Marketplace of Revolution* (Breen 1985 and 2005) provide broader, regional comparative information.

The National Period, defined as 1790 through 1864 marked an important demographic change in Prince George's County: the emergence of a black majority. As the period began, the

number of black slaves exceeded that of free whites for the first time. Agricultural choices, namely the continuation of the labor-intensive tobacco-based economy, encouraged this demographic trend. Although agricultural practices changed little in the county during this period, technologies that impacted other regions nonetheless impacted Prince George's slave community. The cotton gin provided much of the newly opened Deep South with a new cash-crop and reinvigorated the demand for slave labor. Because the United States abolished the international slave trade in the first decade of the nineteenth century, the advent of King Cotton drew upon slaves from places like Prince George's County.

The first decennial American census was taken in 1790 and the document signifies an important change in the primary resource base available to researchers of Prince George's County history. Several other primary sources proved invaluable in the preparation of the agricultural context. These include subsequent federal censuses, tax assessments, the letters of Rosalie Stier Calvert (Callcott 1985), and the narratives of former slaves collected by the Federal Writers Project in the late 1930s. The most significant data utilized in the discussion of the National Period derived from the U.S. Census Agricultural Schedules for Prince George's County (Ag. Schedules). The M-NCPPC requested the use of these documents from which important aspects of everyday life can be gleaned. For the purpose of the context, the Agricultural Schedules proved too voluminous for a comprehensive analysis. Instead, they were sampled. Efforts were made to include slaveholdings of various sizes, reflective of the socio-economic range of slaveholders. Generally equal numbers of sample plantations were selected from each electoral district. Valuable data also derived from secondary sources, in particular *Slavery and Freedom on the Middle Ground* (Fields 1985) and *The Might Revolution* (Wagandt 2004).

In 1864, Maryland's new Constitution formally ended legal slavery in the State, but still, the institution remained a vital factor in the lives of the emancipated. Therefore, the context ends with a brief discussion of the years immediately following emancipation. Again, the Agricultural Schedules for 1870 proved essential to understanding the importance of tobacco agriculture and slave labor. The comparison of these data with those collected prior to the 1864 State Constitution demonstrated the effects, at the plantation level, of universal emancipation. Of note is the decline of tobacco production, in particular among the county's large planters, and the experimentation with other economic pursuits.

Although the temporal divisions represent one important factor in the history of slavery in Prince George's County, the distribution of slaves throughout the county held significant implications. Accordingly, another focus of the context explores how the size of slaveholdings related to agricultural practices and what effect this had on the daily lives of the enslaved. Slaveholdings were classified as Small (1-5 slaves), Medium (5-19 slaves), and Large (20+ slaves). These divisions have been applied to other studies of American slavery and their efficacy, rightfully, questioned because of wide regional variations in the practice of slavery throughout the history of the American South (see Kolchin 1993:xiii). However arbitrary, these divisions nonetheless allowed for some comparison between slaveholdings of various sizes and, in the case of Prince George's County, appear to have relevance.

For example, a preliminary analysis of nineteenth century census and tax records indicates a distinct link between the size of individual slaveholdings and their location within Prince George's County. This geographic variation generally mirrors the agricultural capacity of soils (Ag. Schedules 1860). In short, regions possessing soils favorable for tobacco cultivation contained the largest concentrations of large slaveholdings whereas slaveholdings kept in non-tobacco cultivating portions of the county contained fewer individuals. Four of the county's nine 1860 electoral districts, Queen Anne, Marlborough, Nottingham, and Aquasco, encompassed less than half the total land within Prince George's County, but contained over 60 percent of the slave population (U.S. Census 1860). Nottingham and Queen Anne, two of the most productive tobacco districts, alone accounted for approximately 42 percent of the slave population. Conversely, the Vansville district generally lacked good tobacco yielding soils and contained only about seven percent of the 1860 slave population (Figure 1).

On the surface, the differences in slaveholding sizes, reflected in the geographic distribution of soils across Prince George's County seems somewhat unremarkable. It stands that the areas which produced the greatest amount of the labor-intensive, cash crop owned the greatest share of the slave population and kept these slaves in larger individual holdings. Nonetheless, this trend holds profound implications regarding not only the daily labors of Prince George's County slaves but also their social lives. The records clearly reveal the slave's centrality to every economic endeavor. Slaves labored on small farms with few other bondmen; they lived in the households of small towns alone with their masters, and they labored on the large tobacco plantations of the county elite. Slaves cultivated grain and market crops, tended herds of farm animals, processed dairy products, constructed hogsheads, served in ironworks, and maintained orchards. Furthermore, although the primary record base for the National Period dwarfs those of earlier times, enough evidence exists to demonstrate that throughout the history of the county internal geography played a major role in determining the day-to-day activities of forcibly bound Prince Georgians (Ag. Schedules 1850, 1860; PG Inventories). In other words, the image of large teams of enslaved black Americans toiling in fields of tobacco, although accurate, is at best partial.

In addition to the tasks in which slaves engaged, geographically affected differences in the size of slaveholdings within Prince George's County also impacted slaves' social lives. Those held in non-tobacco growing regions of the county tended to be kept with few numbers of fellow slaves, a situation which likely complicated social interactions such as finding a mate and maintaining family and community networks. The gender and age composition of variously sized slaveholdings compounded these difficulties. In 1840, slaveholdings containing between one and five slaves tended to consist of more women than men and contained a small number of children (Figure 2). Men slightly outnumbered women and children on slaveholdings with between six and 19 slaves. On plantations of 20 or more slaves, children slightly outnumber the equally represented male and female population (U. S. Census 1840). These data may indicate a greater

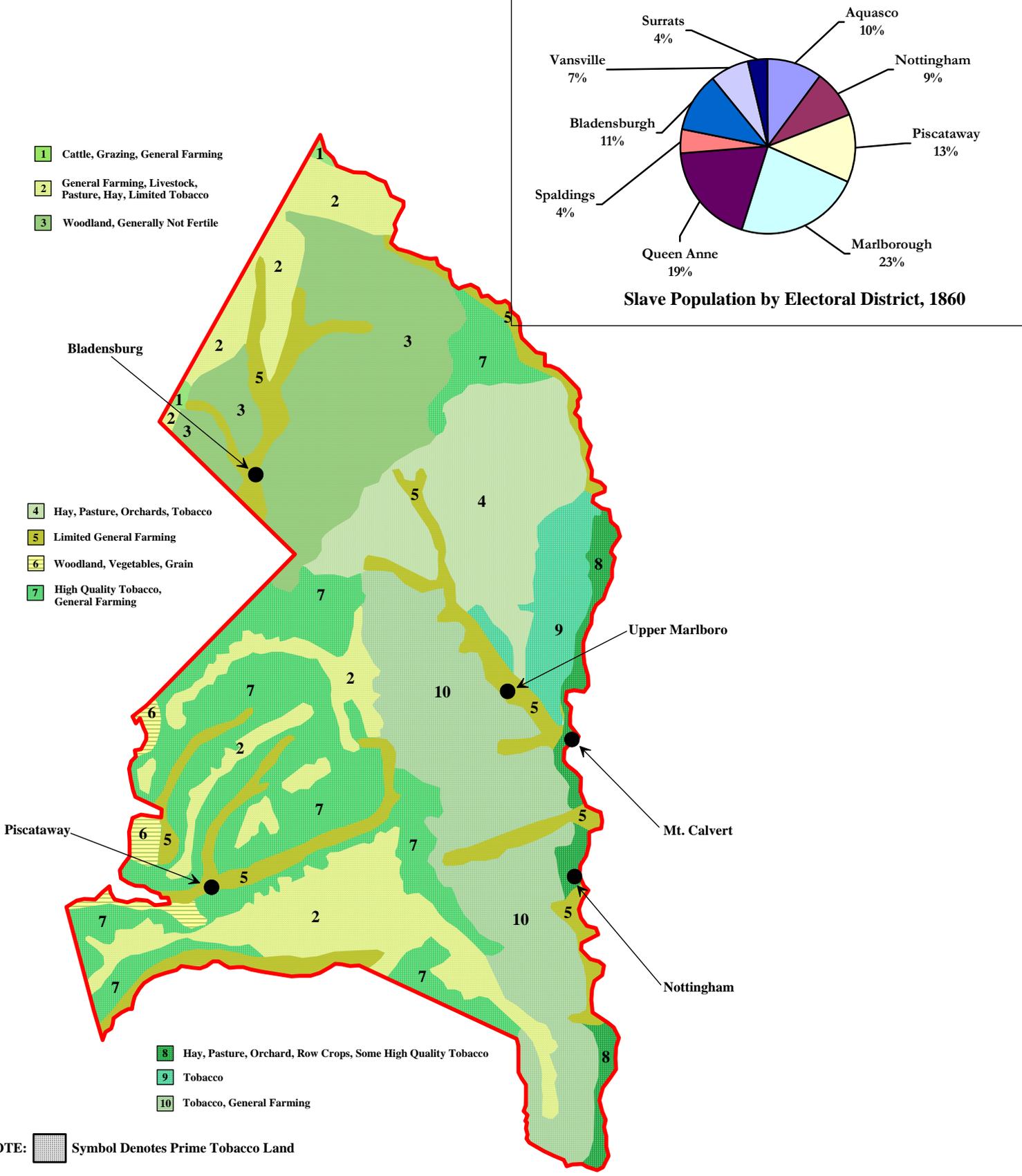


Figure 1: Prince George's County Soil Capacity and 1860 Slave Distribution.

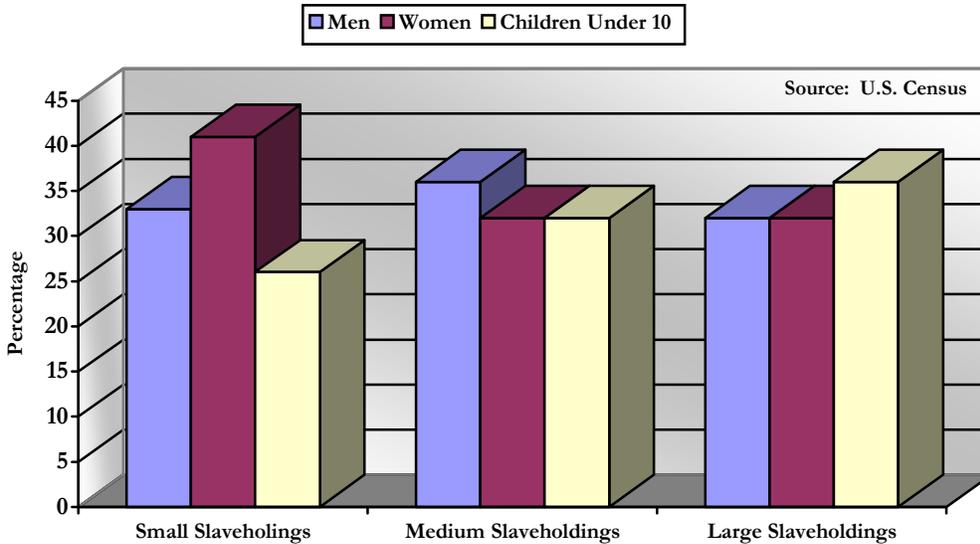


Figure 2: Gender and Age Distribution of Prince George's County Slaves on Small, Medium, and Large Slaveholdings, 1840.

potential for the formation of nuclear families on larger slaveholdings and their maintenance to the degree possible within a system of race-based, chattel slavery.

Conclusion

The preparation of the agricultural context has already yielded significant information regarding slavery as it existed and changed over time in Prince George's County. The context however, represents only one component of a larger research guide. The subsequent components -- the analysis of known plantations and development of plantation models -- will delve into the spatial organization of the slaves' world. Both of these tasks will be presented according to temporal and slaveholding divisions as discussed in the agricultural context. This poses a problem, namely that nearly all extant plantation structures in Prince George's consist of the big houses of large slaveholders dating to the early- and mid-nineteenth century. Few of the county's early period plantation sites, those dating from the early to mid-eighteenth century, have been thoroughly architecturally documented or examined archeologically. In addition to looking at county plantation sites, it may be necessary to draw from architectural and archeological studies conducted outside the county, in particular for information regarding the spatial organization of Early and Colonial Period plantations and small slaveholdings from every period. Ideally, these investigations will have examined slaveholdings in the coastal Middle Atlantic, in regions primarily engaged in cash-crop, tobacco agriculture, but including regions with diversified crops. This research has been initiated and findings will be presented upon completion.

The Antebellum Plantation Research Guide for Prince George's County, Maryland will provide researchers another tool in the study of American slavery. It is however a starting point rather than a definitive conclusion. Future research - historical, architectural, and archeological - will undoubtedly further certain findings of the Guide while challenging, or refuting others. However, because the Guide is a tool that examines the county as a whole, it fails to capture the

individual vignettes of those shackled within the “Peculiar Institution.” Only more detailed investigations hold the potential to speak to the daily lives of bound Prince Georgians. How did individuals like Cesar and Lydia, slaves laboring on the “Sam’s Quarter” of Thomas Addison’s plantation during the early-eighteenth century, mold their physical and social worlds (PG Inventory 1727:56). How did this world differ from that of Margaret, a Prince Georgian enslaved during the early-nineteenth century who at the age of 17 was sold with her mother and eight siblings, along with several other slave families, to Stephen Nickle of Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana, possibly a slave trader supplying the newly sewn cotton fields of the Deep South (PG Chattel).

Measures taken by the Prince George’s County Planning Board of the M-NCPPC and the Prince George’s County Historic Preservation Commission to require cultural resources investigations prior to development represent an understanding of this generation’s responsibility to those past. Research generated by these requirements hold the potential to answer some of the countless questions regarding the lives of slaves across nearly two centuries slave history in the county. Although the Research Guide will provide informed hypotheses regarding the spatial, cultural, and social worlds of Prince George’s County slaves, these remain to be tested. Because the Guide will often rely on inferential data extracted from the available record, future investigations, in particular archeological investigations, should not be constricted by the Guide, but rather should be comprehensive in order to query its efficacy. Furthermore, because so little is known about enslaved life, each investigation contributes, even if they reveal only negative data. As we explore more holistically the Antebellum South’s most defining institution, our understanding of the past becomes richer, and hopefully, the Antebellum Plantation Research Guide for Prince George’s County, Maryland will play a positive role in this process.

Note

1. The author, Christopher Sperling, is an Archeologist/Historian with the Ottery Group.

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