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1997 USM Field School Investigations

Amy L. Young, The University of Southern Mississippi

The 1997 archaeological field school at The University of Southern Mississippi (USM) Department of Anthropology and Sociology spent six weeks testing three important sites associated with African-American slaves in Mississippi. Work represents the beginning of a long-term research project investigating African-American slavery in the southern portion of Mississippi.

The first site investigated, McCallum Farm, is located in the Pine Hills Region of Mississippi. Not known for extensive cotton plantations, early settlers began arriving around 1810 to raise cattle. This farm was established in 1808 by Malcolm McCallum and his wife Mary McIver, both born in Scotland. Malcolm McCallum was one of the larger slaveholders in the Pine Hills. Malcolm's son, John McCallum followed in his father's footsteps and in 1860 the slave schedule of the federal census of Perry County indicated he had 5 slave houses. Tax lists and census records indicate that John McCallum owned around 20 slaves (the number changed through time). The farm is still owned by descendants of Malcolm McCallum and Mary McIver. No 19th-century buildings remain on the farm, however. One week was spent conducting an archaeological survey of the extensive farm to locate the positions of the documented slave houses and John McCallum's residence. Plowed fields were systematically collected, and shovel tests were excavated. The approximate location of the John McCallum house was known to current residents, and the site was located and collected. A large 19th-century artifact assemblage, apparently associated with the slaves, was recovered. Additional investigations at the site are planned for a future date.

Two weeks were spent doing limited testing at a town site in the Pine Hills called Old Augusta. Established before 1819, the town was the county seat of Perry County until it was abandoned c. 1900. The town served as a major slave trading site between Natchez and Mobile. No standing structures survive, and the site is covered with secondary forest growth. One area of the town was extensively surveyed and one-meter square units were excavated where artifacts (especially bricks) were noted on the surface. Unfortunately, the courthouse at Old Augusta burned three times in the 19th century, so there is little documentary evidence available. There is extensive oral history surrounding the site, and field school students interviewed many local residents. The jail, courthouse, a general store, an unknown building, and "The Quarters" were located and tested. The "Quarters" was inhabited by African Americans after the Civil War.

The final three weeks of the field school were spent at a cotton plantation in the Natchez District known as Saragossa. It was likely established around 1820 by Stephen Duncan who owned several plantations and several hundred slaves, but Saragossa was never his home. Based on the average family size and the number of slave houses, Saragossa was home to 60 to 75 slaves (including children and elderly) as well as an overseer. In 1855, Walton Smith purchased Saragossa and enlarged the overseer's house to serve as the home of his own family. Smith also owned other plantations in the Natchez District. An 1843 map shows an overseer's house and eight slave houses. The brick overseer's house and one slave house (timber frame double pen with central brick chimney set on brick piers) survives today. Twenty one-meter square units were excavated to test the area of the slave houses. While some of the slave residential area has been plowed, a number of the house sites are largely undisturbed. Animal bone was recovered in quantity and the site has enormous potential to yield information about slavery on a cotton plantation in Mississippi. Just outside the gates of Saragossa is a small rural African-American community that is largely descended from the slaves. The field school was fortunate enough to be invited to their Fourth of July party and has been invited back to learn more.

Materials from the field school are being processed in lab at USM. A number of students are already preparing papers for presentations at professional meetings.