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Within the past decade, historians have explored the economic lives of people in bondage, tracing the internal economies operating within slave societies of the Caribbean and the American South (e.g. Morgan 1983, Berlin and Morgan 1995, McDonald 1993, Schlotterbeck 1995). Plantation and shop accounts, diaries and legal documents together reveal that slaves actively participated in local economic networks. These findings surely have important ramifications for the archaeological interpretation of plantation and urban slave sites, but have as yet met with limited attention. With few exceptions, archaeologists have failed to adequately explore the roles of slaves as active consumers and producers and the implications of this economic behavior on the archaeological record (Adams and Boling 1989; Sanford 1994; Stine et al. 1996).

Excavations at a slave quarter at Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest plantation in Bedford County, Virginia have raised questions about the ways in which the site's occupants acquired material possessions. The slaves who lived at the quarter from circa 1790-1812 did not materially benefit from proximity to their master since for most this period, Jefferson was an absentee landowner. The quarters were destroyed shortly after he finished constructing a "retreat" house for himself on the property and became a more regular resident.

Archaeologists recovered a small, but diverse, assemblage of artifacts from three house-yard areas discovered on the quarter site, including a minimum of 131 ceramic and 29 glass vessels; fragments of cast iron pots; carpenters', coopers' and general purpose tools; adornment items, floral and faunal materials, lead shot and gun flints, marbles, pipes, writing slate fragments, furniture hardware and padlocks.

The presence of some artifacts can be attributed to the plantation provisioning system, under which the overseer allotted preserved meat, grains, whiskey, coarse cloth and shoes to individuals, a pot and bed to women who married within the plantation community, and construction materials for housing. No records survive to suggest that other objects were purchased by Jefferson or his farm managers for the slaves' use.
Clearly, most artifacts recovered from the Poplar Forest quarter cannot be interpreted using the conventional wisdom of provisions or of planter "hand-me-downs." While individual artifacts may have been cast-offs from the overseer’s household, there is no observable time lag among the ceramic assemblages to indicate systematic provisioning in this manner. Documentary evidence from local stores suggested another avenue of inquiry.

The records of John Hook, a Virginia merchant, include accounts held by enslaved men and women living on plantations near his stores. These accounts begin at his New London shop in Bedford County (1771-1776), and cover accounts recorded during the years he operated a store in neighboring Franklin County (1800-1810). During this period, both counties were dominated by small farms, where only a tiny minority of planters owned more than 20 slaves.

The Hook records from New London list a single enslaved man from Poplar Forest as an account holder. Indeed, the other slaves listed in the daybooks and ledgers represent only a fraction of the enslaved population living in the area. Though apparently not available to most men and women living in bondage, shop accounts do provide the best records of slaves’ economic activities outside the plantation.

The accounts of 16 slaves from at least 12 different plantations record purchases made at Hook's New London store between 1771 and 1776. Cloth, clothing, sewing supplies and accessories such as ribbon, twist and buttons were among the most popular purchases. One man bought a necklace, another a pair of knee buckles. Slaves commonly purchased rum, brandy, molasses and sugar. They bought tools, personal goods such as looking glasses and razors, and cooking implements, including a frying pan, pewter dish, stoneware bowl and "part of a pot." These customers paid for their purchases with cash, handicrafts such as brooms and baskets, raccoon skins, chickens, eggs, cotton and corn. Of 13 accounts, more than half were settled without resort to cash (HPLN; HML).

Accounts for 35 or 36 slaves doing business at Hook's Franklin County shop survive from the period 1800-1808. A preliminary analysis of the data suggests that plantation size did not necessarily dictate slaves' access to earnings or goods which could be used to purchase store merchandise.

The Franklin County accounts reveal that slaves bought a more diverse assemblage of goods between 1800-1808 than did their Bedford predecessors in 1771-1776. This may be due to an increase in available stock over time, to an improved supply system, or to increasing opportunities for individuals to participate in the marketplace. As in the earlier period, cloth, sewing supplies, adornment items and
Clothing represent the most expensive and most purchased items. Of 35 active accounts, all but four record purchases of something from these categories of goods.

Franklin County slaves commonly purchased food and alcohol, including whiskey, sugar, molasses, salt and pepper, shad, herring, bacon, plums and coffee. Items associated with food preparation, storage and serving were also in demand. One man bought four pewter plates in 1800 and a dozen knives and forks the following year; another a dozen plates, and a third a set of tea cups and saucers. Accounts record purchases of a variety of ceramic, pewter, tin and glass vessels (HPLH).

Other selections by enslaved customers include: horn combs, wash bowls, chamberpots, razors, spectacles, and smoking pipes. Several individuals invested in tools and raw materials. Slaves bought many types of knives, as well as awls, augers, pruners, iron, nails, bar lead and molds, leadshot and powder. Six of the 35 active account holders purchased padlocks; one bought a doorlock (HPLH).

Bondsmen and women settled their debts with cash, goods, or services. Their most common source of income appears to have been agricultural produce. Hook and others purchased grain, fodder, cotton, tobacco, dried apples, and even dogs from slave customers, yet nearly one-quarter of these account holders failed entirely to settle their debts (HPLH).

Hook's records also provide a rare insight into the system of economic alliances that existed between slaves. Men and women shared profits from harvests, paid debts through each other's accounts, and made purchases for family and friends. They not only bought, lent and sold goods to each other, but combined resources to purchase a single item. Theodorick Webb's Tom and Jacob Webb's Isaac shared payment for a hat. Others are recorded as purchasing "part of a pitcher" or "part of a pot."

Equally intriguing is the network of economic ties established between slaves and free planters, mediated through Hook's shops. Accounts record these alliances as payments or credits, but leave us to wonder how they were established. Slaves provided services as varied as waggonage, coal production and "physicking" horses to Franklin County's free citizens. These records provide important evidence of the ties that slaves established within a community whose boundaries extended well beyond the limits of individual plantations; of slaves' physical mobility, and of the skills that men and women developed to meet their material aspirations.

Archaeologists studying slavery have been hampered by the notion that the flow of goods was always unidirectional: masters gave slaves new provisions or recycled old or undesirable goods through the quarter. If most of the material objects that survive archaeologically were given rather than chosen, it becomes nearly impossible
to see enslaved people as active creators of their material worlds. The study of colonoware has become so important to archaeologists because this pottery has generally been believed to represent one of the few surviving examples of objects controlled by slaves, acquired outside of the influence of the master, to fit specific needs.

If, however, slaves are seen as active consumers, an attempt can be made to see the material world from the slaves' perspective. The problem, of course, is that men and women living in bondage acquired their possessions both actively and passively, and distinguishing between the chosen and the given at the artifact level may be impossible in many cases.

To begin to address this dilemma, archaeologists need to look beyond individual artifacts to assemblages of related objects and, more broadly, to systems of interrelated objects and features which may preserve evidence of varied economic activities at dwelling sites. Familiarity with the shop accounts are helpful in making a start. For example, some types of artifacts may be more sensitive indicators of active acquisition than others. Hook's accounts demonstrate that slaves most often purchased objects relating to clothing, sewing and adornment. Slaves bought these items to supplement inadequate provisions and to express themselves in ways that plantation-issued supplies precluded (Heath in press).

On a broader level, archaeologists should consider the possibility that the men and women who lived at quarters were active producers of goods with some level of independent economic interests. The extent of these interests, and the ability to produce, varies through time and space, but ample evidence exists to negate the simplistic notion that slaves were always passive recipients of objects. At the Poplar Forest quarter, several lines of evidence suggest that the inhabitants produced goods independent of the larger plantation economy. Clues include tobacco pipes, made of local stone, and stone wasters, the byproducts of work by at least one resident pipe maker. Archaeologists also recovered a variety of tools, including pocket knives, a gimlet, files, two croze plane irons used in barrel making, and various tines that appear to be parts of rakes or harrows. Rather than reflecting theft or resistance to work regimens, these tools may be viewed as evidence of ownership and of production of goods carried out within the quarter. Runaway advertisements from the mid-18th through the mid-19th centuries demonstrate that some slaves owned their own tools and took them with them when they fled the plantation. The Hook accounts also record the purchase of tools by slaves, presumably for their own use.

Many slaves paid off their debts with agricultural products, most likely grown on plantation provision grounds or in house-yard gardens. While the quantities of goods varied between store customers, most merchandise was sold by the bushel, and some
by the barrel. The presence of barrel making tools and pieces of agricultural implements found at the Poplar Forest quarter may, in fact, be residues of the process of independently producing and packaging crops for sale or barter. Slaves participating in the marketplace must have created storage spaces large enough to accommodate their surplus, dry enough to keep it from spoiling, and secure from theft. These may have been within the house, in lean-tos or porches, or in separate sheds within the house-yard complex. Yards potentially hold clues to the location of work spaces, gardens, storage areas and enclosures relating to economic activities (Heath and Moncure 1997).

Four keys, a padlock, pieces for a minimum of eight additional padlocks and parts of two stock locks were discovered within the structures and yards of the Poplar Forest quarter. Locks for doors, chests and other storage areas may have provided safeguards against theft during the long hours that slaves were absent from the quarters.

Coins are another obvious marker of economic activity. While it is likely that some coins functioned as charms and adornment items as well, it seems clear that most coins should be taken at face value -- as evidence that slaves were participating in the economic life of the community.

Finally, the locations of slave sites relative to the "big house" should not pre-determine our interpretation of the artifacts found there, nor should archaeologists pre-judge the economic opportunities afforded to plantation slaves based on their status as house servant, artisan or field hand. Unless strong evidence exists (either through observed time lag or direct matches between objects found in the quarters and the big house), the definition of objects as "hand-me-downs" should be suspect.

In thinking about the material culture of Virginia slaves, Patricia Samford has asked, "How did the physical quality of life differ for field laborers, who had fewer chances to earn money by doing chores or bartering produce and less access to cast-off possessions from the owner?" At the Hermitage, Larry McKee has found no qualitative differences in possessions between domestic slaves and those working in the fields. "Field slaves" he concluded, "might have received fewer castoffs from the mansion, but living further from the overseer's eyes gave them more freedom to hunt and trade." Both of these views acknowledge the possibility of independent economic activity within the quarters. Each, however, places economic opportunity in opposing spheres; Samford near the big house, and McKee with the fieldhands. Both arguments rest on assumptions which need to be questioned. Did field slaves customarily have fewer economic opportunities or, conversely, more free time to garden and trade?
While this is a topic in need of much further research, the Hook accounts reviewed here have some relevance. They indicate that slaves from small holdings, where one or two individuals filled a variety of roles, had access to the shop, as well as those living on larger, more socially stratified plantations. Some men formed economic alliances, sharing the labor of bringing a crop to market and dividing the proceeds. These networks may have been based on kinship, friendship, or shared skills; factors outside of the plantation hierarchy. To understand slaves as self-motivated actors, archaeologists must look beyond the roles dictated to them by planters.

While Hook’s accounts reflect the specialized activities of a relatively small number of people, they preserve within them elements of other, more common economic activities. The sale of foodstuffs and handicrafts reflects their production within the plantation setting; the bartering of services for goods surely went on beyond the store as well as between its customers. These documents allow archaeologists to understand the range of activities people employed to meet their needs, and in so doing, provide us with new tools to critically re-examine our own interpretations.

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