12-1-1997

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Barbara Heath, Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest

Thomas Jefferson inherited nearly 5,000 acres of land in Bedford county at the death of his father-in-law in 1773. He visited the property, Poplar Forest, infrequently during the 18th century, yet derived a significant portion of his income from its tobacco and wheat fields. By the first decade of the 19th century, Poplar Forest was home to more than 80 enslaved African Americans, and one or more overseers and their families.

In 1806, masons began construction of a unique octagonal house at the site. The house, completed in 1809, served Jefferson as an "occasional retreat." During the second decade of the 19th century, Jefferson's overseer and slaves laid-out and planted an elaborate, geometric landscape set within a circular road. Jefferson visited the property several times each year until 1823.

Archaeologists have been investigating Poplar Forest since 1989. Primary research questions focus on the layout and architecture of the plantation and the social relationships of the plantation community.

The North Hill Site: Poplar Forest staff archaeologists, field school students and volunteers have participated in excavations at the site of an 18th century slave quarter known as "the North Hill." Located approximately 800 feet northeast of Jefferson's 1806 mansion house, the North Hill site is part of a larger concentration of buildings that formed the original (pre-Jeffersonian) core of the property known as "the old plantation."

A census of Poplar Forest slaves recorded in January of 1774 listed a single family composed of Guinea Will and Betty, and their three small children Hal, Dilcey and Sukey, as well as a single man, Billy Boy Smith. By the end of that year, an additional family and two single adults were relocated to the property. A later census dating to 1783 lists 35 men, women and children living as slaves at Poplar Forest. During this period, Jefferson was an absentee landowner, visiting once in 1774, and for most of the summer of 1781.

Archaeologists discovered the North Hill site in 1995 when neighboring landowners reported finding artifacts in their vegetable garden. The garden sits on the eastern half of a knoll which also includes portions of the Poplar Forest property along its western extent. Testing within the garden uncovered numerous domestic artifacts dating from c. 1750-1820. Continued tilling in the garden had severely disturbed the site; however the shallow remains of several features, including what is believed to be
a root cellar, were located, mapped and excavated. Testing on the western half of the knoll revealed a fairly even distribution of artifacts in plowzone. Large scale excavation of the western portion of the site began in the summer of 1996.

Distribution maps of artifacts suggest three areas of concentrated deposition. At two of these areas, features were also preserved. Archaeologists recovered a high concentration of domestic material dating to the late 18th and early 19th centuries adjacent to the area tested in 1995. Blue glass beads, a faceted turquoise bead, a small cast brass knife handle with a pistol grip, a cut Spanish coin dating to 1738 were among the more interesting finds. No features are associated with this concentration, but its proximity to the features preserved within the neighboring garden suggest that they may have originated from a structure or structures that once stood there.

The second concentration of artifacts was associated with a five-foot square root cellar and a smaller pit lying 12 feet to the north. The cellar contained a layer of burned architectural material and carbonized botanical remains sealing a thin deposit of soil with domestic refuse. A date of c. 1770-1780 has been assigned to the fill, reflecting the presence of creamware with a Queen's shape rim, but the absence of pearlware or later ceramics. A bone handled folding knife was recovered from the floor of the cellar. Two cut Spanish coins, dating to the first half of the 18th century, and a pair of scissors were also found within the cellar's fill.

The smaller pit was irregular in shape and appears to have been dug into the underlying bedrock. Its fill appears to be contemporaneous with that of the cellar. No clear evidence of wall lines or chimney placement has survived to indicate the size or orientation of the structure(s) associated with these features. Quantities of hand wrought nails and burned daub found within the fill of both features and the overlying plowzone suggest a wooden building with a wood and clay hearth.

The third concentration of artifacts is located approximately 40 feet southwest of the root cellar. This area of the site slopes gently to the south and west, and has never been plowed. Three trenches have been uncovered which appear to form the wall lines of a small structure. An area of burned subsoil suggests that a hearth was located along the north wall, while a gap in the trench lines indicates a doorway located in the northeast corner of the building. The western wall line has not yet been uncovered; however given the evidence to date the structure appears to have measured approximately five and one-half feet wide by 10 to 12 feet in length. It is surrounded by a deposit of organic soil containing numerous domestic artifacts. Creamware and lead glazed redwares predominate in the ceramic assemblage, although fragments of colonoware, delft, Rhenish stoneware and undecorated pearlware have also been recovered. Significantly, no pearlware has yet been found in the occupation layer.
within the structure, suggesting that it was destroyed sometime in the late 1770s or early 1780s.

Excavations will continue at the site through the end of the year. Artifact analysis is ongoing.

During 1997, excavations have been undertaken by students participating in the Poplar Forest-University of Virginia Archaeological Field School, participants in the one week program "Digging, Learning, Teaching: Archaeology for Teachers at Poplar Forest," and returning field school alumni. Research staff includes Barbara Heath (Director of Archaeology), Michael Strutt (Field Supervisor), Heather Olson (Laboratory Supervisor), and Justine Christianson, Jodi Perin and Rob Thomson (externs).