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Preliminary Results: Excavations at a Slave/Tenant Cabin at the Blythewood Plantation

David T. Palmer, Louisiana State University

Blythewood is a former sugar plantation located about 10 km south of Plaquemine, LA. It was constructed sometime in the early 19th century and operated until at least the early part of this century. African-American workers lived at Blythewood from at least the mid 19th century to the middle of this century. There are four standing slave/tenant cabins at Blythewood today. One of these sits directly on the ground instead of being raised up on piers like the others, and it is believed by a local architectural historian (Sid Gray) to be older than the others. This cabin and its surrounding yard were the focus of archaeological excavations during the summer and fall of 1997.

A total of 11 one-meter square units were excavated inside the cabin and in the yard. In addition, five judgémentally placed shovel tests were excavated in the yard and a grid of 20 shovel tests systematically placed at five-meter intervals were excavated, 16 behind (west) of the cabin, and two each to the sides. Artifacts recovered in the upper levels were a mix of recent 20th century materials, mostly of a non-domestic nature, together with some earlier 20th century artifacts indicating a change in use of the cabin from a dwelling to a storage or work shed. The levels below had early 20th century to late 19th century artifacts, while mid to late 19th century artifacts were found in the lowest levels.

The artifacts recovered are similar to those recovered in 1996 by Dr. Chris Hays and Dr. Paul Farnsworth from surface collection and test excavations at other cabins at Blythewood. Many of the artifacts recovered in and around the cabin are of very recent origin, most likely related to current mechanic and tinkering activities at the site and use of the cabin for storage. The earlier artifacts are those from a plantation worker’s household: ceramics, patent medicine bottles, toys, buttons, clay pipe fragments, utensils, faunal remains, and other artifacts typical of a domestic occupation.

Glass was one of the largest artifact categories. Container glass appears to be the best represented, with alcoholic beverage containers among the most numerous, along with patent medicines and canning jars. The glass artifacts seem to indicate a widespread consumption or use of alcohol, although some of the assemblage may reflect recent activities by non-occupants. Patent medicines and other bottled beverages such as mineral water and sodas were also consumed. Canning jars indicate
that home preserving was taking place, indicating that Blythewood's inhabitants were not totally dependent on purchased foodstuffs.

Ceramics recovered were predominantly undecorated whitewares and ironstonewares, with some industrial slip-decorated and transfer-printed whitewares and ironstones, porcelain, yellowware, and a few fragments of earlier ceramics such as creamware and pearlware. Preliminary analysis suggests that there were no matched sets, and that most of the ceramic assemblage could have been purchased on a limited budget in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Many of the metal fragments are identifiable as can fragments indicating the consumption of canned foods. Faunal remains were also abundant at the site, with readily identifiable elements of pig, cow, chicken or other fowl, gar, and eggshell present. The large mammal remains had cut marks and saw marks, and elements such as teeth, jaws, as well as long bones were found, suggesting on-site butchering. A woman who lived at the site in the 1940s had vivid memories of on-site slaughter and butchering. She described how hogs and chicken raised on site would be put up in an elevated pen and fed grain to "clean them out" prior to slaughter, which often took place in the yard near her cabin. This evidence of on-site butchering is another example of the ways in which Blythewood's inhabitants practice deconomic self-sufficiency.

Gardening also added to the self-sufficiency of Blythewood's inhabitants. Although not visible in the archaeological record of the site, oral history records its practice from the early 20th century, if not earlier. The previously mentioned informant described her grandmother's garden as having several types of beans, okra, squash, field peas, and other produce. While patent medicines were found archaeologically, so were traditional treatments. The informant recalled her grandmother using salted meat and cobwebs to treat cuts and puncture wounds. Her grandmother also created hair-care products by combining purchased petroleum jelly with home-brewed ingredients of specific leaves.

Architectural features revealed in the excavation, and the patterning of artifacts in and immediately around the cabin indicate that the cabin was originally stood on piers, like the others presently at the site, which it resembles structurally. It was lowered sometime in the late 19th or early 20th centuries, as oral history indicates that it was already lowered prior to the 1940s. Some of the construction details of the cabin, as well as the patterning of the artifacts, indicate, however, that the cabin is original to its present location, and was not moved from elsewhere.

Overall, the combination of archaeological and oral historical evidence suggests that the material life of Blythewood's post-bellum inhabitants was very modest and
marked by attempts at self-sufficiency. Toys such as porcelain dolls and marbles, as well as items such as tobacco pipes and alcoholic beverage containers are evidence of small luxuries that were obtainable. The large numbers of artifacts recovered are, in-part, a product of the dramatic increase in the number and availability of manufactured goods which became available in the mid to late nineteenth century capitalist economy, and are not indicative of wealth.

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