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The Van Winkle Mill and the Anderson Slave Cemetery: African-American Related Sites in Northwest Arkansas

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As additional data come to light regarding enslaved African-Americans pressed into service in the agricultural economy of the south, attention should be focused on enslavement in other contexts, such as industrial settings, lest we run the risk of stereotyping the system of enslavement (Otto 1980). Similarly, the African-American communities of the Ozark Mountains, both enslaved and free, remain little studied among both historians and archaeologists, with few exceptions (e.g., Catalfamo-Serio 1979; Doolin 1980; Otto 1980). Recent investigations by the UAF station of the Arkansas Archeological Survey (AAS) have the potential to add both to our knowledge of African-American communities in the Ozarks and the conditions of industrial enslavement.

Mapping and limited testing of the Van Winkle Site (3 BE 413), a large domestic/industrial complex located in Benton County, Arkansas, was undertaken in response to the initial development of the Beaver Lake State Park (Hilliard 1997). This site, situated in a steep, narrow hollow, housed one of the largest mill operations in northwest Arkansas from approximately 1858 to the 1940s (Hicks 1990). Additionally, it served as the home of Peter Van Winkle (the mill's owner/operator), his family and the large work force that operated the mill. Just prior to the Civil War, Peter Van Winkle was known to have owned at least 18 slaves, whose involvement in mill work is evidenced by their continued employment after emancipation (Hicks 1990:51).

Features located during the clearing/mapping stage of the project include the Van Winkle home, the associated spring house, the mill site itself and at least two smaller structures (indicated by chimney falls and depressions) interpreted as slave/worker housing. A possible third structure appears to have been modified, perhaps for industrial use. A sherd of flow blue earthenware recovered from subsurface testing around the chimney falls attests to the possibility of a relatively early occupation date.

These three small structures are situated along a narrow side-hollow diverging from the main branch of Van Hollow and appear to be serviced by a smaller spring. This spatial distribution seems to speak volumes about attitudes regarding separation and social distancing of slave quarters as well as privacy afforded African-Americans in this context (see Stewart-Abernathy 1992 for a discussion of this phenomenon among urban slaves in Arkansas).

Additionally, local folklore lead the authors to believe that a "slave cemetery" was present somewhere in Van Hollow. Two sets of upright, unmarked field stones were reported by a local informant. These stones, situated on a ridge near the small domestic structures, were identified by Park Ranger Mark Clippinger and AAS personnel as possible grave locations. Non-invasive testing is being considered to verify the existence of this cemetery.

Another African-American related site investigated by the AAS in Benton County is the "Anderson Slave Cemetery" (3 BE 625). After local informants (including the Benton County

Cemetery Preservation Group) reported that a cemetery might be present on land newly acquired by the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport Authority (NWARA), the NWARA requested that the AAS investigate the area (Hilliard 1998).

Following informant leads, various locations within the thirty-acre pasture were investigated via mechanical stripping. In spite of difficult soil conditions (large pockets of chert deposits), blade cuts were sufficient to discern soil anomalies.

Three features interpreted as infant or sub-adult grave pits were explored by a combination of mechanical stripping and hand-excavated units. These features were located on a small knoll at the back corner of the former Anderson family farm near an intermittent creek. The upland soils of the Ozarks are notoriously acidic, and no artifacts or human remains were recovered even though fill was collected and processed through a flotation system. Soil analysis conducted on fill from two of the features seems to support the grave-shaft interpretation through high phosphorus contents relative to the native matrix (Hilliard 1998:14). This higher phosphorous content may be the result of bone decomposition, but interpretations of grave-fill via chemical signatures remain somewhat inconclusive in archaeological literature (e.g., Bethell 1989; Solecki 1951). No further excavations were conducted, as the project goal of identifying the specific location of the cemetery for avoidance had been achieved.

Identification of various antebellum features, including the specific location of the slave cemetery, provides spatial data for the reconstruction of the landscape of the Anderson antebellum farm. The slave dwellings and burying ground were located south of a road and in a relatively lower topographic setting than the white family home and cemetery. The slave cemetery is located approximately 400 meters south of the Anderson family cemetery on a corner of the property that is subject to flooding. Extensive historical accounts and archival data are currently being compiled by the authors in order to place this antebellum landscape in context and provide clues concerning the lives of the enslaved African-Americans associated with the Anderson family.

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