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An Abolitionist Leads the Way In Unearthing Of Slaves' Past

By John Noble Wilford

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Except for the archaeologists digging in a grove of trees, the old plantation on the Eastern Shore of Maryland appears to be much the same as it was when the abolitionist Frederick Douglass lived here as a slave child, some 180 years ago.

The main house has lost none of its "air of dignity and grandeur" that Douglass remembered. The long drive from the gate runs through a broad lawn and is still paved with white pebbles that sparkle in the summer sun. The mind's eye pictures carriages arriving at the steps of the two-story Georgian house, with its fresh coat of pale yellow paint.

In the back, there are neat out-buildings that served as wash houses and henhouses, kitchens and stables. Beyond, there are formal gardens, an old greenhouse for growing exotic fruit and, not far away, the family cemetery. A single family, the Lloyds, has owned this land since the 1660's. While the cemetery is filling up, their property has diminished to 1,300 acres, still a substantial spread but down from the 42,000 acres they had owned in three states.

The Wye House plantation is a kind of time capsule of the economy and society that dominated much of the antebellum South. All that is missing is the reminder of the human cost that Douglass knew, rose up against and never forgot.

The slave quarters have vanished, on the whole a matter of no regret. But for the archaeologists digging on the grounds, the absence is lost history. They are among a steady number of scholars in the South engaged at ground level in reconstructing the culture of slavery in America.

The search for buried remnants of the dwellings of the African-American slaves has brought archaeologists and their students to the plantation the last two summers, at the invitation of the Lloyd descendants. The project is directed by Mark P. Leone, an archaeology professor at the University of Maryland who has spent much of his career investigating material remains of the gentry and their slaves in Annapolis, Md.

This was a rare opportunity, Dr. Leone said, to excavate a large Southern plantation that has been in the hands of the same family for more than 340 years. That may have helped preserve the buried history.

"We're unearthing historic and scientific treasure," Dr. Leone said, citing the discovery of three and possibly four sites of building foundations and a variety of humble household goods, including thimbles and buttons, spoons and eating knives, ceramics and leftover bones from meals the people ate.

Standing under a tulip poplar at one of the excavation pits, Lisa Kraus said she was also digging into the largely unexamined Lloyd family journals, letters and ledgers at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore. She is a graduate student at the University of Texas, Austin, preparing a doctoral dissertation on the plantation's slave society.

"Very few Southern farms have this kind of knowledge at hand -- a Frederick Douglass or these archives," Ms. Kraus said. Nodding toward the estate house, she added, "Or a Mrs. Tilghman."

Mary S. Tilghman, an 87-year-old widow, is the 11th-generation owner of the property. Her stories, passed down from early times, are "a source of primary information" for the project, Ms. Kraus said.

Seated in the south parlor amid portraits of departed kin, Mrs. Tilghman said she and her older son and heir, Richard, fully approved of the excavations.

"I am really fascinated by anything I can find out about the place," she said.

Asked if it made her uncomfortable to think the project would call attention to the family's slaveholding past, Mrs. Tilghman replied, "Slavery wasn't invented by colonial Americans, and we don't think it was good, but it was there."

The archaeologists started their research with a hand-drawn map from 1784 and the autobiographical writings of Douglass, the eloquent champion of freedom for slaves who was a presidential adviser to Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War.

Douglass lived on the plantation as a boy of 7 and 8 in the 1820's, and the experience made a lasting impression. He wrote of the grinding poverty and hopelessness, the "whippings and savage mutilation of slaves" and the cruel overseer who was "judge, jury, advocate and executioner." It was here, he said, that he first understood that he was a slave and what that meant.

His vivid descriptions set the slave quarters on what was called the "long green," which ran from near the main house down to the river. A two-story brick dwelling was surrounded by a community of huts, work sheds and a crowded, rough-hewn dormitory known as the "long quarter."

The entire quarters disappeared more than a century ago, leaving all traces of the building ruins buried and overgrown with brush and trees. Ms. Kraus, whose previous experience included excavations of George Washington's distillery at Mount Vernon, in Virginia, said the archaeologists relied on the map and the Douglass writings to orient their excavations.

One of their first test trenches uncovered foundation bricks, possibly remains of the two-story brick dwelling Douglass described. A huge poplar grows out of the building site, forcing student excavators to dig gingerly around and under the tree roots. They found household goods from the 18th and early 19th centuries.

"In slavery, the line between work and home life was very blurry," Ms. Kraus said. "Some lived in their workshops, but this is just a dwelling. We can tell by the artifacts."

Steps away, archaeologists have exposed a line of bricks, probably the foundation for a wooden building from the 18th century. Buried in the sediment were pipe stems, broken window glass, some pieces of carriage equipment.

"We're not sure what to make of this site," Ms. Kraus said. "Some sort of shop, perhaps."

Closer to the river, a crew of students supervised by Michael Gubisch, a recent Maryland anthropology graduate, was digging around a brick wall that had been recently exposed. This was presumably the carpentry shop marked on the map at about this spot. Some iron tools were found, and charcoal in the soil suggested that the shop met its end by fire.

"We are finding evidence of intensive occupation through this entire area," Ms. Kraus said.

Archaeologists plan to return next summer for the project's final season, and Ms. Kraus is continuing her examination of the family records, which has its emotional moments.

"You read Douglass about someone being sick, about aunts and grandmothers and families," Ms. Kraus said. "Then in the archives you read their names, and they are listed in the inventory along with hogs, cattle, horses, plows and other property."

Ms. Kraus said she had found Douglass to be a reliable witness. The one building still standing on a knoll at the edge of the slave quarters appears almost exactly as Douglass remembered it. This is the red cottage believed to be where the feared overseer lived and kept watch on the slave population of close to 1,000 in flush times.

Douglass wrote of the overseer and the mornings when the horn called workers to the fields. "Woe betides them who hear not this morning summons," he said, for the overseer used to stand by the door of the long quarter, armed with a hickory stick and ready to whip anyone lagging behind.

While excavators worked the shallow pits, the still of the hot afternoon was broken by a noisy mowing machine driven by a caretaker. Machines have mostly replaced manual laborers, white or black.

Mrs. Tilghman said African-Americans in nearby communities, some of them descendants of the plantation slaves, used to work the fields at planting and harvest. "But that is a thing of the past," she said. "Two men with machines, the big stuff, can do all the work."

Dr. Leone called attention to another change: the trees growing where the slaves had lived.

During slavery, Dr. Leone said, the quarter was cleared of all trees so that everything and everyone were always in clear view from the estate house, the overseer's cottage and the wharves.

"Lines of sight and the fear of being watched, coupled with violence, were the techniques of slave governance," he said.

After Emancipation in 1863, many of the former slaves settled outside the plantation in the new villages of Unionville and Coppertown. The archaeologists said they had consulted their descendants in planning the project, asking what they would like to know about the place where their forebears lived in bondage. Ms. Kraus has described results of the excavations at periodic meetings at St. Stephens A.M.E. Church in Unionville.

"What have archaeology and history done for African-Americans? Not much," Ms. Kraus said. "We are working in places like Unionville to get the people identifying with our research as a part of retrieving their lost history."

It was a history that motivated Douglass to fight for the end of slavery. After two years here, he was sent to work in Baltimore and eventually escaped to New York and freedom. He returned later to Wye House under more favorable circumstances.

"My grandfather remembered, as a young man, when Douglass came here after the war," Mrs. Tilghman said. "They had drinks and food out on the porch, a fine time."

Even though the visit could not wipe the slate clean, it left Douglass with warmer thoughts of the old plantation.

"To say that our reception was every way gratifying," he wrote, "is but a feeble expression of the feeling."