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March 2009 Newsletter

Identity and Place Making: A Study of Colonoware at Fairfield Plantation

By Danielle Cathcart*

The ruins of Fairfield Plantation sit on a small parcel of land not far from Williamsburg, Virginia. It once stood as an emblem of colonial grandeur and humbled all who drew near. Originally patented by Lewis Burwell I in 1648, Fairfield grew to prominence in the mid-eighteenth century alongside other plantations like Rosewell and Carter's Grove (Figures 1, 2). Fairfield underwent a succession of large-scale renovations and additions until it succumbed to



Figure 1. Eighteenth-century map showing locations of Fairfield, Rosewell, and Williamsburg.

fire in 1897 (Harpole and Brown 2007). The material remains of this storied past are scattered throughout the plowed soils of the plantation, and speak to the daily activities of over one hundred enslaved laborers as they worked and lived under the direction of Fairfield's many owners. To see this history through the journeys of a colonoware pot from manufacture, use, disposal, and eventual recovery by archaeologists is to step away from categorical debates and seek out meaningful truths. These events are perhaps typical of thousands of fragments

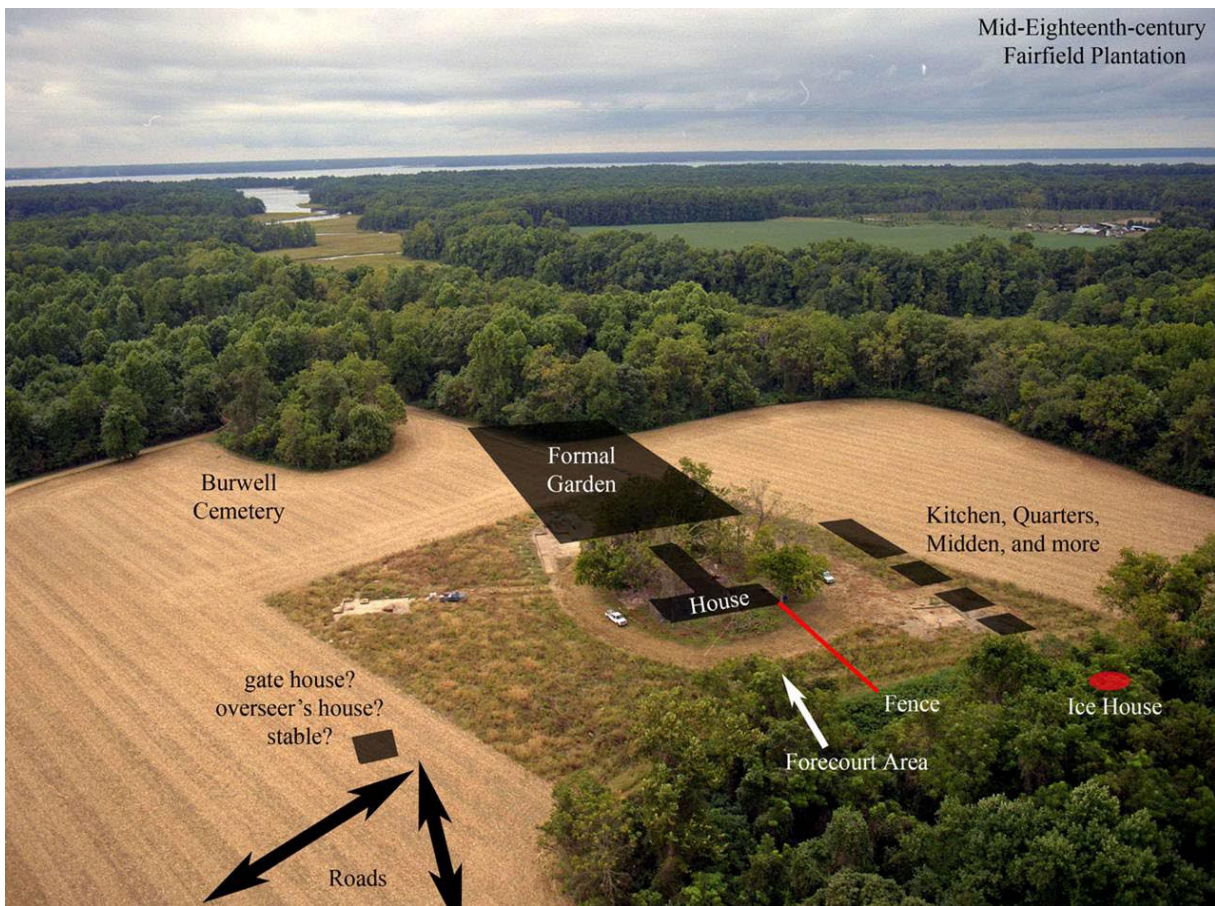


Figure 2. Schematic map of mid-eighteenth century cultural features of the Fairfield Plantation overlain on aerial photograph of current landscape.

recovered on plantations in the Chesapeake, Carolinas, and Caribbean. But a biography of colonoware is crucial to understanding the role they played on plantations and in the lives of many individuals. In an attempt to situate Fairfield within the larger arena of African American slave studies, it might be useful to begin with a scene in the slave quarters located not more than fifty feet to the west of the manor house.

At the end of a long work day, an enslaved laborer at Fairfield would begin preparing their evening meal and they reach for any number of items customarily used for cooking. They settle on a fire-worn pot beginning to crack from years of continual use. Perhaps having made the pot him or herself, they recollect gathering the clay from a nearby vendor or river bed. Their skilled hands remember smoothing together the stacked rings of clay, molding it into a useful and needed form. Linear marks incised onto the surface or base personalized the item. After filling the pot with cut vegetables and chopped meats, they set it in a burning hearth. The warmth reminds them of nestling the new pot in a pit fire where uneven temperatures would fracture some pots, and discolor the others. A burnishing stone refined surface imperfections and added a finished look to the pot. The meal simmers, activity winds down, and families begin eating.

Such a ritual would have been repeated and modified by every individual residing and working at Fairfield. Every piece of material culture would conjure a memory of how it was acquired or made, and what it meant to the individuals who used it. While only a glimpse of what might have transpired on any given evening, it introduces those issues dominating much of the discussion of colonoware since the 1960s.

Ivor Noël Hume (1962) published the first serious research conducted on the anomalous ware discovered in stratified seventeenth and eighteenth century deposits in Colonial Williamsburg with disturbing regularity. In temper, paste, and manufacture technique, these sherds resembled Native ceramics with the exception of form. The shape clearly imitated European style bowls, porringers, and chamber pots, among others. As he characterized it as “markedly inferior to even the cheapest type of colonial lead-glazed earthenware,” the appearance of this pottery in plantation and town contexts required explanation. Because of their similarity to the ceramic traditions of the Catawba and Pamunkey Indians, Noël Hume surmised these pieces represented a “Colono-Indian” ware manufactured during the colonial period as most likely trade items intended to be used by enslaved African Americans and poor whites. Given the absence of most any comparative source for him to draw on, Noël Hume’s explanation is not at all unreasonable. Unfortunately, these assumptions would color the questions and interests of later archaeologists reconsidering colonial and post-colonial African Americans.

Leland Ferguson’s (1992) work in South Carolina challenged Noël Hume’s on two important fronts, and champions a drastic reinterpretation of what he renamed as colonoware.

First, this term recognizes the viability and vibrancy of slave-made material culture and the multi-ethnic influences on its production. Secondly, Ferguson humanized the study of slave-made artifacts by addressing aspects outside economic determinants. Particularly, he argues that enslaved African Americans incorporated colonoware as a meaningful and essential possession in day-to-day living. Convincing evidence proves that African Americans in bondage not only had the capacity, but the wherewithal to manufacture their own supply of colonoware as means to fulfill practical and cultural needs. It is believed that a sense of autonomy and power can be derived from the ability to make and acquire material goods beyond those supplied by planters as a means to reiterate the private world African and Creole slaves made for themselves. By 1850 or so, Ferguson notes that colonoware's popularity began to decline, perhaps due to a confluence of circumstances that rendered hand-made ceramics obsolete or no longer necessary for the performance of everyday activities. Nonetheless, it is obvious that for a brief moment in history, colonoware was an immensely important piece of African American life on these plantations.

At Fairfield, colonoware is low-fired, hand-made earthenware with predominately shell temper. Surface color ranges from light to dark browns and tans. Oxidized cores on some of the sherds are suggestive of open-firing that may or may not have occurred on site. A number of factors account for the presence, distribution and integrity of colonoware at Fairfield as seen in Figure 3, yet it is always the motivations and intentions of the people responsible for the patterns detected in the ground that most perplex and excite the historical archaeologist. To find colonoware on an archaeological site is not only an indication of the presence of enslaved African Americans, but also a potential measure of cultural identity, social interaction, and individual autonomy. It demonstrates the material differences between the lives of slaves and white elites. More importantly, colonoware represents attempts made by enslaved individuals to influence the physical make-up of their immediate surroundings, manipulating the materials accessible to them to suit cultural and biological imperatives (Singleton 1996). Thus, colonoware studies become a useful method through which archaeologists and historians may address a number of pressing matters relevant to African American studies. Specifically, questions concerning plantation organization, and the use, reuse, and distribution of plantation resources are answerable through the lens of colonoware research. Situated within these contexts, the life of Fairfield colonoware has even greater significance. Still, Fairfield

archaeologists are left with the burden of proving their conclusions using often incomplete and fragmented records.

Nearly all of the colonoware was gathered from within the plow zone which extends approximately one foot deep before the transition to subsoil. The limitations inherent in this type of excavation procedure pose certain interpretive difficulties when the artifacts are subjected to extensive analysis. There is no doubting the destructive nature of the plow. It fractures already broken artifacts, obliterates vertical stratigraphy, and disrupts the preservation of features. Nevertheless, recent work demonstrates that while a site's chronology may be irrevocably disturbed, the plow only minimally impacts the horizontal provenience of artifacts lying just beneath the surface (King 2004). More frequently, it breaks larger ceramic fragments found in primary depositional environments, such as middens or feature contexts, rather than those from secondary deposits, such as the yard areas surrounding domestic structures and other activity centers. Thus, artifacts gathered from within the plow zone almost precisely reflect the location in which they were disposed. The size of these artifacts, based on percentages of different sized sherds, may also indicate the context of their deposition. This, of course, broadens the range of spatial analysis that can be applied to archaeological sites. As this concerns the quantity and condition of the colonoware collected at Fairfield, it is important to be aware of these limitations, but not skeptical of the ability of plow zone artifacts to yield useful information concerning the spatial layout of the plantation. It is incumbent upon archaeologists and historians to situate colonoware within these complex processes so that we may parse out not only the material conditions of plantation life, but also the life events of this unique ceramic and the people who used it. The presence of colonoware at Fairfield thus opens the site to number of different questions that an explanation of the architectural remains alone could not inspire.

Documenting the presence of colonoware required the visual representation of precisely where, and in what quantity the ceramic occurred in the ground. This was accomplished by creating a series of image maps using Surfer software that isolated the concentrated nature of the assemblage within the site (Figure 3). Based on these images, I began to question what might account for the appearance of discrete areas of colonoware concentration. Fairfield colonoware was recovered from 123 five-by-five-foot test units that yielded a total assemblage of 382 sherds. This represents approximately one percent of all Fairfield ceramics. Although seemingly small, this percentage is typical of most Virginia plantation sites where colonoware often accounts for

no more than ten percent of the total ceramic load. It also reflects a sample from the core of the plantation rather than a distant quarter. An additional 288 test units, excavated on a grid system, were negative for colonoware. Three distinct areas of concentration are apparent near the slave

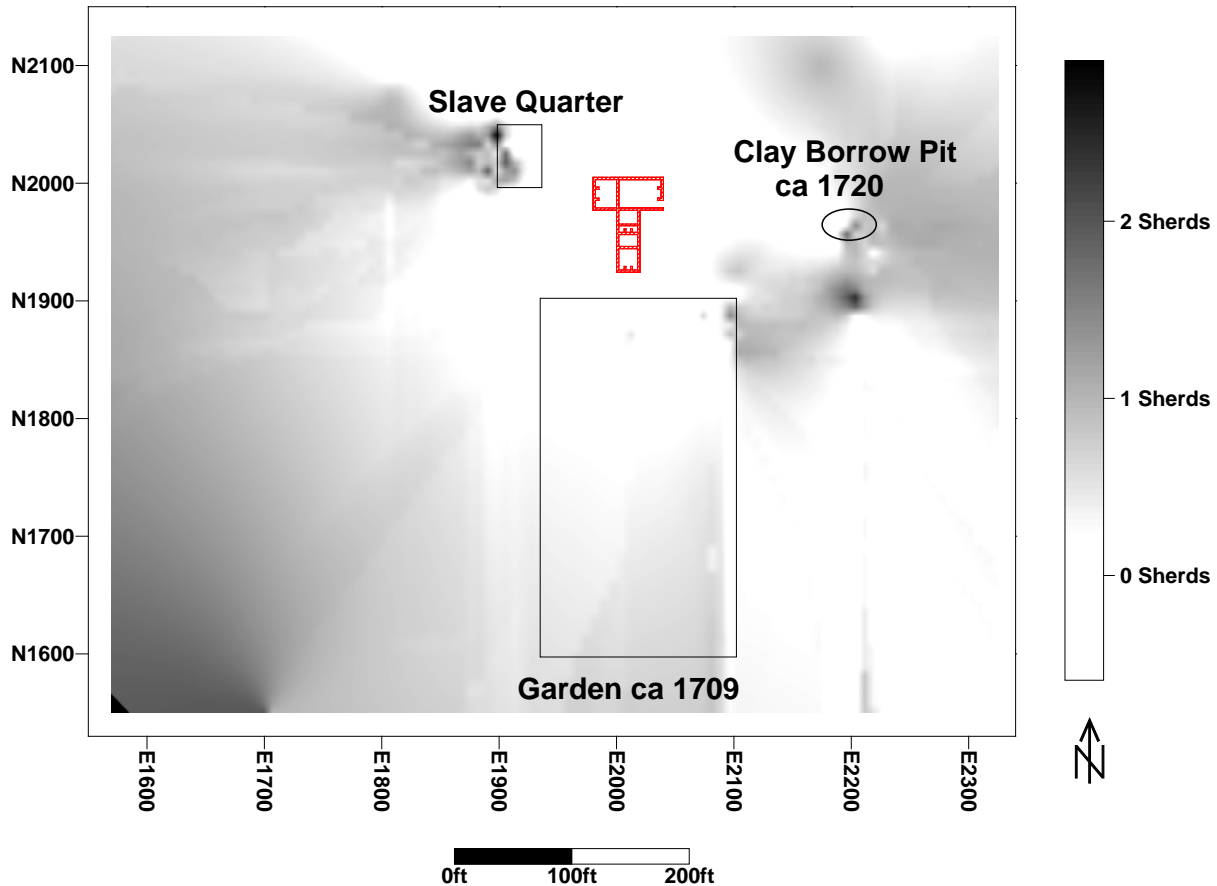


Figure 3: Image map representing the occurrence of Fairfield's colonoware assemblage on the ground. Three distinct concentration areas are apparent in the slave quarter, clay borrow pit, and northeast corner of the garden. Outlying sherds on west side of map are extrapolated beyond available data and may indicate areas of future concentrations. Plan of T-shaped manor house circa 1710-1730.

quarter, south of the clay borrow pit, and the northeast corner of the garden. To attempt an explanation for this pattern, I arbitrarily divided the sherds according to their size, decoration, and the occurrence of rims or handles. Each sherd was sized according to a standardized chart that simultaneously allowed me to establish the integrity of the sample. Less than ten sherds contain decorative elements like burnishing or incising, and only one handle was counted. All pieces measured between 10 and 40 centimeters.

Over time, this ceramic would begin to deteriorate, and be of little practical use to Fairfield slaves. Of course, accidents happen and many pots would find themselves discarded before their use life had ended. The larger, more noticeable sherds would have been gathered and primarily deposited in a nearby refuse area, while the smaller pieces were swept and

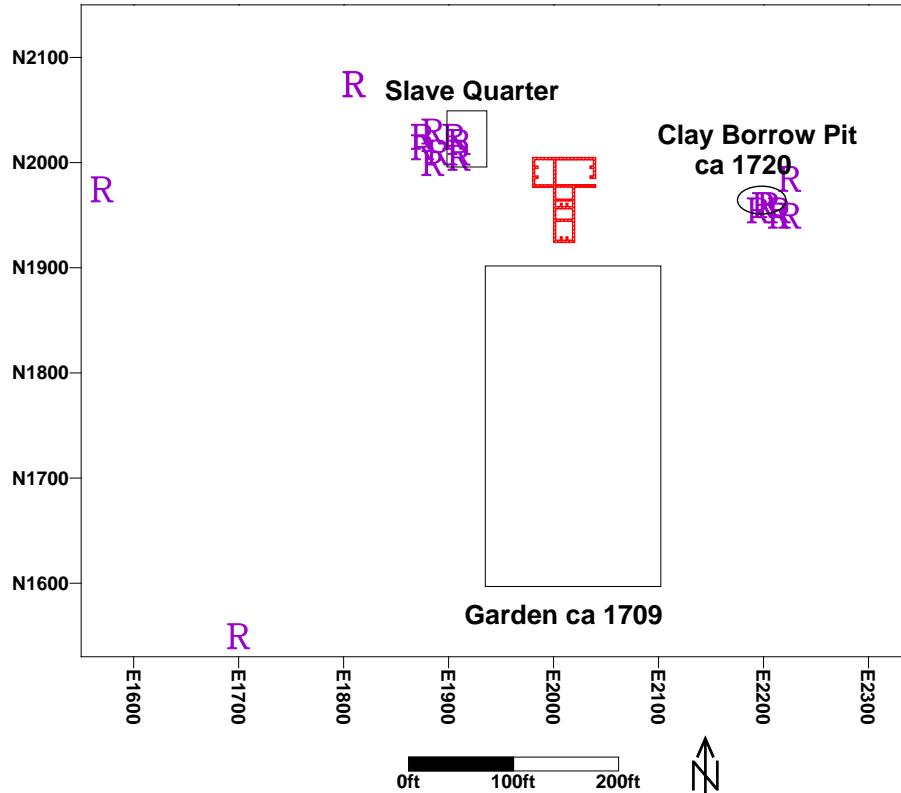


Figure 4: Classed post map of rim sherds throughout the site. Rims are split almost evenly between the clay borrow pit and slave quarter and were probably primarily disposed of in these areas.

scattered around the yard. Over twenty rims (Figure 4) were uncovered, nearly all of them within the vicinity of the slave quarter and clay borrow pit. They are unique in their abundance compared to handle, burnished, and incised pieces, as well as their moderate size. Forty centimeter sherds (Figure 5) are just as distinct as rims in that they would catch the eye and be collected by hand. Assuming that both categories were subject to primary depositional processes, it stands to reason that their use life was probably confined to the domestic spaces not far from where they were discarded. This tells me that colonoware was an integral item in the daily tasks carried out in these areas.

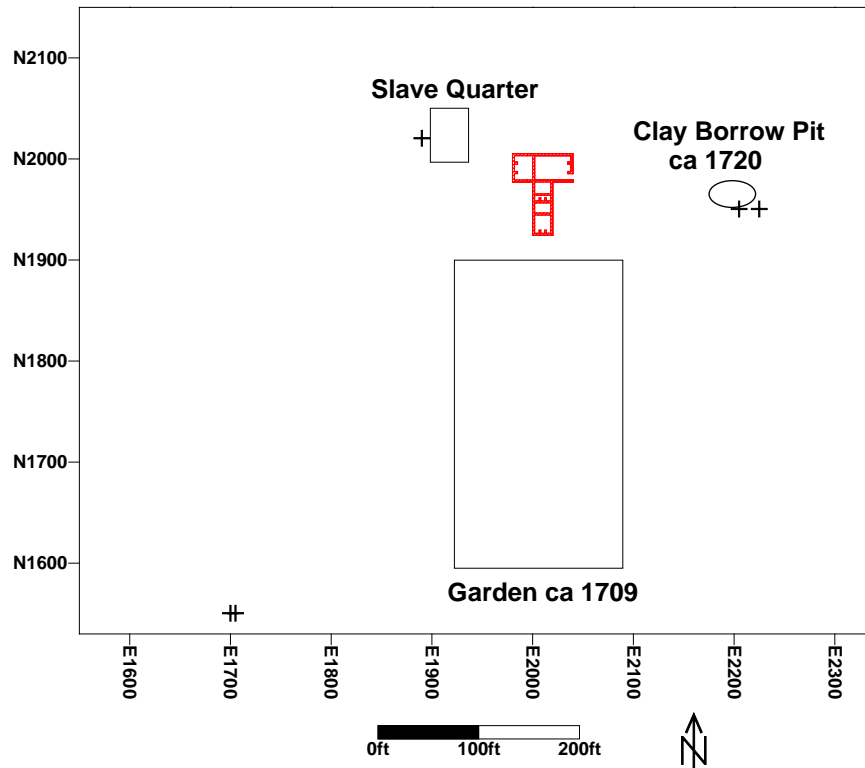


Figure 5: Forty centimeter sherds are also interpreted to be the result of primary depositional processes.

The remaining small fragments typify the Fairfield assemblage, and in nearly every instance where size is considered, the slave quarter area and borrow pit possess nearly equal artifact loads, with the garden falling closely behind (Figures 6 and 7). This is noteworthy as it relates to the possibility that slave quarters may have existed in these areas. While more numerous, it becomes increasingly difficult to reasonably draw comparisons between sherds no larger than thirty-five centimeters. Other than their similarities in size, there are no distinguishing markings or manufacture techniques that are readily visible so as to verify a connection between the clustered areas or establish a convincing chronology for their deposition. An attempt to mend these sherds has not yet been undertaken, but might prove useful in addressing these interpretive challenges. However, the smallness of these pieces could reflect secondary deposition consistent with swept yards.

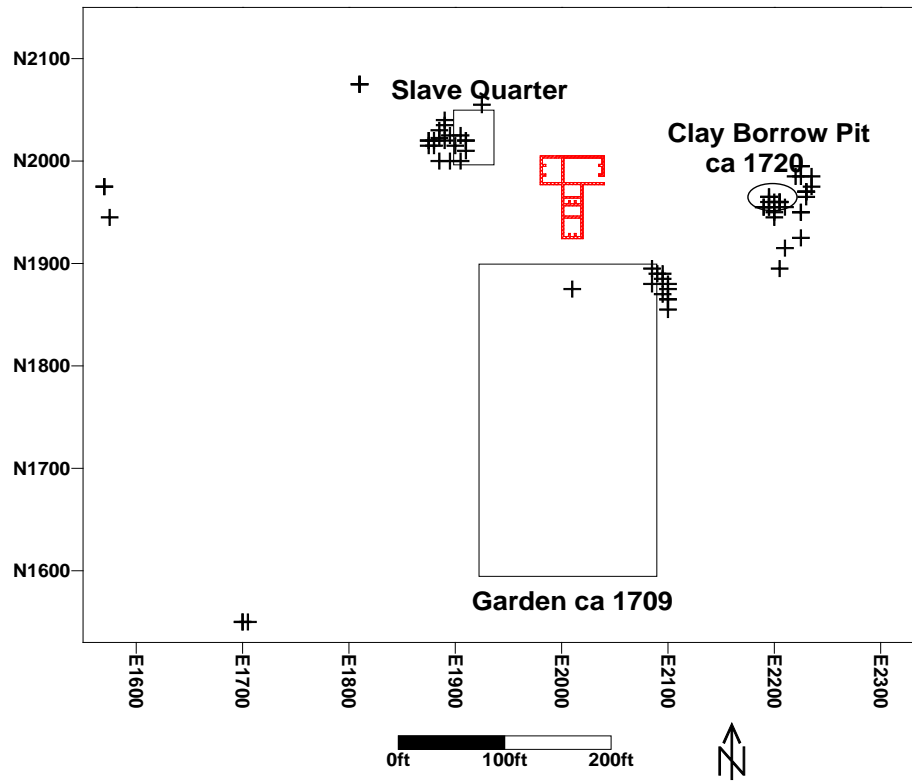


Figure 6: Distribution of twenty-five to thirty-five centimeter sherds believed to be the result of secondary depositional processes.

To clarify why concentrations of colonoware occur near the clay borrow pit and garden requires an appreciation for the circumstances surrounding its opening, and its usefulness as a temporal datum from which the disposal of the nearby sherds can be referenced. The borrow pit was opened for a brief period, most likely in the 1720s or 1730s, perhaps to provide clay for bricks fired in a nearby kiln and used as building materials for a southern addition to the manor house. This was a time of rapid change confined within a relatively brief moment. It was filled almost immediately after it was no longer needed, allowing for a chronological point of reference for materials located above the feature itself. A depression in the landscape over the filled pit would have allowed or required enslaved laborers to later fill the area with their own refuse. All this makes me wonder if further excavation might uncover evidence for more slave quarters in these areas.

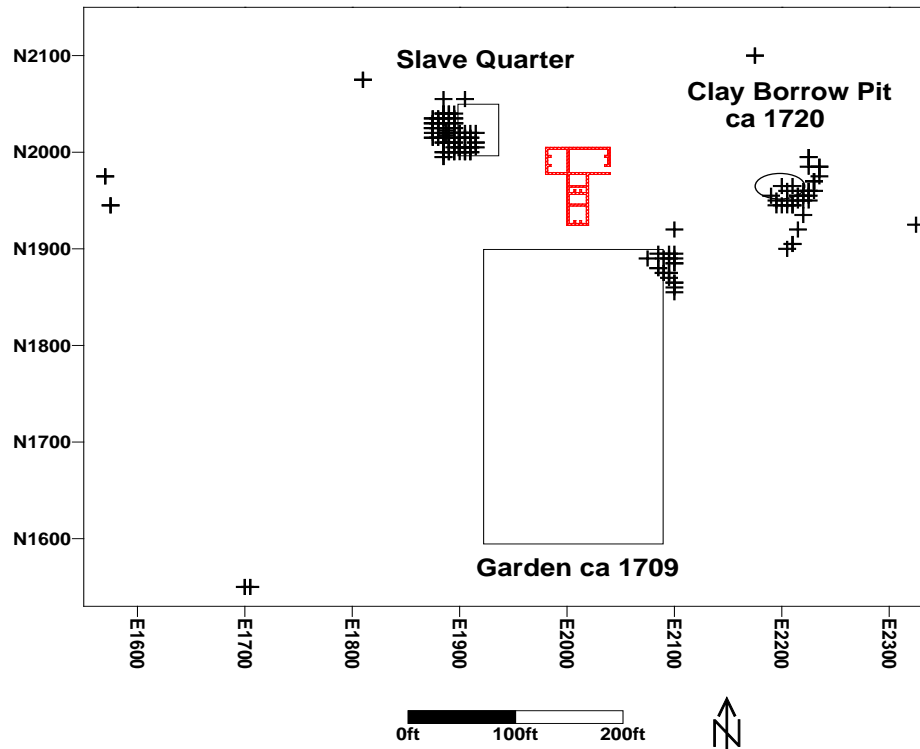


Figure 7: Distribution of all sherds twenty centimeters or under.

The possibility of buildings, perhaps slave quarters, lining the east and west sides of the garden is very real based on comparative examples from numerous plantations as early as the 1680s possibly at Bacon’s Castle, through the mid-18th century at Kingsmill and Carter’s Grove. Wine bottle kicks recovered from postholes verify the appearance of a garden at Fairfield by at least the mid-18th century, and align the presence of Fairfield colonoware within this timeframe. If it turns out there were additional slave quarters in these areas, what would the disposal of colonoware in or near the area above the borrow pit and garden say about how much control enslaved African Americans at Fairfield had over the construction of their immediate landscape? The answer no doubt relies on further inquiry that includes those artifacts spatially and temporally associated with the colonoware concentrations. Nonetheless, it seems apparent that the use of colonoware was maintained for at least the decades between opening of the borrow pit in 1720s or 1730s and the existence of the mid-18th century garden uncovered by Fairfield archaeologists. This leads me to believe it was intentionally kept as part of their cultural and material repertoire as the built landscape changed over time.

Clearly, these fragments led rich and textured lives. From the moment they were molded and fired, these pots meant something to the people who used and traded them. While functioning within the domestic sphere, Fairfield colonoware was imbued with meaning and significance, the nature of which we've only begun to comprehend. Because their quarters were so near the manor house, it would seem that enslaved African Americans might have had little opportunity to express themselves free from interference by the owner or overseer. But we must not underestimate the ability of slaves to negotiate their surroundings to reflect very personal and individual worldviews. While it cannot be determined at this time to what extent Fairfield slaves manufactured their own colonoware, or engaged in trade with neighboring plantations or Indian tribes like the Pamunkey, excavations are ongoing. Subjecting the sherds to a more comprehensive analysis to detect evidence for distinctive breaks or markings indicative of the firing process, like spall fractures or fire clouds, may shed light on whether Fairfield slaves possessed a tradition for manufacturing their own pottery. Chemical analysis to determine the composition of the clay could also reveal the physical origin if not the maker of Fairfield colonoware. As research continues, a number of questions can be posed that will supplement the work done with colonoware. Specific questions could address how much control enslaved persons had over the construction of landscape at Fairfield, and how the activities and habits of Fairfield laborers reflect the symbolic significance colonoware had over the use and manufacture of this product. It is entirely possible that the makers and users of Fairfield colonoware could have been one and the same, or more interestingly, separate groups engaged in trade for their mutual benefit. Places like Fairfield must be approached with an appreciation for the unique processes of social and cultural reproduction that took place under the influence of a variety of ethnic groups interacting and reacting to each other. In this way, a meaningful picture of colonoware at any given site might be obtained, rather than through a preoccupation with exclusively assigning colonoware to one ethnic group, or the imposition of arbitrary typologies onto the pottery itself. More than a debate over who made these pots and why, colonoware represents the distinct possibility that we might get at a more comprehensive understanding of the ways and lives of the people who intentionally incorporated this ceramic into their daily activities.

* Danielle Cathcart, College of William and Mary, 2009 (Images 2-7 by the author).

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