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Authors	Heath, Barbara
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Poplar Forest Quarter Site Update

Submitted by Barbara Heath, Jefferson's Poplar Forest

An earlier report on excavations and analysis of this site appeared in this newsletter (winter 1994). This update summarizes our findings to date.

Archaeologists at Poplar Forest, Thomas Jefferson's plantation in Bedford County, Virginia, have recently completed excavations at the site of a slave quarter and associated structures dating from circa 1790-1812. The site is believed to represent the western edge of a complex of buildings which served as the plantation's core settlement until 1806, when Thomas Jefferson began construction of an octagonal dwelling house some 650 feet to the southwest.

Staff archaeologists, field school students and volunteers have been working on the site since the spring of 1993. The site sits on a hillside, and the eastern half was plowed later in the nineteenth century. An are aapproximately 100 x 80 feet has been excavated by hand.

Beneath the plowzone, three root cellars and two lines of irregularly spaced postholes define the footprint of a cabin which measured approximately 15 x 25 feet (Structure I). A shallow feature roughly 10 feet in diameter was uncovered 14 feet northeast of the cabin. It contained charcoal and pockets of ash, daub and brick fragments, numerous wrought nails, and small quantities of ceramics, glass and animal bone. Along the southeast edge of the feature, and sealed beneath its fill, a small, ash-filled pit was uncovered. Some 2 feet in diameter and 0.8 feet deep, the pit contained quantities of charcoal and one creamware sherd. A large, flat stone had been placed within the pit. The large shallow feature is currently interpreted as a filled floor surface within a small outbuilding (Structure II).

Excavations during the fall and winter of 1996 have focused on a complex of three pits, a section of stone paving, and a series of post holes believed to be associated with a third structure. These features lie approximately 25 feet west of the cabin, and have not been significantly disturbed by plowing. Although field and laboratory analysis is ongoing, artifacts associated with the pits, paving and in surrounding layers suggests that this structure may also have been a dwelling (Structure m).

Preliminary analysis of the crossmends in the ceramic and glass assemblages demonstrates that Structures I and m had different areas of deposition rather than a shared yard space. Analysis of the artifacts as a whole, especially early machine cut nail distributions, suggests that Structure III postdates Structures I and II.

The assemblage of nails from the site has been cataloged by size and type into construction nails and "others" (those used for furniture, finish nails, horseshoe nails etc.) Ratios of construction nails (pulled, clinched, unaltered) from areas associated with each of the three structures were compared to ratios reported by archaeologist Amy Young for house construction, destruction and disposal sites. The Poplar Forest ratios were not comparable to any of Young's findings. Maps plotting the distributions of each type of nail showed concentrations of each directly on the site

of Structure m, and scattered in the area northwest of Structures I and II which has been interpreted as a work yard.

Susan Trevarthen Andrews, an independent consultant, has analyzed faunal materials from Structures I and II. Four hundred and twenty excavated bones and over 1,000 bones recovered from wet screening constituted the assemblage from root cellars within Structure I. One adult and two immature pigs were represented in the faunal assemblage from Structure I; the remaining species were represented by one adult each: cow, chicken, turkey, white tailed deer, opossum, squirrel, and rabbit. While domestic mammals were represented by a predominance of skull and foot fragments, element distributions from wild species suggest that slaves had access to whole carcasses. This evidence, coupled with the recovery of used lead shot of varying sizes and a gunflint suggest that the residents of the site hunted to provide a portion of their meat diet.

Eighty two excavated bones and 367 bone fragments recovered from wet screening were analyzed from Structure II. One adult cow, an adult pig and a chicken were identified. The faunal remains from Structure m have not yet been analyzed.

Floral samples from these features are currently undergoing analysis by Leslie Raymer of New South Associates. She has identified corn, peaches, grapes, wild beans, cherries, chinaberry seeds, black walnut and hickory shells from the fill of a root cellar in Structure I.

Elbow shaped schist tobacco pipes have been recovered from root cellarfill and plowzone. Several fragments have incised decorations consisting of Xs or parallel lines on the bowls, and one stem is octagonal in shape. Pieces of cut schist and a pipe waster have also been recovered from the site, suggesting that these pipes were made by slave residents. Similar pipes have been recovered from disturbed contexts associated with Monticello's Mulberry Row, and a single fragment was uncovered in the fill of a circa 1820 stable floor excavated in Lynchburg, Virginia. Whether the practice of making stone pipes in the early nineteenth century was widespread in the Virginia Piedmont, or whether it was more localized, remains to be discovered.

Backfilling of the site should be completed within the next few weeks. A "ghost" structure will be placed above the remains of Structure I to convey basic information about the buildings size and siting to the public. Interpretive signs will accompany the exhibit. For further information about the site, please contact: Barbara Heath, Director of Archaeology, Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, P.O. Box 419, Forest, VA 24551.