

Inequality within a Slave Settlement at Monticello in the Late-Eighteenth Century

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Abstract

This poster summarizes recent archaeological research into among-household variation at Site 8, a domestic site occupied by enslaved field laborers at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello plantation during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Correspondence analysis of plowzone ceramic distributions reveals the existence of at least two residential groups and increase over time in the distance between them. There is evidence for more important role for storage and higher levels of conspicuous consumption among the northern group. Spatial patterns in artifact size indicate greater investments in yard maintenance for the north group as well.

1. Why look for inequality?

Extraordinary social inequality between enslaved laborers and their owners was a key feature of early-modern slave societies. Archaeologists have focused on its obvious material expressions, often assuming that enslaved communities were socially homogeneous and that enslaved households with high archaeological visibility were representative. By ignoring the possibility of inequality among enslaved households, we may overestimate living standards and preclude a more accurate understanding of the complex social dynamics of slave societies.

2. Methodological challenges



For eighteenth-century domestic sites in the Virginia Piedmont, where log building was nearly universal, the methodological challenges of finding the poorest enslaved households are severe: there may be no post holes, no masonry foundations, and no cellars.

In the absence of sub-surface features, we must rely on the spatial distribution of artifacts to identify and characterize households (e.g. Wandsnider 1996). But because poor people have few possessions, we must be prepared to sample low-frequency artifact scatters intensively.

3. Site 8

Site 8 is located about a half mile east of Thomas Jefferson's mansion. Occupied by enslaved field laborers from c. 1770 to 1800, it was the largest of several slave settlements on the Monticello Plantation home farm.



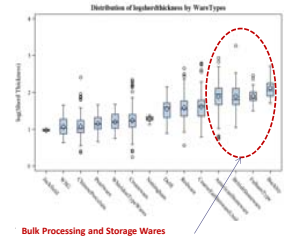
Jefferson's Monticello plantation produced tobacco up until 1790, then wheat, then both crops.

4. Plowzone sampling

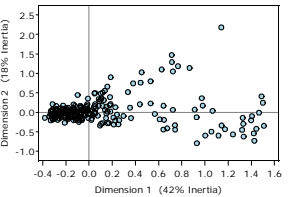
- Since its abandonment around 1800, Site 8 has been intensively plowed. Our plowzone sampling strategy consisted of the following stages:
- The ~ 200 x 300 foot site area, defined by STP survey, was divided into 20-foot blocks.
 - We excavated a randomly chosen 5-foot quadrat within each block.
 - Additional quadrats were excavated nearby if high artifact densities or subsurface features were encountered.
 - We dry-screened plowzone through quarter-inch mesh
 - A total of 266 quadrats have been excavated so far.

5. Chronology

Identifying synchronic difference requires chronological control. To achieve it we seriated plowzone assemblages, characterized by ware-type frequencies. However, to make sure the analysis attends time, we want to focus on *historical types*. One way to do this is to use types used primarily for eating and drinking, *not* bulk processing and storage. We make this distinction using sherd thickness, on the assumption that thicker vessels are more likely to have processing and storage functions.

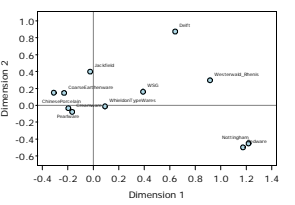


Ware-type frequencies are low for each quadrat. To mitigate the noise from sampling error, we use empirical-Bayes estimates, computing a beta-distribution prior from neighboring quadrats and binomial likelihood function for each quadrat, to derive a beta posterior type-frequency estimate for each quadrat (Robertson 1999).



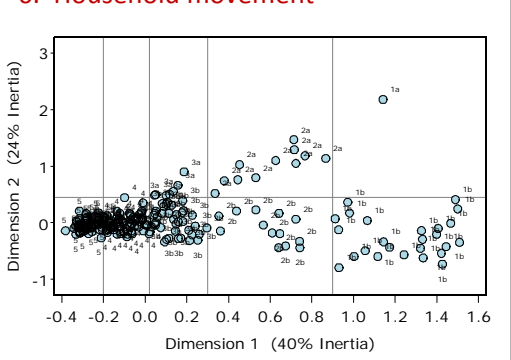
Correspondence analysis of the beta posterior estimates reveals that most of the variation among quadrats lies in a two-dimensional subspace.

The positions of the type scores along dimension 1 suggest that it tracks change in assemblage content over time, with the early assemblages on the right, and the later ones on the left.



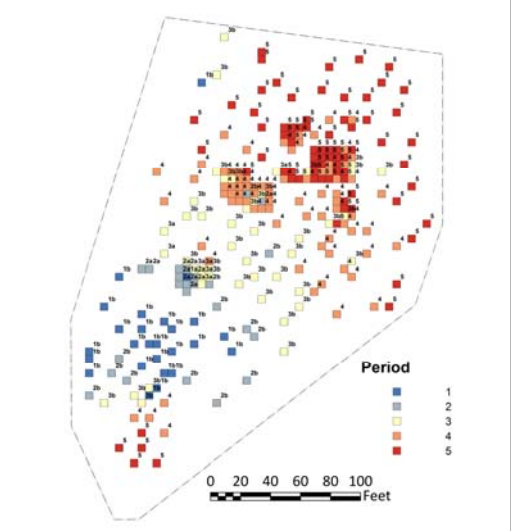
Dimension 2 captures synchronic variation during the first half of the occupation, which we suggest differentiates two households or zones with distinctive ceramic inventories.

6. Household movement



Using the CA dimension-1 scores, we assigned the quadrats to five temporal phases (1-5). For Phases 1, 2, and 3, we divided the quadrats into two synchronic groups (a and b), based on the dimension-2 scores. The CA solution suggests that during Phase 1, there was single group (b) at the site, whose eating and drinking ceramic inventory was dominated by redwares and Nottingham stoneware. In Phase 2, they were joined by a second group (a) using more Delft.

Mapping the phases for groups a and b, shows that in Phase 2, the two groups are spatially adjacent to one another. We suspect the two groups represent two households that initially lived in close proximity. However, by the end of the occupation, there appears to be a northern household zone separated from a southern one by about two hundred feet.



7. Subfloor pits

We discovered four clusters of from 1 to 3 subfloor pits: small storage cellars that enslaved people in the Chesapeake typically dug beneath their houses. Each pit cluster represents a log house that left no other trace below plowzone. Three of the houses (2, 3, and 4) fall in the northern household zone. House 1, the earliest, lies near the border of the northern and southern zones. We have found no pits in the southern zone. Given our uniformly applied sampling strategy, this is good evidence that the houses in the southern zone lacked storage facilities.

Plotting pit volume over time reveals an upward trend for the northern zones.

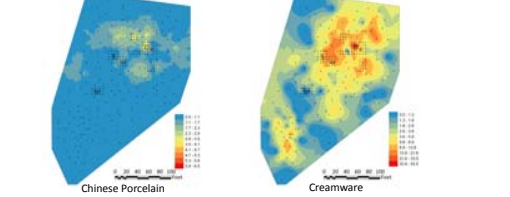
The subfloor pit under the latest house (House 2) is not only the largest, it has a brick lining, representing an investment in permanence.



All this suggests the northern household(s) enjoyed an increase in storable resources and expected residential stability.

8. Consumption

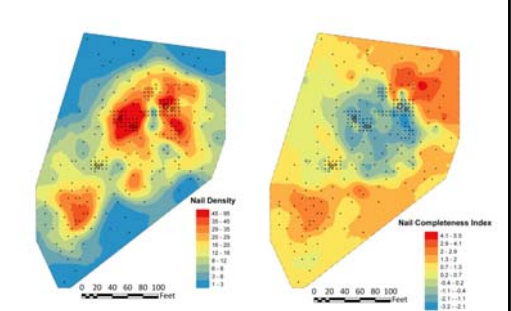
The two-dimensional CA solution suggests ceramic ware-type frequencies were becoming more similar for the two groups. However, there was one important exception to the trend. Kriging log-transformed started counts and exponentiating the predictions reveals that Chinese porcelain, the most costly of the wares, is only found in the north.



9. Spatial structure of discard

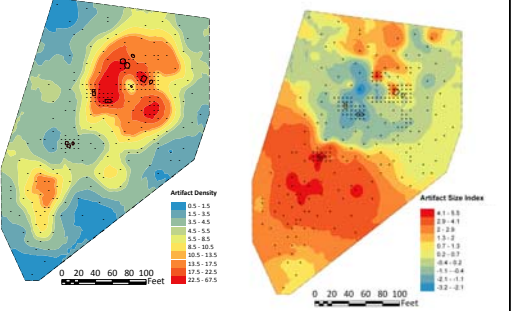
Ethnoarchaeological work during the 1980s revealed site maintenance often takes the form of size sorting, in which only larger pieces of trash with greater hindrance costs are transported (e.g. O'Connell 1987). For each quadrat, we used our empirical-Bayes method to estimate the number of large (x) artifacts. We computed an artifact size index (ASI) as a standardized deviation from the expected number based on the site-wide proportion (p) of large artifacts.

$$ASI_i = \frac{(x_i - pN_i)}{\sqrt{p - (1 - p)N_i}}$$



We estimated ASI using two artifact classes. First, consider nails. Here large artifacts are whole nails, while small artifacts are broken nails. In the northern zone of the site, we see striking evidence for site maintenance: the large artifacts (whole nails) were transported to the periphery of the zone, despite the fact that the total artifact density is greatest around Houses 2, 3, and 4. The ASI and density surfaces are *negatively correlated*. The southern zone at Site 8 is different. There is no evidence for site maintenance. Large artifacts (whole nails) were not transported to the periphery. In the southern zone, the ASI and density surfaces are *positively correlated*.

A nearly identical pattern emerges for large and small ceramic sherds:



Contrasts in the spatial structure of nailed and ceramic discard suggest that residents of the northern households invested much more effort in site maintenance than the residents of the southern zone. Situational factors that encourage site maintenance include higher population densities, more trash, and greater residential stability.

10. Conclusions

This poster has presented evidence for the existence of two, distinct household zones at Site 8. Over time the zones moved apart in space, suggesting lower levels of cooperation between them. More storage and site maintenance in the northern zone point to greater residential stability and lower levels of future discounting. We suspect residents of the northern zone managed to accumulate greater wealth, which they signaled with more costly ceramics.