

The Data are in the Details: Thoughts on the Utility of the Digital Archaeological Archive of Chesapeake Slavery

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Introduction

In approaching archaeological problems, there are “big picture” people who look for broad patterns in the material record to see even larger truths, and “small picture” people, who find bits of information useful in understanding particular historical contexts in even the tiniest objects and the most seemingly trivial details. As a member of the latter group, I have found myself for the past several years moving somewhat schizophrenically between plantation landscape design and the contents of flotation tanks, trying to say something new --and hopefully important-- about the enslaved people that lived at Poplar Forest in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Several years ago, I found myself becoming increasingly frustrated by the assumption that most, if not all, material culture found at quarter sites could be attributed to plantation provisioning systems, hand-me-downs from planters to enslaved workers, or theft (Heath 1997). While undoubtedly some of the materials uncovered by archaeologists owe their origins to one or more of these systems of distribution, it seemed unlikely to me (and several others, I should add) that everything slaves owned was given to them or stolen by them. If this were the case, looking at material culture at quarter sites became a fairly limited exercise, one that would yield some insights into what owners thought about the relationship of slaves to the world of consumables, but one that made it virtually impossible to see direct agency at work. How could we really learn anything about Africans and their descendants, if every part of their material world --from the houses they lived in, to the food they ate, to the plates they served it on-- was dictated to them, or, at best, snatched from an owner's cupboard or storehouse?

This, of course, was not the case, as research by a number of scholars has shown. Enslaved people built their own cabins influencing details of construction, size and siting where possible; hunted and gathered a proportion of their diets, modified and supplemented provisioned goods to fit their own needs, and participated, to at least a limited extent, in the consumer revolution that swept the American South in the eighteenth century (McKee 1999, Martin 1993, Morgan 1998, Sanford 1994, Vlach 1991). By the mid-eighteenth century, important details about their roles as consumers begin to appear in store ledgers and daybooks. Equally important details can be found in the archaeological record. The challenge, of course, is in assessing that

record, through a database that is accessible and provides comparable attributes from a number of sites.

Assessing Consumer Choice: Buttons

A few years ago, I wrote a paper on adornment practices among enslaved men and women in eighteenth-century Virginia (Heath 1999). I was able to find an abundance of documentary references to clothing and adornment, primarily in contemporary runaway advertisements. Using artifacts, especially buttons, recovered at a Poplar Forest quarter, I argued that enslaved men and women were aware of, and able to respond to, changes in fashion in the broader marketplace. The button data suggested that individuals made conscious choices about style, and that these choices followed, to some extent, mainstream fashions. Whether this is a correct reading of the data, or whether my interpretation is skewed by the idiosyncratic nature of a single site in a single point in time, remains to be seen. The ultimate test of my argument rests on a close analysis of comparative data from other sites. Currently, those comparative data are buried in databases or are yet to be teased from the artifacts themselves.

My analysis of buttons looked at a number of attributes that others may or may not have decided were important to catalogue. The diameter of the button, the color (white or yellow in eighteenth-century terms) of the metal, the presence or absence of plating or other decorative treatments, the presence and descriptions of individual backstamps -- all these attributes were useful clues for determining the date and potential use of the buttons.

These clues helped to address broader questions of use and meaning. Did the buttons recovered at the site represent discards or losses from items of provisioned clothing? This might be suggested by clusters of buttons of similar size, color and matching backstamps. Did they hint at piecemeal acquisition? This might be demonstrated by a range of individual buttons with different backstamps and slightly different sizes, suggesting that unrelated buttons were recycled or acquired separately. Were there signs of wear on the buttons? Were the shanks intact, or were they broken? These use-related clues might clarify which buttons were broken and potentially lost, and which, though still useable, may have been intentionally discarded.

Together, the attributes of 122 buttons led me to hypothesize that enslaved men and women, like their free counterparts, were discarding useable white metal buttons at the end of the eighteenth century in favor of yellow metal buttons, which became the predominant fashion by 1810 (Hughes and Lester 1993). If this were the case, enslaved residents of Poplar Forest were aware of relatively subtle changes in fashion, and were economically positioned to respond to them. Whether everyone was able to participate in such economic choices, or only a few individuals, is also an issue worthy of consideration.

The question of cohesion, or divisiveness, within plantation communities is an important one, and one that has, for the most part, been simplified to a black/white, free/enslaved

dichotomy. Yet the instability of plantation communities, the fluidity of populations occasioned by sales, hiring out, inheritance or, ultimately, the death of the owner, was an important component of the experience of enslaved peoples. Fraser Neiman has argued that this show of “fashion sense,” an act of conspicuous consumption, signifies internal competition between the enslaved residents of Poplar Forest (Neiman 1999: 140-142). Those able to follow broader fashion trends demonstrated their superiority through myriad subtle social clues, including their choice of buttons.

Similar studies using shoe, hat or breeches buckles found on seventeenth-, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century quarter sites could undoubtedly be undertaken to corroborate or challenge my hypothesis. Careful analysis of any one of a number of time- and form-sensitive personal objects should provide important evidence for changes in consumerism and consumer choice. At this point in time, however, the comparative data have not been assembled. Through the formation of the Digital Archaeological Archive of Chesapeake Slavery, an important step has been made towards encouraging studies of this kind.

Assessing Consumer Choice, Ceramics

Archaeologists have long argued that the meaning of objects changes depending on the context of use (Deetz 1977, Howson 1990). Enslaved individuals may have used European objects to signal meaningful social distinctions that went beyond cost and economic indicators of status. Jean Howson, in her study of the material culture of enslaved communities on Montserrat, has suggested that enslaved villagers communicated important messages within their communities through ceramic choice (Howson 1995). Her analysis of the frequency of decorative techniques on ceramic forms associated with enslaved and later free African West Indians revealed their preference for transfer-printed plates, striped and sponge-decorated European bowls, and undecorated, locally manufactured bowls. This contrasted with the ceramic preferences of planters, who, she argued, met different cultural needs through their choices of decorated wares.

Although planters also acquired transfer-printed plates, these tended to be parts of larger sets of matching dinner wares, purchased in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries to conform to the latest styles of European dining. They acted to emphasize dining as a formal ritual and signaled their owners' membership among the elite of society. African West Indians, who cooked and consumed their meals in the open air of yards and gardens, were unconcerned with acquiring matching dinner wares. Howson argues that they acquired transfer-printed plates favoring exotic scenes as display items that underscored a household's status within the village community.

Montserratian slaves used bowls for food consumption. Howson determined that those preferred by enslaved village residents were not transfer printed, but rather patterned with repetitive geometric motifs (such as were featured on sponge-decorated wares) or bore the multicolored stripes characteristic of mocha and banded wares. She argues that through the use of bowls that maintained a West African aesthetic of bold, repetitive and often stylized geometric motifs, individuals asserted their common membership in a shared culture.

Cost may not have been the determining factor in economic choice, even for those at the lowest end of the economic scale. Rather, cultural meanings attached to particular forms and decorative styles so that a printed plate and a “striped” bowl both made sense in terms of the language of distinction and inclusion of the African West Indian village community (Howson 1995:218)

It would be quite exciting to be able to first document, and then explore, aesthetic preferences among enslaved people living within the Chesapeake region. Returning again to the world of clothing, fashion historians have argued that enslaved Virginians developed an aesthetic demonstrated through combinations of colors, patterns, and styles of clothing that was quite distinct from the choices made by middling and poor whites (Baumgarten 1988, Griebel 1995, White and White 1995). Understanding this aesthetic is dependent on written descriptions of slave costume and to a very limited extent, on extant textiles. It would be tremendously exciting to be able to trace the development and meanings of aesthetic choices on other classes of material items, including the exuberantly decorated ceramic wares common in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. To undertake such a study requires a level of cataloguing detail and a comparative sample that currently isn't available.

Conclusions

By standardizing data analysis categories between Chesapeake slave-related sites, the Digital Archaeological Archive of Chesapeake Slavery has the potential to put artifact-level analysis on an equal footing with large scale, architecture and landscape-based analyses in answering important questions about Virginia's enslaved population. Through the comparative studies that it will facilitate, archaeologists can begin to use the fairly subtle clues of color, form, texture, use wear and other attributes of a wide range of artifacts to address important questions of consumer choice, plantation economic and social strategies, and even the development and meaning of aesthetic preferences within enslaved communities.

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