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The Relationship Between Enslaved Individuals And Plantation Architecture In 18th And 19th Century Virginia

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Abstract

Plantation architecture was built in a way to show the physical stratification between the enslavers, or plantation owners, and the enslaved through architectural design and spatial distancing. The goal of this stratification was to impose racialized ideas of the superiority of “whiteness” and to limit the identity of the enslaved. However, archaeological analysis at 18th and 19th century Virginia plantations can reveal how enslaved individuals showed individual and cultural identity through the architectural and material remains of their built environment.

Introduction

Plantation owners operated their plantations through the need of control and domination over enslaved individuals. At first this control took the form of christianity, but then later transformed into racialized control and the creation of the idea of the racial superiority of “whites.” One way they asserted this control was through architectural design and spacing. Examples of this include the separate entrances for enslaved individuals and white guests at Mount Airy or the use individualized point perspective at Gunston Hall (see Figure 1.) (Epperson, 1999, p. 163-172). Ultimately, plantation owners created a duality of wanting to have control over enslaved individuals but also keep them away from view. This control, minimized enslaved identity (Thomas, 2002, p. 148-149), however, through archaeological evidence we can also see architecture providing enslaved individuals resistance against the order it also imposes.



Figure 1. Gunston Hall is located in Northern Virginia and is an example of an 18th-century plantation. It was owned and operated by founding father George Mason.

Architectural Remains

The architectural design and spatial layout, while ultimately built by enslaved persons, was dependent on the plantation owner or hired architect (Singleton, 1996, p. 150-151). However, in some instances, such as the Carter Grove Plantation, these quarters were organized in circle formation, similar to that of West African housing formations (Samford, 1996, p. 92). The grouping of enslaved quarters such as this would have maintained a group identity through socialization.

Enslaved housing was set apart from that of the plantation house with field workers typically farthest from the house and skilled artisans closer. These houses were often made of stone, mud, brick (see Figure 2.), and wood, often with dirt floors and no windows (Samford, 1996, p. 92-95). Houses were typically small, and could house several individuals in them at one time (Singleton, 1996, p. 151).

A common architectural aspect of these quarters was root cellars, which were pits in the floor to store food as well as materials attached to their cultural and individual identity (Samford, 1996, p. 95). Items that have been found in these root cellars include beads, cowrie shells, and crystals (Singleton, 1995, p. 124). These items would have had personal or religious attachment to them such as cowrie shells (see Figure 3.) which served as currency, decoration, and religious items in West Africa (Samford, 1996, p.101). These items would have been kept in these cellars out of the eyes of the plantation owner. Root cellars have been found in Virginia plantations such as Monticello and Kingsmill (Epperson, 1999, p. 171).

Other forms of identity and resistance include purposefully having their housing in a disordered mess or by adding back doors to their housing to have more physical access to the outdoor space (Singleton, 1995, p. 129).



Figure 2. 3D printed brick courtesy of VCU Virtual Curation Lab. This brick found at Gunston Hall has finger indentations of the enslaved workers who made the brick. It would have been used to build architectural elements of the plantation.

Conclusion

Archaeological evidence of 18th and 19th century Virginia plantation sites can reveal resistance against dominance and ideals of whiteness and christianity by enslaved individuals. One way this resistance took form through individual and group identity found through architectural and material remains at sites. And while these remains can not tell us about individual persons, nor can we look at each these remains and make over-generalizations about the diverse enslaved population in Virginia (Thomas, 2002, p. 144), we can instead look at common themes that go against antebellum social order to show some remaining sense of identity from these individuals.



Figure 3. Example of a cowrie shell found at Gunston Hall. It is assumed it was used by an enslaved individual.

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References

References available upon request.