

EXAMINING SLAVERY'S ARCHITECTURAL FINISHES:
THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERDISCIPLINARY INVESTIGATION OF HUMBLE
SPACES

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A THESIS

in

Historic Preservation

Presented to the Faculties of the University of Pennsylvania in
Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN HISTORIC PRESERVATION

2018

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Introduction

The documentary evidence that informs much of our understanding of slavery stems from the people who owned them, as the education and literacy of slaves was largely discouraged.^{1,2} Thus, the majority of slavery's contemporary accounts were not written by enslaved persons. The investigation of spaces occupied by slaves might provide much-needed insight and evidence on the experience of slavery from the perspective of an enslaved person. In an effort to explore the personal experience of slavery by way of material evidence, understanding that finishes historically sometimes reflect self-expression, the author considers these questions: Were finishes in slave spaces more than purely utilitarian? Could they be expressions of personal taste? Is there evidence of traditional African uses of color on certain elements? If so, could pigmented finishes be considered a form of resistance used by slaves to manifest their identity as more than just white man's property?

The answers to these questions require an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on the investigations of slave spaces from a range of perspectives, including architectural, archaeological, social sciences and others. It also requires consideration of the traditional

¹ Walter B. Hill, "Living with the Hydra: The Documentation of Slavery and the Slave Trade in Federal Records," *Prologue* 32, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 250. In this article Mr. Hill notes that one of the first historians of African-American history examined slavery using federal documents, indicating the lack of slave-authored records. Though letters and documents written by slaves have been found in museum archives, they do not account for the majority of slavery's historic accounts.

² Ralph Erickson, "The Laws of Ignorance Designed to Keep Slaves (Blacks) Illiterate and Powerless," *Education* 118, no. 2 (December 22, 1997): 206.

African architecture and finishes that may have influenced finishes in slave spaces.³

Together with a review of slave quarters' finishes analyses, these examinations and the comparisons to African traditions will be used to determine if the occupants had any level of autonomy with regard to their immediate physical environment.

A survey of finishes analyses from some sites throughout the South and Midatlantic United States and Bermuda draws on the only material available for examining spaces occupied by slaves. As these studies are rarely published, they were found by directly contacting paint analysts and site managers of properties possessing slave quarters to determine if any documentation regarding finishes analysis exists. Given the small size of the preservation and conservation fields, many of these reports were found through professional connections, while others were retrieved from historic and cultural institutions, such as the National Museum of African American History and Culture. It is probable that other unpublished finishes reports of slave quarters exist, but were not found.

While a significant amount of research has been conducted on slave quarters, very little has been published regarding their interiors or finishes. In fact, only one published article about the results of a paint investigation of slave spaces could be found.⁴ Given this scarcity of published scholarship, this thesis draws from the already existing

³ The subject of African finishes will be briefly mentioned in "Color and Architecture in Africa," but a comprehensive discussion is beyond the scope of this work.

⁴ Susan Buck's "Paint Discoveries in the Aiken-Rhett House Kitchen and Slave Quarters" is a summary of her dissertation on the paint investigation of the site and was published in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* in 2005.

architectural and archaeological research of slave spaces while also offering new insights to the interior of slave quarters and their finishes.

Scholarship on slave spaces is not as comprehensive as that of other structures, such as mansions belonging to prominent members of society. This is largely due to the fact that relatively few original structures survive, especially those cabins located far from a main house on rural plantations. These cabins were typically occupied by field workers, whose work and lifestyle differed greatly from their colleagues in the house. The so called “house or domestic slaves” resided in their master’s day-to-day spaces. Long considered to be insignificant, these buildings were neglected and allowed to deteriorate over time. A combination of complete loss of evidence or poor condition have made the understanding of architectural finishes difficult.⁵ The houses and quarters located closer to the main house for domestic slaves can be found on most plantations, but are especially common in more urban settings. Where space was a precious commodity, some slaves lived in attics or cellars of the mansions. Additionally, domestic slaves ranked higher on plantation’s social hierarchies and were more likely to have access to more goods and privileges.⁶ Thus, their spaces tended to fair better.

Nevertheless, as secondary spaces, rooms occupied by slaves are under-represented in research conducted on slavery. Attention to slave quarters and cabins

⁵ In his preface to *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation of Slavery*, John Michael Vlach notes that “Given the fact that most of HABS fieldworkers were decidedly antiquarian in orientation and were primarily concerned with high-style architecture, their attention to slave structures is fortuitous, if not unanticipated.”

⁶ Frederick Lange and Jerome Handler, “The Ethnohistorical Approach to Slavery,” in *The Archaeology of Slavery and Plantation Life*, ed. Theresa Singleton (Left Coast Press, 2009): 22.

continue to be overshadowed by discussions on grand mansions, which have more readily caught the attention of historians and academics because of their imposing architecture. Archaeological and architectural investigation of slave spaces only began to take place in the past few decades. The absence of architectural finishes analysis in these buildings is notable and may reflect preconceptions that slave spaces were always simple and unadorned. Only recently has this understanding of slave spaces being without color been empirically tested.⁷ Coupled with the belief that slave spaces are often ignored or neglected by those responsible for them, scholars and stewards of these historic resources have been unmotivated to consider whether or not such humble spaces contain more than just pragmatic limewashes. As a Restoration Specialist in North Carolina's State Historic Preservation Office, Brett Sturm is familiar with hardships facing slavery's physical evidence, noting "Slave dwellings were often constructed on an *ad hoc* basis using materials, like logs, that tend not to survive 150+ years of exposure to our southeastern climate. These factors, along with the broad societal failure to recognize slave heritage prior to, say, the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, combine to make the slave dwelling an exceedingly rare historical resource in the present day."⁸ Now, however, architectural historians are discovering that this is not the case, and as evidenced by the case studies discussed below, some sites are employing paint analysts to investigate the finishes of their slave quarters.

⁷ John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993): 136, 139.

⁸ Brett Sturm, e-mail message to author, February 16, 2018.

Finishes Analysis

When considering paint analyses of historic structures, it is important to review the methodological development of finishes analysis. Analytical techniques developed for the examination and preservation of paint did not occur until the nineteenth century, with the professionalization of science. Louis Pasteur and Michael Faraday, were among the first scientists to use their analytical skills in an effort to conserve paint, the latter focusing his investigations on how environmental factors damaged art.⁹ Naturally, many of the same methods used in the analysis of art were, and in some cases still are, used in the analysis of architectural finishes, including polarized light microscopy and microchemical spot testing, to name a few. Polarized light microscopy identifies pigments by revealing their unique microstructures and other physical characteristics only visible under high magnification.¹⁰ Microchemical spot testing, on the hand, was an early method of using reagents to identify the media and pigments of paints.¹¹ It was not until the early twentieth century that architectural finishes began to be methodologically.

Preservationists, architects and conservators first analyzed finishes in the 1920s, as part of the restoration of Williamsburg, Virginia. Their methods involved scraping through the paint until reaching the substrate and examining the layers with a naked eye

⁹ Joyce Hill Stoner, "Changing Approaches in Art Conservation: 1925 to the Present," in *Scientific Examination of Art: Modern Techniques in Conservation and Analysis* (The National Academies Press: Washington DC, 2005): 40.

¹⁰ Walter C. McCrone, "Polarized Light Microscopy in Conservation: A Personal Perspective," *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 33, no. 2 (1994): 102.

¹¹ Joyce Plesters, "Cross-Sections and Chemical Analysis of Paint Samples." *Studies in Conservation* 2, no. 3 (1956): 127.

or under magnification.¹² All analysis was performed *in situ*. It was not until the 1950s that paint samples were sent off to experts for analysis at higher magnification, often by way of stereomicroscopes.¹³

Years later, methods of visual comparison were augmented by other methods. Now, finishes analysts employ visual inspection and instrumental methods of analysis to identify paint constituents, including inorganic materials, such as pigments, and organic components, such as binding media. More specific methods include X-ray diffraction, scanning electron microscopes and electron microprobes.¹⁴ Analysis of finishes is best performed in conjunction with an understanding of historic architecture. Architectural investigations or building archaeology provides much needed context for the paint analyst, who may substantiate hypotheses through finishes evidence. This scientific yet interdisciplinary methodology has been called the “micro-chemical-analytical” approach, based upon “a foundation of increasing knowledge about historic buildings and finishes, and of necessary skills for microscopically analyzing and accurately interpreting layers, colors, pigments and media.”¹⁵ While colorimetry and spectrophotometry are considered the standard procedures necessary for color matching, some believe that the chemical

¹² Willie Graham, “Architectural Paint Research at American Museums: An Appeal for Standards,” in *Architectural Finishes in the Built Environment*, ed Mary Jablonski and Catherine Matsen, (London: Archetype Books, 2009): 3.

¹³ Frank Welsh, “The Early American Palette: Colonial Paint Colors Revealed,” in *Paint in America: The Colors of Historic Buildings* (John Wiley & Sons, 1994): 69.

¹⁴ Frank Welsh, “Who Is an Historic Paint Analyst? A Call for Standards.” *APT Bulletin* 18, no. 4 (1986): 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

analysis of a paint's composition allows much more accurate color matching and paint recreation.¹⁶

The call for standards of paint analysis underlines a long standing recognition of problems with inconsistent and unreliable methods. In 1986, Frank Welsh published *Who Is An Historic Paint Analyst? A Call for Standards* through the Association for Preservation Technology, in which he calls for a more scientific approach and a clearly-defined methodology. Yet, in 2009, Willie Graham echoed Welsh in his *Architectural Paint Research at American Museums: An Appeal for Standards*, noting the need to create a baseline of proficiency and support innovation. In 2015, paint analysts Lisa Nilsen and Kathrin Hinrichs Degerblad edited *Standards in Architectural Paint Research*, which is a compilation of papers from the Fifth International Conference on Architectural Paint Research 'Interdisciplinary Innovation Through Baseline Proficiencies.' Centered on the theme of standardization, this book criticizes the inconsistency of practices in paint analysis, promotes interdisciplinary collaboration and offers a proposal to draft European standards of architectural paint investigation. Spanning thirty years, these publications make it clear that standards for paint analysis and its methodology have proven elusive, though recent efforts offer hope for the future. While technological advances have greatly increased the range of analysis, practices are still under discussion. For instance, the usefulness of paint scrapings or exposures is the source of international debate among

¹⁶ Patrick Baty, "The Role of Paint Analysis in the Historic Interior," *Journal of Architectural Conservation* 1, no. 1 (January 1, 1995): 4.

analysts and conservators.¹⁷ Thus, all recognize that, despite the refinement in scientific analysis of finishes, conclusions rely on evidence. And given finishes ephemeral nature, evidence is often difficult to attain.

These challenges largely stem from the fact that not all layers of finishes survive and those that do may not retain their original appearance. Where paint layers have been disturbed, analysis is largely useless. Without a clear stratigraphy, no chronology relating to a period of significance can be developed. Exposure to the elements can significantly damage exterior finishes, while deterioration of materials from water damage can affect interiors. Additionally, methods of paint preparation occasionally involved the removal of previous layers. Paint stripping through the burning of painted elements was a common practice, leaving a charred substrate, but the mechanical removal of paint is harder to discern. Thus, undisturbed areas provide the most useful paint samples, yet the analyst must examine the sample to ensure there is no evidence of paint removal between painting campaigns.¹⁸

Visual investigation without chemical analysis, as was the norm for much of the early twentieth century, is problematic. The colors revealed *in situ* are not the same as when they were first applied. Many have faded, undergone discoloration as a natural result of aging or reacted to conditions in their environment. For example, linseed oil paints are known for yellowing over time as the result of ultraviolet light degradation.

¹⁷ Line Bregnhøi and Mads Chr. Christensen, "Paint Research, Interpretation and Communication," in *Architectural Finishes in the Built Environment*, ed Mary Jablonski and Catherine Matsen, (London: Archetype Books, 2009): 88.

¹⁸ Richard Ireland, "Notes on Colour Investigation and Pigment Analysis," (2006) 4. Accessed April 29, 2018. <https://www.scribd.com/document/11541112/Paint-Investigation-Notes>.

Thus, the authentic color of a finish is much more likely to be identified by distinguishing the pigments used to impart color. Identification of particular pigments aids in dating paints. Analysis of paint composition has led to the recreation of finishes with the same pigments. Due to alterations in pigment and media, and contributing conditions, these recreated paints are sometimes brighter or more vibrant than many might expect. Indeed, the earlier methods of scraping layers of paint away from walls to reveal the original finish did not account for the aging and discoloration of paint. The subdued color schemes used in many restoration projects of the 20th century matched the exposed paint, but did not actually represent the original finish as it would have appeared when first applied.¹⁹ Questions of replicating historic paints must also consider differences in aging between historic and modern paints.

In addition to adding insight into original appearance, finishes analyses also shed light on original construction and changes to a building. Paint analysts work with architects, archaeologists and historians to determine original finishes and to help identify architectural change. For example, they may distinguish changes by comparing paint stratigraphies from one area of a structure to another. A missing layer or layers suggest anomalies that often relate to change. This comparison is carried out by microscopically examining the stratigraphy of paint samples in cross section. The photomicrograph below offers an illustration of a cross sectional paint sample. As an example, paint sample below, taken from an eighteenth century cupboard, illustrates more than twenty layers of

¹⁹ Patrick Baty, “The Role Of Paint Analysis In The Historic Interior,” 6.

finishes applied to the surfaces over time. As mentioned above, analysts also distinguish the original color and composition of paints by matching to color standards by eye and more recently, by using instrumental methods, such as spectrophotometry or colorimetry. The analysis of paint composition can also aid in dating changes, as specific pigments were only developed or made commercially available at certain points in history. Thus, their identification can offer approximate dates for periods of construction.

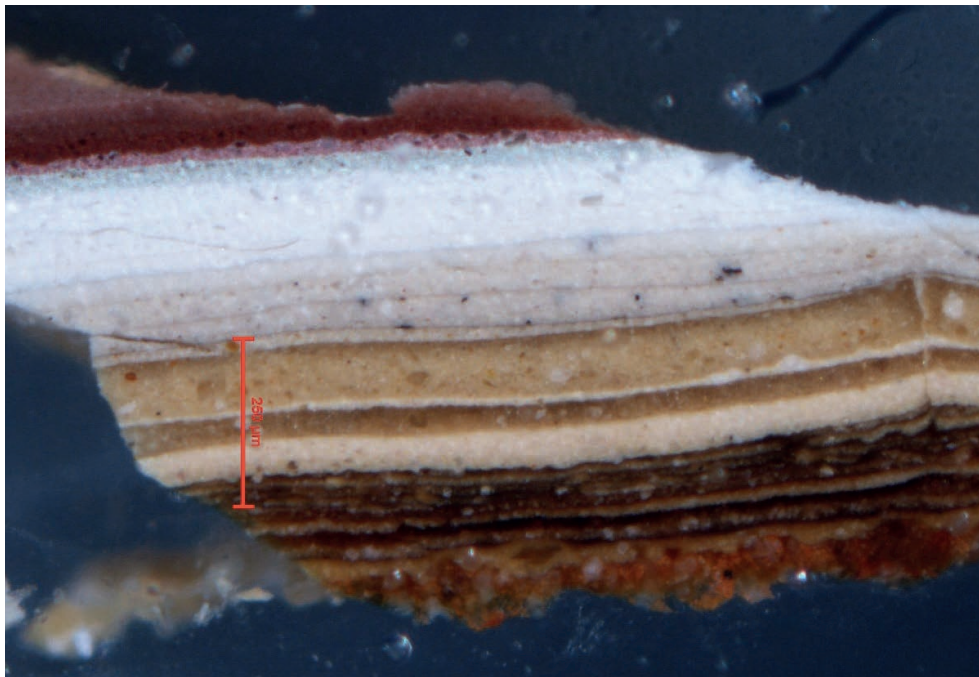


Figure A: Paint sample from eighteenth century corner cupboard²⁰

Finishes analysis is also highly useful in developing a site's interpretation. It allows conservators, site managers and curators to restore a space to its period of significance. This is done by carefully examining samples taken from a site in order to

²⁰Britt et al. "An Investigation into the Architectural Finishes of the Pantry at Bartram's Garden," Unpublished Report, 2018.

establish a chronology of finishes. By comparing this chronology with the history of the site, gleaned either from architectural examination or historical records, a particular finish used during the period of significance can be identified. For example, Mount Vernon's period of significance is George Washington's occupation of the mansion. Thus, the interpretation of the site seeks to restore visual appearance to what Washington would have seen. However, as the site was occupied by others after the Washingtons, its appearance changed. Through architectural investigation and paint analysis, conservators were able to restore Mount Vernon's appearance to its period of significance.

This restoration of an original color aids in transporting visitors to another time, when certain colors or finishes represented status or wealth.²¹ Finishes were often used as demonstrations of wealth and status, thus their restoration clearly shows students of the past how architecture and color could be used impress or intimidate. With this in mind, it is easy to understand why the finishes in more humble spaces, like slave quarters, have not been investigated. Until recently, paint analysis has been a tool used primarily for more prestigious spaces with notable color schemes or decorative finishes.²² As service spaces were used for labor-intensive and dirt-generating work, it is unlikely they were decorated or had more than practical coatings. However, recent investigations demonstrate that much can be learned from paint analysis, even if the finishes are not highly decorative.

²¹ Roger Moss, "Nineteenth Century Paints: A Documentary Approach," in *Paint in America: The Colors of Historic Buildings* (John Wiley & Sons, 1994): 55.

²² Patrick Baty, "The Role Of Paint Analysis In The Historic Interior," 2.

A Note on Slavery, Racism and Color

When discussing slavery and the potential levels of autonomy of slaves, it is crucial to understand the relationship between slave and owner. It is important to acknowledge that the experience of slavery often differed from slave to slave, usually as a result of their owner's personality. Some masters were generous and favored their slaves.²³ Others were cruel and manipulative. However, the pervasive ideology of the superiority of white skin and the inferiority of black, allowed Europeans and their descendants to own people with darker complexions demonstrate that even if a master was kind, he or she still thought of black people as beneath him. Furthermore, even though some white Americans referred to their slaves as "family," laws and dominant ideologies prevented owners from treating their property like true family.²⁴ For example, many of the original colonies had laws which stated that "all children borne in this country shall be held bond or free only according to the condition of the mother."²⁵ This allowed slave-owners to increase their property without major expense and enslave their own children. Even after the abolition of slavery in 1863, principles like "the one drop rule" kept racism alive and well. This principle stated that an individual with even one ancestor of African descent (one drop of African blood) was black, regardless of skin color.²⁶

²³ John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, 19.

²⁴ Robert K. Fitts, "The Landscapes of Northern Bondage," in *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery*, ed. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg (Yale University Press, 2010): 203.

²⁵ Peter Kolchin, *American Slavery: 1619-1877* (Macmillan, 2003): 17.

²⁶ Khanna, Nikki. "'IF YOU'RE HALF BLACK, YOU'RE JUST BLACK': Reflected Appraisals and the Persistence of the One-Drop Rule." *The Sociological Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2010): 97.

These ideologies concerning color still linger. They are the result of Eurocentric thinking that has dominated recent history, and it is not limited to colors of skin. For example, Olivia Gude, a teacher in the United States, argues that “there is a strong tendency for teachers to continue speaking in the language of scientific certainty when discussing the symbolic meanings of colors.” In fact, she continues:

Blue is described as peaceful and soothing, red as stimulating, yellow as cheerful and eye-catching. Black is said to mean somberness and death; white is viewed as the essence of purity. Particular color preferences and associations are thus validated in the students' minds as not merely habitual and customary, but as natural and instinctive.”²⁷

Thus, American students learn about color in ways that relate to Western theories of art. But the exclusion of other interpretations of perceptions limits students' understanding of other cultural contexts. If slaves were indeed able to transfer their African traditions of color usage to their quarters in the United States, what many perceive as simply bright or cheerful colors could in fact represent something much more meaningful, such as tradition colors found in the country of origin. Furthermore, the associations of white with purity and black with death take on new meanings when applied to skin color. Studies have shown that young American children perceive dark or black as negative and white or light as positive, which can be understood as a manifestation of racial bias.²⁸ Clearly, colors evoke very strong reactions from us as humans and can carry a great deal of importance in their representation in our environments, whether in our skin or painted on our buildings.

²⁷ Olivia Gude, "Drawing Color Lines." *Art Education* 53, no. 1 (2000): 45.

²⁸ John E. Williams and C. Drew Edwards. "An Exploratory Study of the Modification of Color and Racial Concept Attitudes in Preschool Children." *Child Development* 40, no. 3 (1969): 738.

Even without an ethnocentric understanding of colors, the discussion and interpretation of slave spaces becomes an inherently problematic topic and is quite difficult to adequately address within the field of preservation. The Colonial Williamsburg Restoration was sternly critiqued for the “evasion of a crucial aspect of its history: the fact that its culture and economy alike were based upon the institution of human slavery.”²⁹ Yet, such evasion is hard to avoid when one considers the routine realities of slavery. Slave markets, brandings, chain gangs or lynchings are not easily represented by normal museological methods. Slave quarters, however, can provide an understanding of slavery that illuminates both the brutality of bondage and the strength necessary to survive it. It is clear that no matter the best intentions of a slave owner, the ruling laws and ideologies of the day prevented them from truly seeing individuals of African descent as equals, which makes it seem likely that slaves would turn to their indigenous practices as a way to maintain their identities outside of slavery.

Case Studies

The following eight case studies describe the finishes analyses of multiple slave quarters, belonging to both field hands and domestic slaves in the United States and Bermuda. It is worth noting that the case study of Bermuda includes six separate sites that each are worthy of separate investigation, which is beyond the scope of this thesis. The majority of finishes found at these sites are limewashes, some pigmented and some

²⁹ James Marston Fitch and Jane Jacobs, *James Marston Fitch: Selected Writings on Architecture, Preservation, and the Built Environment* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2007): 189.

unpigmented. All analyses, with the exception of Bellamy Mansion, used visual examination of cross sections to determine chronologies and chemical analyses to identify pigments. The analysis of Bellamy Mansion's slave quarter consisted of visual inspection through microscopy, and samples were compared to the Munsell Universal Color System, Glossy or Matte Collections for reference.

Aiken-Rhett House



Figure B: The Back of the Aiken-Rhett House: kitchen and laundry on left, stables on right.³⁰

The Aiken-Rhett House in Charleston, South Carolina was one of the earliest houses to benefit from the analysis of its service spaces. John Robinson built the main

³⁰ Gateway Charleston, 2018.

house around 1820, with William Aiken Sr. buying it from him in 1827.³¹ William Aiken Jr. inherited the property and expanded it, adding the kitchens in 1836. The majority of finishes in the kitchen and stables date from this period of expansion. Census data from 1850 shows that William Aiken Jr. had seven slaves at his urban home in Charleston, adding twelve more by 1860; however, in total, Aiken owned 878 slaves, the bulk of which resided and worked at his rice plantation at Jehossee Island.³² Aiken was described as an “indulgent” master by his peers and seemed to particularly demonstrate partiality to his domestic slaves.³³

In 2005, paint analysis was carried out in the kitchen and five chambers located in an addition at the back of the house. The analysis of the spaces revealed that these chambers “were repainted as often as the primary spaces in the mansion,” possibly with leftover paint.³⁴ However, the paint was used in radically different ways. For example, ultramarine pigment in the limewash of the kitchen chamber on the second-floor was also found in the decorative finishes in the main house, suggesting that pigments were “purchased specifically for very limited decorative use in the house, and a large volume of remaining synthetic ultramarine was mixed into the limewash for the walls of the kitchen chamber.”³⁵

³¹ Kappy McNulty. “Governor William Aiken House.” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form.

³² Susan Buck, “Paint Discoveries in the Aiken-Rhett House Kitchen and Slave Quarters,” *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* 10 (2005): 188.

³³ *Ibid.*, 189.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 193.

The earliest extant finish found in the first-floor kitchen is a deep yellow pigmented limewash. In contrast, the samples taken from the first-floor chamber suggest an original pinkish-orange limewash. The north chamber on the first-floor with four generations of unpigmented limewash on its plastered walls, followed by two layers of yellow-pigmented limewashes and then an alternating series of unpigmented and orange and dark-yellow limewashes. The second-floor's south chamber was finished in a blue limewash containing synthetic ultramarine. This relatively uncommon pigment was also found on the walls of the double drawing room in the mansion, underneath 1858 wallpaper and in the decorative paint scheme for the ceiling rosettes. Finally, the middle chamber on the second floor of the kitchen outbuilding contained a series of unpigmented limewashes followed by yellow and then orange pigmented limewashes.

In 2017, analysts investigated finishes in the stables and its second floor chambers, which were occupied by slaves. The window woodwork in the south chamber on the second floor was originally finished in light greys, while a louvered door to a closet was originally coated with a paint made with chrome green, suggesting that this color was added after 1825.



Figure C: Aiken-Rhett Stables: Second Floor South Chamber, louvered closet door.³⁶

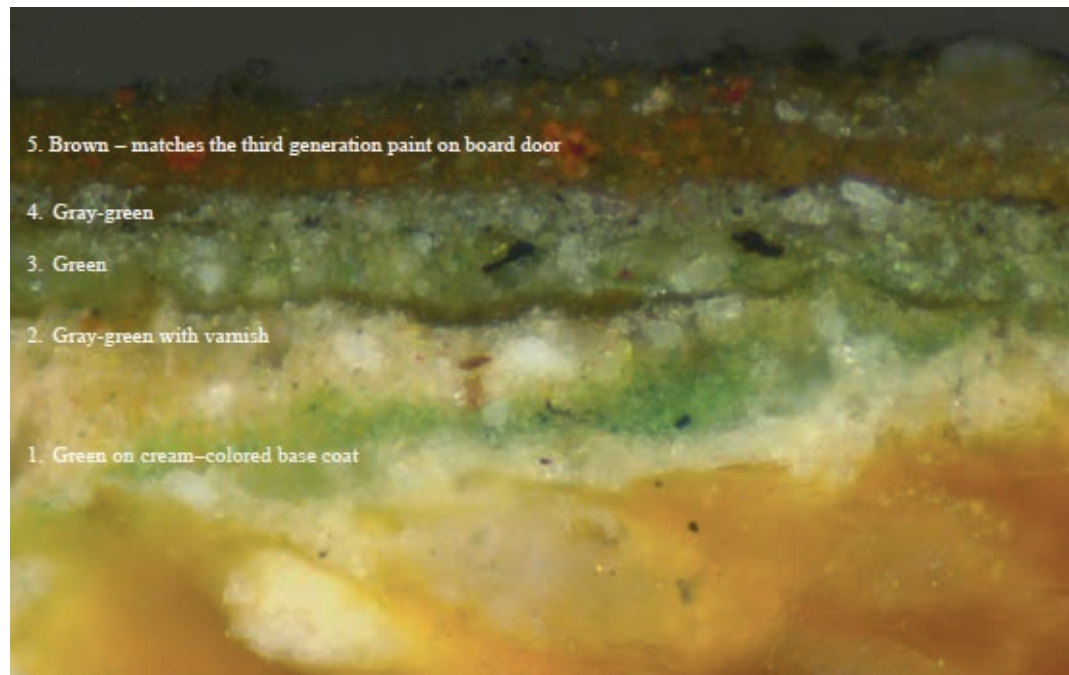


Figure D: Stratigraphy from louvered door in Aiken-Rhett Stables³⁷

³⁶ Susan Buck. "Aiken-Rhett House Outbuildings Paint Investigation." Unpublished Report, 2013.

³⁷ Ibid.

Intriguingly, this green does not match the green paints used on the exterior of the building, indicating that either new paints or new pigments were used here. The first layer of finish on the plaster of this room was identified as a deep red-pigmented limewash, which was also found in the North Chamber. Later paint layers include distinctive blue-pigmented limewashes, indicating that this room was often colorfully painted. With only two layers of paint, the hayloft of this building has the least number of finishes. However, they are also brightly colored, with the south wall still appearing orange. As the picture below suggests, after its original application, the orange limewash would have been a striking color in such a small space.



Figure E: Aiken-Rhett Stables: Second Floor North Chamber, with orange limewash still visible.³⁸

³⁸ Susan Buck. "Aiken-Rhett House Outbuildings Paint Investigation." Unpublished Report, 2013.

The use of limewash in these spaces and those in the following case studies is unsurprising as it was a common method of sanitation; instead of cleaning dirt or stains away, they were just painted over. However, the variety of bright, antebellum colors in the second-floor chambers is surprising and could be interpreted as representing the tastes of changing occupants. Most of the service chambers had similarly bright pigments coloring the paints on the walls, while the Aiken's rooms in the main house were more subdued in overall color, with the exception of highlighted and decorative elements. This inconsistency between the mansion and the service quarters suggests that the enslaved occupants may have been responsible not only for the act of painting but also the choice of color. Given William Aiken Jr's reputed fondness for his domestic slaves, he may well have extended this level of autonomy to his human property.

Nathaniel Russell House



*Figure F: Nathaniel Russell House: Kitchen Quarters*³⁹

Constructed around 1808, the Nathaniel Russell House provides another example of antebellum architecture in Charleston, South Carolina. Much like the Aiken Rhett House, the Russell slave quarters are located behind and to one side of the main house. Much less is known about Nathaniel Russell, but the house and its elaborate Adamesque interiors indicate that he belonged to the upper echelons of Charleston's society. The house was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places on the basis of its high style architecture and interior designs, yet the nomination does not once mention the

³⁹ "DEPENDENCIES, FROM SOUTH - Nathaniel Russell House, Dependencies, 51 Meeting Street, Charleston, Charleston County, SC." Photograph, Historic American Building Survey.

intact slave kitchen or quarters.⁴⁰ Due to the recent paint analysis, however, more attention is being paid to this humble space.

The investigation into the finishes of the Kitchen Quarter wing began in March 2017. Starting with the exterior, the evidence suggests that the kitchen was not originally painted to match the main house. The interior woodwork was coated in eighteen layers of paint. In contrast to woodwork found in the mansion, the earlier generations of paint are primarily dark colors. There are four generations of browns, followed by gray, tan and a dark brown varnish coating. The ninth generation could be grain-painting with a red-brown glaze on a cream-colored base coat, which is then followed by dark brown and red-brown. The kitchen's plaster walls were found to be unfinished due to the presence of a layer of soot immediately on the plaster substrate.

The woodwork in the laundry was in worse condition than in the kitchen, but three samples appear to represent the original paint stratigraphy. The first generation was a gray paint with a darkened oil glaze, followed by a generation of cream-colored paint. The third layer is a dull pink paint that contains zinc white, a pigment which dates the paint to after 1845 when zinc white was commercially available. Painted woodwork fragments found behind the lath in the laundry reveal a series of finishes, beginning with a pale blue-pigmented limewash, followed by an unpigmented limewash and then five generations of oil-bound paints with considerable dirt between each layer. This grime suggests that dirt was allowed to build up before each repainting, indicating that the

⁴⁰ Tray Stephenson and Bernard Kears. "Nathaniel Russell House." National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form. South Carolina Department of Archives and History, April 25, 1973.

limewashes were a cleaning or sanitation method. The evidence also suggests these washes are early or original to the walls in the lobby entry and laundry. Samples taken from the laundry's baseboards revealed a deep red stain as the original finish, which is identical to the original baseboards in the east chamber and second-floor passage.



Figure G: Stratigraphy from original baseboard, trapped behind modern baseboard in Nathaniel Russell's Laundry⁴¹

⁴¹ Susan Buck, "Russell House Kitchen-Quarter Interior Paint Research." Unpublished Report, January 2018.

The original finish on the laundry's window trim is a light gray paint with an oil varnish, which indicates that this space was not initially painted to match the kitchen. The plastered walls of the second-floor passage were found to have a finish of gray-pigmented limewash, but as this is followed by the dark cream-colored paint also seen in generation twelve in the east chamber, the gray color is not the original finish. Similarly, the woodwork in the west chamber was also originally gray, distinguishing it from the east chamber and passage. Limited evidence suggests that the original finish on the east chamber's walls could have been a yellow-pigmented limewash. Yet, no limewash was found on the walls of the west chamber. Meanwhile, samples from the passage revealed its original finish as being a gray-pigmented limewash.⁴²

In contrast to the Aiken-Rhett House, the kitchen and slave quarters of the Nathaniel Russell House are lacking in bright colors. The majority of the walls were unfinished or unpigmented. The only pigmented finishes were found on woodwork or trim. Though the findings are not as striking or vibrant, they are still curious. The original finishes of the kitchen do not match the main house, suggesting that new or differing paints were purposefully used. This may have been to further distinguish the kitchen from the refined spaces of the main house. However, the presence of blue, pink and red pigments on the woodwork suggest a color scheme beyond purely utilitarian coatings, though who chose these colors is difficult to determine. Ongoing research in the Kitchen Quarters is uncovering much more about the original finishes and revealing “trapped

⁴² Susan Buck, “Russell House Kitchen-Quarter Interior Paint Research.” Unpublished Report, January 2018.

materials that date to use by enslaved people.”⁴³ Perhaps these artifacts will divulge the level of autonomy exercised by Nathaniel Russel’s slaves and whether or not it extended to the painting of the woodwork in their spaces.

Bermuda

Though the British government abolished slavery in Bermuda in the 1830s, its presence is still reflected in its built environment. Like many slaveholding households in America, the kitchen and slaves’ chambers were often located in cellars or other buildings.⁴⁴ The analysis of numerous spaces on the island revealed that most areas occupied by slaves were finished with pigmented limewashes. The following six sites were analyzed as part of a survey of finishes in Bermuda and are all deserving of further research in their own rights.

A room in the cellar of Princess Cottage was unevenly finished with the same plaster used in the owner’s rooms, followed by around twelve layers of whitewash. In Paget Parish, a workroom at 1815 Beau Sejour twenty-nine layers of pigmented limewash covered three coats of white and brown, respectively. The first layer of limewash was orange in color, followed by nineteen layers of white and nine generations of dull yellow. In Smith’s Parish, numerous cellar rooms at Winterhaven contained whitewashes and orange-pigmented limewashes. The eighteenth century Hamilton Parish

⁴³ Susan Buck, e-mail message to author, March 21, 2018.

⁴⁴ Edward Chappell, “Accommodating Slavery in Bermuda,” in *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery*, ed. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010): 67-98.

house of Leeward has a rear cellar room originally finished in whitewash, followed by layers of peach, red-brown and white limewash. The walls of Rosebank and Greendale's cookrooms hold vestiges of pink, brick red, yellow and gray limewashes. The most distinctive samples were taken from the dark cellar cookroom of Mount Pleasant of Pembroke Parish. Its stone walls were covered in brown plaster, then limewashed over fifty times, beginning with white plus layers of brown-, pink-, orange- and red-pigmented washes.⁴⁵

All six sites had service spaces in their cellars, and all were finished in limewashes. Furthermore, most of these spaces were frequently repainted or recoated. This is most likely due to the amount of dirt and grime generated from household work. However, not all of these spaces were pigmented. Unpigmented limewash seems a reasonable choice of finish for these dark cellar spaces, but it would more readily show dirt. The pigmented finishes, however, could potentially mask debris while simultaneously making the space appear lighter. With this in mind, and given the prevalence of pigmented finishes among sites in such close proximity, it is likely that the pigmented finishes were a practical choice and not one reflecting the personal tastes of the slaves.

⁴⁵ Chappell and Moffitt, *Limewashed Island: Architectural Finish in Early Bermuda*. Unpublished Report, 2017.

Monticello

A 1999 investigation of Monticello's South Pavilion and Wing examined the finishes of a kitchen and several chambers. Thomas Jefferson lived in the South Pavilion beginning in 1770, when its construction was completed. He resided in the quarters on the second-floor as he waited for the main house to be finished; the ground floor of the pavilion held a kitchen used by his slaves. By 1809 Jefferson's enslaved workers completed the rest of the South Wing, which served as "house domestic and work spaces previously located along Mulberry Row."⁴⁶ After Jefferson relocated to the main house, the South Pavilion's kitchen became a wash room.

The findings from the 1999 analysis suggested that the South Pavilion cellar was originally left unpainted and then coated with many layers of yellow-pigmented limewashes.⁴⁷ The exposure of layers of a deep yellow whitewash pigmented with yellow ochre, burnt sienna and charcoal black above a layer of soot confirmed these findings in 2017. Samples from the baseboards in the cellar also revealed that they were originally finished in a blue-gray. Additionally, many of these samples contained an orange-base coat for graining. Samples from the west wall of the cellar began with three layers of yellow-pigmented limewash, followed by two unpigmented limewashes. This pattern of yellow-pigmented followed by unpigmented limewashes continues, with the yellow varying from very pale to medium yellow. The Dairy's walls had very few surviving

⁴⁶ Michael Cottman, "Historians Uncover Slave Quarters of Sally Hemings at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello," NBC News. July 13, 2017. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/thomas-jefferson-sally-hemings-living-quarters-found-n771261>.

⁴⁷ Susan Buck, "Monticello South Wing Paint Study." Unpublished Report, August 2017.

limewashes, but four generations of unpigmented limewashes were found in on the north stone wall. The fifth generation was a yellow-pigmented limewash, followed by six layers of unpigmented washes. Sally Hemings's room, which was newly identified within the South Wing in 2017, proved difficult to investigate owing to ongoing water and moisture problems.⁴⁸ Evidence of unpigmented limewashes were found but are impossible to date due to their poor condition. However, the consistency of finishes in other spaces make it likely that this room was limewashed frequently for sanitation purposes and to brighten the space.



Figure H: Sally Hemmings room in Monticello's South Wing⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Michael Cottman, "Historians Uncover Slave Quarters of Sally Hemings at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello," NBC News. July 13, 2017. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/thomas-jefferson-sally-hemings-living-quarters-found-n771261>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

The West Quarter's north wall retains material evidence eleven generations of unpigmented limewash, except for the fifth layer, which contains yellow pigments.



Figure I: Stratigraphy on original plaster from Textile Cottage's North wall⁵⁰

In 2016 and 2017, analysts also investigated finishes in Monticello's Weavers Cottage or Workman's Cottage. The results from samples taken from plastered walls in the east room suggest that the space was finished with unpigmented limewash during the first three generations. The inconsistent dark red limewash of the second generation can

⁵⁰ Susan Buck, "Monticello South Wing Paint Study." Unpublished Report, August 2017.

be likely attributed to dirt or clay contamination at the time of application. The Cottage finishes were found to be unpigmented limewashes and is interpreted accordingly.⁵¹

Reliable comparisons of paint stratigraphies among the spaces within the South Pavilion, South Wing and Weaver's Cottage are difficult, because the structures have been exposed to elements for many years. Severe deterioration and loss of any original evidence is highly likely. However, the buildup of dirt before the first layer of paint suggests that the original interiors were left unpainted. As soot and dirt began to build up, the walls were finished with either yellow-pigmented or unpigmented limewashes. The alternating of pigmented and unpigmented limewashes would suggest a color scheme, and as this alternation can be seen in most of the South Wing, it is unlikely it was chosen by the occupants. However, what stands out is the evidence of graining on the baseboards in the South Pavilion cellar. As a method of painting a wooden element to look like a more expensive type of wood, the presence of graining is unusual since the South Pavilion cellar was originally built as a kitchen and then transformed into a washroom. This anomaly remains unexplained.

Drayton Hall

Located roughly twelve miles northwest of Charleston, South Carolina and built in the mid eighteenth century for John Drayton, Drayton Hall's cellar served as workspace for generations of slaves. This impressive example of Palladian architecture

⁵¹ Susan Buck, "Monticello Textile Workshop Paint Study." Unpublished Report, August 2017.

survived the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, to become “one of the finest of all surviving plantation houses in America.”⁵² Two dependencies flanked the main house, but only their foundations remain. The formal interior spaces are highly decorated and have been restored to a blue-gray color. The cellar and its service spaces were also interpreted as being the same grey color. However, analysis conducted in 2013 proved otherwise.

The analysis of samples from the woodwork in the south passage indicated that a deep red oil-bound paint was the original finish while samples from multiple plastered walls were unpigmented, as were all generations that followed. However, the analysis of paint samples suggested that the gray appearance is the result of dirt and soot mixing with the limewashes. The only evidence of finishes, which were found on in the recesses of small plaster figurine on a wall above the fireplace was a deep yellow distemper paint containing yellow ochre and calcium carbonate. The investigation also indicated that the door jambs were left unpainted prior to being limewashed.⁵³

⁵² James Dillon, “Drayton Hall.” National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form. Historic Sites Survey, National Park Service, August 1976.

⁵³ Susan Buck, “Drayton Hall Cellar Spaces Paint Study.” Unpublished Report, October 2016.



Figure J: Plaster figure above fireplace in Drayton Hall's cellar room⁵⁴

The evidence from Drayton Hall's cellar indicates that the service spaces were largely unpigmented. The only sources of pigmented finishes were the woodwork and the small plaster figure. The origin of the figure is unclear. It is possible that most of the domestic slaves lived in the dependencies, which are no longer extant, rendering the cellar a workspace. This might explain the lack of pigmentation on the walls. However,

⁵⁴ Susan Buck, "Drayton Hall Cellar Spaces Paint Study." Unpublished Report, October 2016

thorough research on the Draytons, their slaves and the purpose of the dependencies is needed to draw definitive conclusions regarding the finishes of the cellar.

Bellamy Mansion

Built between 1859 and 1861, the compact Bellamy Mansion in downtown Wilmington is considered one of North Carolina's finest embodiments of historic antebellum architecture.⁵⁵ Though Bellamy Mansion was an urban home, similar to the Aiken Rhett House and the Nathaniel Russell House, its slave quarters were located at a distance from the slave owner's home. Historically referred to as the "Negro House," the two story brick quarters located behind the mansion were constructed in 1860.⁵⁶ The Bellamys' wealth is also apparent in the finishes used on the exterior of the slave house. Visible from the street, it provided another opportunity to display their wealth.⁵⁷ However, the interior of the slave house would have only been seen by the slaves who occupied it. Indeed, with no rear windows, the design of the slave house and its position within the compound focused it on the mansion.

⁵⁵ Catherine Bishir and Tim Buchman, *The Bellamy Mansion, Wilmington, North Carolina: An Antebellum Architectural Treasure and Its People*, 2 edition (Historic Preservation Foundation of North Carolina, 2013): 34.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 56.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 45.



Figure K: Bellamy Mansion Slave House, restored: as seen from the back porch of the main house⁵⁸

Analysis carried out in 1996 and 1997 addressed both exterior and interior finishes of the slave house.⁵⁹ The paint analyst identified simple finishes in eleven interior spaces. All interior and exterior woodwork, such as door and window architraves, stair wainscot, sashes and doors, was painted a white. Additionally, all baseboards were painted white, except for those in a first floor room and a closet, which were found to be grayish-pink in color. Though the plaster of the walls was in a poor condition, extensive sample analysis proved that they were originally unfinished. The east privy proved to be

⁵⁸ “Update: Slave Quarter Restoration.” Blog. *Bellamy Mansion Museum*. Accessed April 29, 2018. <http://bellamymansion.weebly.com/blog/update-slave-quarter-restoration>.

⁵⁹ Peter Sandbeck, “Bellamy Mansion Slave Quarters Historic Structures Report.” Unpublished Report, 1998.

an exception, however, as it had several generations of whitewash. The privy's flooring was also found to have a layer of pale rose-white distemper or limewash, followed by coats of white limewash. However, it is possible the pinkish shade is a result of soil mixing with the finish. This is unsurprising, as frequent applications of limewashes was practiced as a sanitation method. Finally, at least three mantels in the house were originally finished in black, glossy paint.⁶⁰

The unfinished walls of the Negro House provide a contrast to the Aiken-Rhett House slave quarters and their brightly pigmented walls. In conjunction with the white woodwork, these unfinished walls fit the general expectation of slave quarters' interiors as basic and undecorated. If examined in isolation, the Negro House, presents no oddities, as the only finishes were limewashes used for sanitation in the privy. However, most of the aforementioned sites have used limewashes throughout slave chambers, both pigmented and unpigmented. What is even more odd is the presence of black, glossy paint on the mantels in the slave quarters, which would have looked stark against unfinished walls. This could have been a method of masking soot generated by the fires, but the glossiness is an unnecessary and unexplained feature.

Oakland Plantation

Located in Natchitoches, Louisiana, Oakland Plantation has an excellent example of both antebellum and local architecture in its South Tenant Cabin. While its date of

⁶⁰ Peter Sandbeck, "Bellamy Mansion Slave Quarters Historic Structures Report." Unpublished Report, 1998.

construction is unknown, its construction methods and materials suggest that it was built in the late 1850s and occupied by slaves who worked on the plantation. It was originally a one-room structure, but evolved over time to become a three-room building with an open front gallery.

The interior of the cabin contains bousillage, which was a mixture of clay and plant material or animal hair used within a system of horizontal lath attached between the upright members of a wall. Bousillage was a common form of insulation used in Louisiana until after the Civil War and can be found in a variety of structures. The bousillage plaster was identified as the substrate on which the finishes were applied.

Analysis revealed that the bousillage was finished with whitewash and was applied in one to three applications. Investigations of the fragments from an original door also showed that it had been painted a medium green on both the interior and exterior sides. The exterior of the door was later painted brown, and the interior was coated in a blue paint. The door also has evidence of limewashes.⁶¹

Whitewash in a slave cabin is a practicality that needs no explanation. However, the green and blue pigments found on the original door are unusual, especially in a slave cabin. These cabins were often occupied by field hands, who were typically on the bottom rungs of a plantation's hierarchy, making their access to pigments most unlikely. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that whoever built and lived in this cabin painted the door green at first and then blue. The isolation of pigments to the door might emphasize

⁶¹ Hartrampf and OJP Architect, "Oakland Plantation South Tenant Cabin Historic Structure Report." Unpublished Report, March 2003.

its role as an entry point. Though there is no scholarly documentation of slave's using certain colors to prevent the entry bad spirits, this tradition of marking doorways exists in many cultures, most notably in the origins of the Jewish tradition of Passover.

Point of Pines Plantation

The exact date of construction for the slave cabin currently located in the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, DC is unknown. It originated from Point of Pines Plantation on Edisto Island, South Carolina, and archival documents list it on the property after the 1850s.

Prior to its move to Washington, the finishes on the cabin were analyzed. Some of the cabin's exterior elements, such as door and window frames, maintain visible layers of distinctly colored finishes. However, these proved to be primarily from the twentieth century. Both the exterior and interior were limewashed multiple times, but dating these layers is impossible; the cabin has long been exposed to the elements, allowing for the degradation of its material. It is important to note that the wood found below the first layer of interior limewash was found to be grimy, indicating that it might have originally been unfinished. Additionally, the only evidence of original pigmentation was found in fragments on the exterior door frame: a deep, red oil-bound paint. Yet, there is not enough evidence to show that this was consistently used on the exterior trim.⁶²

⁶² Susan Buck, "Edisto Cabin Paint Analysis." Unpublished Report, June 2015.

Much like the South Tenant Cabin on Oakland Plantation, the presence of pigmented finishes on a slave cabin is surprising, though not unprecedented. Again, pigmentation is limited to the entry point. The use of pigmented finishes as highlights may be due to their scarcity or the limited access of them to field hands. Yet, traditions might again suggest that the relegation of color to the door frame related to who was welcome to enter and who was not.



Figure L: Point of Pines Slave Cabin in the National Museum of African American History and Culture⁶³

⁶³ Author, March 25, 2018.

Discussion of Findings

In looking at these examples of finishes in slave quarters, a clear distinction between urban slave quarters and rural cabins stands out: brighter colors on the walls are more prevalent in urban spaces, while doors and frames seem to be the only highlighted features for cabins. For the Aiken Rhett House and Nathaniel Russell House, the modern interpretation of slave spaces as being without colors beyond white and brown is inaccurate. Though, service spaces were typically finished with unpigmented limewashes as a practical sanitation coating, the presence of vibrantly pigmented limewashes at both sites suggests that these finishes were more than just practical. The frequent repainting and presence of multiple variations of pigmented finishes in the chambers is unusual, as it indicates the possibility that the colors may have been changed to suit different uses or occupants.⁶⁴

Yet, this would mean the slave-owners afforded their domestic slaves a surprising degree of agency and gave them paint to use as they saw fit. While this may seem far-fetched, it is not entirely out of the realm of possibility. Other investigations into slave dwellings reveal that they sought to create their own sense of space, especially through movable objects, which will be further addressed in a discussion of archaeological evidence from slave quarters.

In Bermuda, the same questions of autonomy arise. Were the pigments leftover painting material from the main house? Generally, the pigments found in the cellars do

⁶⁴ Susan Buck, "Paint Discoveries in the Aiken-Rhett House Kitchen and Slave Quarters," 196.

not match those applied to the exteriors, again suggesting that “the occupants rather than their owners made color choices.”⁶⁵ This is a more tenable premise for Bermuda, as the use of color was more significant than in the mainland colonies.⁶⁶ Research indicates that after 1790, the island’s residents typically built houses that were more fashionable “and initial findings suggest they were more inclined to make bright color a part of their architectural statements.”⁶⁷ Why brighter colors were preferred here compared to similar structures in the United States is not fully understood, although it is possible that the use of color derived from African traditions.

With regard to rural cabins, it is even less likely that field workers had access to paints or pigments. Furthermore, it is unlikely that they would spend what little free time they had on procuring the necessary materials. The red finishes at Point of Pines and Kent Plantation may not have been the presentation finish as red was common color for primers. Additionally, it is important to note that exterior elements, such as window and door frames, were often painted green, as a result of the pesticide-related properties of a common green pigment that contained arsenic.⁶⁸ Thus, the green door at the cabin on Oakland Plantation may not have been the original finish. Yet, it is worth noting that after the Civil War, the occupants of the cabin at Point of Pines Plantation finished the walls with newspapers and then wallpaper. While this might demonstrate a preference for

⁶⁵ Edward Chappell, “Accommodating Slavery in Bermuda,” 73.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 15.

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, 67-98.

⁶⁸ Roger Moss, “Nineteenth Century Paints: A Documentary Approach,” 67.

finished spaces, it is just as probable that the newspapers provided much needed insulation, since the cabin was so drafty.

The Architecture of Slavery

Architectural examinations can provide important insight into daily life of bygone eras. The forms used in mansions and slave cabins show us that slaveholders designed spaces “with the purpose of employing architecture to subjugate and control their human chattel.”⁶⁹ This is demonstrated through the arrangement of slave cabins in relation to the mansion, the passageways and back rooms in mansions only used by servants and numerous other features specifically created to keep slaves in their place. In truth, “it is by studying the everyday that we are able to see the true effects of the mechanisms of a system such as slavery.”⁷⁰

As mentioned above, enslaved workers could be broadly divided into two categories: domestic servants and field hands. Though they were owned by the same masters, their experiences of slavery, and their physical environs, were quite different. Domestic slaves typically resided within a certain radius of their owners, either in the mansion or in an outbuilding. Field workers, on the other hand, often lived in cabins located closer to the crops than the mansion, under the watchful eye of the overseer.⁷¹ The development of architecture for each category of slave, and even the overseer,

⁶⁹ Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg, “Introduction” to *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery* (Yale University Press, 2010): 3.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, 130.

reflects the attitude with which these individuals were regarded and the rigid hierarchy of plantations. The following sections will provide an overview of the evolution of slavery and its reflection in architecture and a case study demonstrating the process of architectural manipulation.

Domestic Slaves' Quarters

In the early days of slavery in the North American colonies, domestic slaves did not often have their own spaces. They slept in hallways or in their masters' rooms, so they could be ready to serve at a moment's notice.⁷² Some might interpret such physical closeness as an example of how the lives of slaves and their masters were so intimately interwoven. Yet, the enslaved were frequently excluded from family "rituals, such as meals, church services, and burials," furthering their identity as others or outsiders; this ideology of alienation allowed many white Americans to justify slavery.⁷³

At the beginning of the 17th century, slaves or indentured servants and owners lived together in the same spaces. After around 1670, as slavery became more common in the American colonies, workers began to live separate from the main house.⁷⁴ Though slaves had originally been kept close at hand by their masters for convenience's sake, by the 17th century, owners no longer wanted to see their property so frequently. As many slaves were cooks or scullery maids, the kitchen quickly became a space primarily for the

⁷² Edward A. Chappell, "Accommodating Slavery in Bermuda," 70.

⁷³ Robert K. Fitts, "The Landscapes of Northern Bondage," 200.

⁷⁴ Barbara Heath, "Space and Place within Plantation Quarters in Virginia, 1700-1825," in *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery*, ed. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg (Yale University Press, 2010): 162.

enslaved. The same can be said of stables and laundries. While stables were always located some distance from the main house, laundries and kitchens could be found in basements and cellars. The architectural design of many grand houses and slave spaces, often reflects how masters perceived their slaves. By relegating the service quarters to cellars, and eventually outbuildings, slave-owners clearly sought to distance themselves from their slaves.⁷⁵

The examination of cellars in Bermuda demonstrates that these unheated and dark spaces were often occupied by many domestic slaves. Though many of these spaces were designed for storage or labor, the presence of pigmented limewashes on the walls indicate occupation.⁷⁶ These cramped rooms separated owners from slaves, providing privacy. However, completely detached slave quarters became the fashion for those who could afford it in the 18th century.

The benefits of moving one's slaves from the cellar to a separate building were many. Owners wanted their slaves to be visible enough to be monitored, but not visible enough to be seen performing their tasks.⁷⁷ This is especially true with regard to the delivery of food; many alterations after the 1790's allowed for the secret passage of food from the kitchen to the formal dining room. Having outbuildings around or to the back of the main house made it easier for the owners "to increase observation of slaves' own activities while hiding their penetration of refined settings."⁷⁸ A detached kitchen also

⁷⁵ Edward A. Chappell, "Accommodating Slavery in Bermuda," 72.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 73.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 76.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 90.

became popular at this time as it kept dirt, fumes and heat generated by cooking away from the main house, providing greater comfort to the wealthy occupants and their guests. This separation of space additionally serves as an indication of hardening physical and social boundaries; slaves could no longer fade into the background of a room, but had very specific spaces to occupy.

Also during this time, the abolition movement began to denounce the slave trade and the mistreatment of slaves. To allay these new critiques, slave owners began to build alternatives to the dark, cramped cellar quarters found in the Caribbean and American colonies. In Bermuda, “the most distinctive model beginning in the 1790s was a detached, two-story building with cooking below and housing above.”⁷⁹ Moving Northwest, in the Chesapeake, owners began building two-room, center-chimney kitchens in the mid eighteenth century. These slightly roomier abodes served dual purposes: by providing a better living space for slaves and allowing slave owners to paternalistically conclude that in building these structures, they had alleviated the horrors of slavery put forth by abolitionists.⁸⁰

Another model of slave housing employed by plantation owners was terraced or row houses. Popular in the Caribbean and especially St. Croix, these barracks-like masonry structures often held a plantation’s entire slave population.⁸¹ In the Chesapeake,

⁷⁹ Edward A. Chappell, “Accommodating Slavery in Bermuda,” 79.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 78.

⁸¹ William Chapman, “Slave Villages in the Danish West Indies: Changes of the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries,” in *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery*, ed. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg (Yale University Press, 2010): 106.

these large buildings were often divided by gender, similar to the reconstructed quarters at Mount Vernon. By the mid 18th century, however, most slave housing was loosely based on family units.⁸²

Those who could afford to modify their plantations to appease abolitionists often did so according to recommendations put forth in manuals. In one such publication from 1803, titled *Practical Rules for the Management and Medical Treatment of Negro Slaves in the Sugar Colonies*, the author states that improved slave housing would in turn “improve the health and reproductive rate of slaves.”⁸³ Published in 1781, John Wood’s *A Series of Plans for Cottages or Habitations of the Labourer either in Husbandry or the Mechanic Arts* also heavily influenced construction of slave housing in the West Indies.⁸⁴ These manuals demonstrate slave-owners’ understanding of architecture and its effects and their willingness to use it to their benefit. They also describe the differing methods of arranging the landscape to best suit a master’s needs and wants.

While some plantation owners sought to make their slaves and the associated outbuildings less visible, others displayed them as indications of status and wealth. Boone Hall in South Carolina incorporates outbuildings as part of the grand vista; they line the road approaching the house. Yet, at Magnolia Grove plantation in Alabama, domestic slave dwellings were deliberately pushed to the northwestern corner of the yard, some 100 feet from the spaces in which they worked.⁸⁵ In Tennessee, where plantations were

⁸² Barbara Heath, “Space and Place within Plantation Quarters in Virginia, 1700-1825,” 158.

⁸³ William Chapman, “Slave Villages in the Danish West Indies,” 114.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 110.

⁸⁵ John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, 20.

smaller and slave populations correspondingly smaller, many slave-owners appeared to have preferred close proximity to their domestics. Most slave houses were arranged around mansions more for expediency's sake rather than to reinforce hierarchies.⁸⁶

Though their arrangement differed according to an owner's wealth and preference, most plantations had an assortment of outbuildings. Consisting of dairies, spring houses, ice houses, chicken houses, dovecotes, craft shops or store houses, these structures would be primarily used by slaves, giving them a sense of ownership. For example, a tutor at Nomini Hall was fined by the plantation's slaves for entering their work spaces without first asking their permission.⁸⁷ Slaves clearly felt a sense of authority over their work and the spaces in which it occurred. This is especially true of slave artisans, whose work was specialized enough to warrant their own craft shops and work stations where they would practice their unique skills.⁸⁸ Yet, depending on the talent, these spaces could see the manipulation of good workmanship into something very sinister. Enslaved blacksmiths often forged the very chains that chaffed the skin on members of their community or even their own children. Thus, even spaces that provided the joy and pride of good workmanship were tainted by the horrors of slavery. Storage structures were similarly duplicitous in nature; many storerooms were used to contain a

⁸⁶ Michael Strutt, "Slave Housing in Antebellum Tennessee," in *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery*, ed. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg (Yale University Press, 2010): 226.

⁸⁷ John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, 33.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, 83.

variety of property, occasionally including slaves. A storage structure at Melrose Plantation, Louisiana, notoriously doubled as the plantation's jail.⁸⁹

Another distinction worthy of note, is the contrast between stables and slave dwellings. Most stables well-built, roomy structures that outlasted many other outbuildings, like the poorly constructed log cabins that housed field hands. Chachan Plantation in Berkely County, South Carolina, was not just large but also sported curved Jacobean gables, lending it a distinguished air.

This disparity between efforts spent on architecture for beasts of the field and human beings was not uncommon, nor did it go unnoticed. In fact, in 1862, Edmund Kirke noted that stables at a plantation in South Carolina were “better built, warmer, more commodious, and in every way more comfortable than the shanties occupied by the human cattle of the plantation.” When questioning the master of the plantation as to whether “this architectural gesture meant that he valued his horses more than his slaves, the man replied: ‘That may be true. . . . Two of my horses are worth more than any eight of my slaves.’”^{90,91}

Living in such close quarters to their masters greatly hindered the ability of many African domestic slaves to live their own life, in many capacities. Without a space to call their own, they could not easily practice any familial, cultural or religious traditions to bolster their identities beyond belonging to a white family. Where this is the case, slaves

⁸⁹ John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, 85.

⁹⁰ Edmund Kirke, *Among the Pines: Or South in Secession-Time. By Edmund Kirke* (Carleton, 1863): 144.

⁹¹ John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, 111.

would often use the distance and time provided by errands to carry out their personal lives. In wooded areas around the plantation or house, “out of their masters’ view, slaves exchanged information, renewed ties to loved ones and friends, and occasionally kept alive African traditions through rituals.”⁹² But for those who were kept close to the mansion, it is possible they turned their focus inwards, using color as a way to physically manifest their identity.

Slave Cabins

Early slave houses in both the Caribbean and the North American colonies were constructed using impermanent materials. In the Danish West Indies (now the US Virgin Islands), most slave houses were wattle-and-daub cottages, covered by grass or sugarcane leaves.⁹³ Many of these structures were built by their occupants, and therefore, it is not uncommon to see the transference of African building traditions. A late eighteenth century painting of Mulberry Plantation in South Carolina depicts rows of “African” slave quarters, prompting Samuel Dyssle to comment “Carolina looks more like negro country than a country settled by white people.”⁹⁴ The idea of enslaved individuals deriving comfort from familiar forms probably did not occur to many slaveowners. These

⁹² Robert K. Fitts, “The Landscapes of Northern Bondage,” 208.

⁹³ William Chapman, “Slave Villages in the Danish West Indies,” 102.

⁹⁴ Carl Anthony, “The Big House and the Slave Quarters: African Contributions to the New World,” in *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery*, ed. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg (Yale University Press, 2010): 182.

meagre structures were simply a cheap and fast way to provide shelter to their field hands.⁹⁵



Figure M: Painting by Thomas Coram ca. 1770, Mulberry Plantation, South Carolina⁹⁶

Yet, relying on the oral tradition of something being called “African” can prove problematic. With a hipped roof overhanging masonry walls by nine feet on all sides, a structure exotically referred to as “African House” on Melrose Plantation, Louisiana demonstrates how oral tradition can cloud reality. Architectural research has revealed that this is not a foreign form but a local practice in that area.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, 166.

⁹⁶ Gibbes Museum of Art.

⁹⁷ John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, 85.

Numerous archaeological investigations have revealed seashell remnants at slave sites. This is largely attributed to the making of “tabby,” a burnt lime-and-shell aggregate used in walls and fences, which is also found in West Africa in a variety of construction types.⁹⁸ Similarly, the building traditions of wattle-and-daub and rammed earth used to build the many early slave huts are both construction methods found in West Africa.⁹⁹

In addition to the use of traditional materials, some evidence suggests an African influence in spatial design.¹⁰⁰ The Keswick Plantation slave quarters in Virginia are made from the same clay bricks as the main house, but the slave arranged them in a “circular structure with a large, triple-fluted central chimney some nine feet across at the base.”¹⁰¹ Such rounded architecture existed also in the Kasai Province in Zaire, now known as the Democratic Republic of Congo.

⁹⁸ Steven Jones, “The African-American Tradition in Vernacular Architecture,” *Journal of American Folklore* 107, no. 426 (1994): 199.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 200.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 201.



*Figure N: Keswick Plantation Slave Quarters*¹⁰²

Eventually, masters would dictate that slave structures should mimic the basic design and building methods of the main house, which meant that slaves were stripped of their building traditions while having their masters' cultural values thrust upon them through their physical environments.¹⁰³ The differences in architecture and design of slave housing was soon eradicated as plantation owners instructed their enslaved carpenters to use local building materials and traditions, resulting in many timber-framed, clapboard-sheathed, post-in-ground structures.¹⁰⁴ These were an improvement on the log cabins, which preceded the better-built framed structures. Indeed, prior to the nineteenth

¹⁰² John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, 56.

¹⁰³ Carl Anthony, "The Big House and the Slave Quarters: African Contributions to the New World," 180.

¹⁰⁴ Barbara Heath, "Space and Place within Plantation Quarters in Virginia, 1700-1825," 162.

century, most cabins built for the enslaved were of such poor quality that they were falling apart even as they were occupied.¹⁰⁵

Waldwic Plantation and its remaining slave quarter presents an unusually detailed example of how a slave space might be made to match the master's house. The slave quarter was a barn, converted to living quarters. As evidenced by the photos from 1935 below, during its conversion, particular effort was made to make the quarters match the main house. Though the reasons behind such a decision are not immediately clear, it is easy to interpret this representing the slaveowners desire to mark his territory. Though the latticework along the roof is a beautiful detail, it looks out of place and reminds the viewer of the master in the mansion, looking out and surveying his property both living and inanimate.

¹⁰⁵ John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, 156.



Figure O: Waldwic Mansion¹⁰⁶



Figure P: Waldwic slave quarters¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Alex Bush, "Historic American Building Survey," 1935.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

The newer, timber-framed cabins ranged in sizes, but were often single-room. In his travels through the south in the mid nineteenth century, Frederick Law Olmstead compared and recorded the variety found in these structures; he noted the largest cabins in Virginia and a decrease in size as he moved south.¹⁰⁸ Had he visited the Hermitage plantation in Georgia during the 1830s, he would have been surprised. The cabins there are single-room brick structures, an unusual material for housing slaves. This anomaly can be explained by the large brickworks on the estate, thus these more sturdy structures cost the owner no extra expense.¹⁰⁹



Figure Q: Brick slave cabins at Hermitage plantation, Georgia¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, 156.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid*, 158.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 174.

As only the most durable examples of slave cabins survive, it is important to realize that they only represent the best versions. Oral histories can help supplement this physical bias. Rose Holman, a former slave from Choctaw County, Mississippi recalled: “We lived in little log houses daubed wid mud an’ didn’t have no beds – slept on de ground on pallets. We eat out o’ troughs down at Marsa’s back doo’.”¹¹¹ Thus, we must be careful when considering the structures that still stand, since they might not represent reality.

Prompted by the abolitionist call for reform, plantation owners employed the new models for slave housing. These new models of construction were often limited to slave-owners in the upper echelons of society. Some built new quarters and moved the majority of their enslaved property into them, and others kept their workers in the cellars. Furthermore, while the housing conditions for slaves may have improved, these new quarters were often inhabited by groups of slaves who were unrelated, especially for field hands.¹¹² Yet, apologists for slavery promoted the idea of family-based housing as they believed it would provide stability within the slave community, but stronger familial ties also gave masters another means of control.¹¹³ Under the threat of being torn apart, families might be more compliant. Circa 1850, wealthy slaveholder, James C. Bruce, constructed brick quarters according to the hall and chamber form for his slaves at three

¹¹¹ George P. Rawick, Jan Hillegas, and Kenan Barrett Lawrence, *The American Slave: Indiana and Ohio Narratives* (Greenwood Press, 1977): 1037.

¹¹² Edward A. Chappell, “Accommodating Slavery in Bermuda,” 78.

¹¹³ Clifton Ellis, “Building for Our Family, Black and White: The Changing Form of the Slave House in Antebellum Virginia,” in *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery*, ed. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg (Yale University Press, 2010): 147.

of his Virginia plantations: Berry Hill, Staunton Hill and Morotock.¹¹⁴ Though more sturdy and humane than earlier slave housing, these spaces were designed and arranged to allow for the fluctuation of enslaved families according to the demands of the marketplace, as evidenced by the fluctuations of occupants as Bruce divvied his property among his sons.¹¹⁵ In the Aiken-Rhett and Nathaniel Russell Houses, similar fluctuations might be represented by the frequent changes of color within the stratigraphies, though such an investment into space for a temporary occupant is unlikely. Yet, for a transient slave, marking the walls of his or her room would create a sense of place in an environment where all spaces belonged to the master.

As the arrangement of domestic outbuildings in relation to the mansion reflected the power dynamics of a shared space, so too did the layout of slave cabins. At the beginning of the eighteenth century, overseers typically resided with the slaves and did not have their own spaces. However, as the number of slaves increased – by 1860 2,292 estates had over one hundred slaves each – so did the need for extra management. Located closer to the crops, slave cabins were often under the watchful eye of the overseer, who was in turn under the purview of the master.¹¹⁶ An overseer's house was typically better finished and had refinements such as glass windows. At James Bruce's Morotock, the overseer's home had trim molding around the windows and doors and a

¹¹⁴ Clifton Ellis, "Building for Our Family, Black and White: The Changing Form of the Slave House in Antebellum Virginia," 142.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 153.

¹¹⁶ John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, 136.

plastered garret.¹¹⁷ In direct contrast, most field hands' cabins were severely plain, often lacking proper insulation; according to some oral histories, many cabins were unfinished, without plaster or paint.¹¹⁸ Thus, the current interpretations of many slave spaces as plain or lacking in color may be accurate.

While paint color may not have been a common form of resistance, lifestyle and the use of the built environment was. Even in such a controlling setting as a cotton plantation, the enslaved found ways to resist. A former slave remembers the house she grew up in: "My ma never would have no board floor like de rest of 'em, on 'count she was a African—only dirt."¹¹⁹ Such a decision would likely not have perturbed the master, as he was spared from providing lumber for this cabin's floor. Similarly, some field laborers were afforded gardens, so that they did not have to be fed by the master. In addition to providing sustenance, these plots of lands gave slaves a sense of ownership, and the surplus of vegetation was sold. According to a former slave, "De only money de slaves ebber had wuz from selling de corn or tobaccy dey raised on de li'l patch dy had to wuk."¹²⁰ This gave them the means to furnish their cabins, with "simple beds, benches, and tables fashioned by slaves during their little bits of free time, together with a few

¹¹⁷ Clifton Ellis, "Building for Our Family, Black and White: The Changing Form of the Slave House in Antebellum Virginia," 151.

¹¹⁸ John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, 136, 139.

¹¹⁹ Norman R. Yetman, *Life Under the "Peculiar Institution": Selections from the Slave Narrative Collection Library of Congress* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970): 291.

¹²⁰ George P. Rawick, Jan Hillegas, and Kenan Barrett Lawrence, *The American Slave: Indiana and Ohio Narratives*, 1030.

cheap pictures and other trinkets.”¹²¹ These items furthered their sense of place in a landscape designed to treat them like outsiders.

Such was the slaveowner’s need for control that special attention was given to the visual presentation of cabins even if they were not readily visible. With regard to whitewashing slave cabins, one planter stated that “it adds very much to the neat and comfortable appearance of the buildings” and had a “cleansing and purifying effect, conducive to health.”¹²² Thus, the whitewashing of slave cabins was first for the owner’s pleasure and secondly for the benefit of the occupants. This demonstrates that cabins were intended to function as “shelters for people, who by definition, were not allowed to own homes.”¹²³ While the occupants of slave cabins found ways around their prescribed environment, it is unlikely that architectural finishes were a method they could employ.

It is important to note that the desire to practice African traditions continued after emancipation. In the 1930s, residents on St. Simons Island, off the coast of Georgia, recall a black man named Okra who hoped to build a home for himself reminiscent of one in Africa: “Ole man Okra say he wahn a place lak he hab in Africa so he buil im a hut.... But Massuh make im pull it down. He say he ain wahn no African hut on he place.”¹²⁴ Even when they had gained their freedom, some African-Americans were not allowed to embrace the cultural identity of which they had been stripped. Similarly, the use of

¹²¹ John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, 167.

¹²² James O. Breeden, *Advice Among Masters: The Ideal in Slave Management in the Old South* (Greenwood Press, 1980): 121.

¹²³ John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, 163.

¹²⁴ Georgia Writers’ Project, *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies Among the Georgia Coastal Negroes* (University of Georgia Press, 1986): 179.

certain spaces was still prohibited for southern black Americans in their work environments. Charles Dew, a Southern Historian who grew up in Virginia during Jim Crow, recalls that the older African-American couple that served his family had their own bathroom off the back porch, which was significantly less nice than the bathroom used by the family in the house.¹²⁵

The Archaeology of Slavery

Archaeological research reveals how slaves used African traditions to create sense of place in their new land and minimize the discomfort of interacting with an unfamiliar environment and society. Findings indicate that these interactions were most frequently defined by “ethnicity – African heritage and inherited cultural norms – and the restrictions of enslavement itself.”¹²⁶ Much like the historical documentation of slavery, the archaeology of areas and spaces occupied by slaves represent a range of experiences. This is apparent through the examination of slave settlements along the coast of Georgia: the slaves of very large plantation were found to have sparse material culture, but when compared to smaller plantations, “these slaves were found to have a higher standard of living indicating greater access to goods and services.”¹²⁷ This illustrates the hierarchy of

¹²⁵ Charles B. Dew, *The Making of a Racist: A Southerner Reflects on Family, History, and the Slave Trade* (University of Virginia Press, 2016): 36.

¹²⁶ Garrett Fesler, “Excavating the Spaces and Interpreting the Places,” in *Cabin, Quarter, Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery*, ed. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg (Yale University Press, 2010): 30.

¹²⁷ Sue Mullins Moore, “Social and Economic Status on the Coastal Plantation,” in *The Archaeology of Slavery and Plantation Life*, ed. Theresa Singleton (Left Coast Press, 2009): 157.

slavery, which is also seen when comparing domestic slaves to field hands.¹²⁸ Urban slaves were more exposed to white society and their values, plantation slaves were less so, allowing them to maintain what African traditions they could and create new ones when they could not.¹²⁹

Ironically, the most important African tradition was that of dancing. However, because the traces dancing leaves behind are often ephemeral much like finishes, it is often passed over in favor of tangible evidence. Yet, African scholars are quick to point out that, “to non-Africans, sculpture may well seem the greatest of the African traditional arts – because that is the art they most often see. But to Africans, the most important art is dancing. Dance fuses the two central concerns of African life: religion and community relationships.”¹³⁰

These community relationships thrived, even though their built environment was meant to subdue them. Enslaved Africans often resisted the restrictive aspects of their daily lives by incorporating or reinterpreting their own cultural customs where they could. For example, a shared central space is integral to communities in African cultures. As slave cabins and quarters were often cramped, “yards became important places for social, economic, and spiritual action within communities.”¹³¹ Slaves in America turned

¹²⁸ Frederick Lange and Jerome Handler, “The Ethnohistorical Approach to Slavery,” 22.

¹²⁹ Amy Friedlander, “Establishing Historical Probabilities for Archaeological Interpretations: Slave Demography of Two Plantations in the South Carolina Lowcountry, 1740-1820,” in *The Archaeology of Slavery and Plantation Life*, ed. Theresa Singleton (Left Coast Press, 2009): 216.

¹³⁰ Alice Eley Jones, “Sacred Places and Holy Ground,” in *Keep Your Head to the Sky: Interpreting African American Home Ground*, ed. Grey Gundaker and Tynes Cowan (University of Virginia Press, 1998): 101.

¹³¹ Barbara Heath, “Space and Place within Plantation Quarters in Virginia, 1700-1825,” 169.

took meticulous care of the yards around their cabins, much to the consternation of their masters.¹³² The keeping of a “swept yard” was a form of cultural resistance – slaves were affirming their identity “as someone other than a slave.”¹³³ Other evidence, such as the use of certain ceramics or particular methods of cooking, shows that cultural resistance was part of a slave’s daily life. Ethnobotanical analysis in Jamaica has suggested some slaves maintained their traditional diets. Ackee, a plant prominent in West Africa for its medicinal and dietary properties, has been found through archaeological investigations of slave quarters.¹³⁴

Within slave cabins or their surrounding yards, away from the masters’ view, many slaves dug subfloor pits. Archaeologists have examined these pits to determine if they fit within the context of African traditions, with many believing that they are “expressions of gender relationships and household composition, spirituality, economic and social ambitions, and strategies of health and well-being.”¹³⁵ This is clear through the another hypothesis, which asserts that these pits might have been more similar to safety-deposit boxes, a safe place for valuables.¹³⁶ Items purchased with money from the selling of vegetables might be placed in these pits as a safety precaution or items used for spiritual or religious ceremonies.

¹³² Garrett Fesler, “Excavating the Spaces and Interpreting the Places,” 32.

¹³³ Ibid, 45.

¹³⁴ Douglas Armstrong, “An Afro-Jamaican Slave Settlement,” in *The Archaeology of Slavery and Plantation Life*, ed. Theresa Singleton (Left Coast Press, 2009): 283.

¹³⁵ Barbara Heath, “Space and Place within Plantation Quarters in Virginia, 1700-1825,” 165.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 167.

There is the distinct possibility that these pits acted as portals or shrines, allowing access to ancestors; one of the main spiritual tenants of agrarian societies in West Africa was the ability of the ancestors to affect the living. To this day, West Africans and those of West African descent often fashion shrines within the privacy of their homes.¹³⁷ No matter what their use, these subfloor hollows were a way for slaves to exert ownership over their environment, shaping their environment “as both a mnemonic and a stage for reinterpreting their African identity in an alien world.”¹³⁸

Similarly, although evidence of finishes is limited, it seems likely that a similar expression of identity would have occurred in the interior finishes.

Colonoware, rough earthenware or ceramics created by the enslaved found in many slave settlements, is another common archaeological find that further attests to the possibility of the transference of African traditions. One example of colonoware is a “yabba” – a large bowl or pot, which represents part of a shared food preparation and eating practice, whose forms are derived from African potting practices.”¹³⁹ It is important to note that the presence of colonoware decreases substantially around 1800 in most archaeological investigations, and many mud-walled huts are replaced by post-constructed frame houses. Many scholars believe this to be the result of acculturation of slaves to their European-founded environs, largely by means of greater exposure through

¹³⁷ Barbara Heath, “Space and Place within Plantation Quarters in Virginia, 1700-1825,” 167.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

¹³⁹ Douglas Armstrong, “An Afro-Jamaican Slave Settlement,” 273.

the Revolutionary War.¹⁴⁰ Similarly, subfloor pits, though common from 1700-1760, become incredibly rare by 1830.¹⁴¹

On rare occasions, items from Africa have been found in slave spaces. On Barbados, archaeological investigations revealed a carnelian bead and an African pipe. These artifacts might have been produced in Africa and brought to the Caribbean, or made in Barbados using African practices.¹⁴² Even if the goods themselves did not survive the Atlantic passage, the skills required to make them did. Such groupings of artifacts are commonly found among burial sites, which demonstrate how mortuary patterns offer strong connections to African burial customs.¹⁴³

Cowry shells were used as decorations for clothing and hair, tools for divination and currency in West Africa. Many of these shells might have survived the Atlantic passage as beads on clothing or in the hair of enslaved individuals. It is important to note that many of the cowries found in the South were altered for the afore-mentioned functions, which suggests that the many shells found in these archaeological sites were not just collection items, but had specific uses.¹⁴⁴ Similarly, objects found at Jordan Plantation comprised a conjurer's kit, and "shaped and sanded fragments of eighteenth-century English earthenwares found at Poplar Forest, Thomas Jefferson's summer retreat"

¹⁴⁰ Thomas Wheaton and Patrick Garrow, "Acculturation and the Archaeological Record," in *The Archaeology of Slavery and Plantation Life*, ed. Theresa Singleton (Left Coast Press, 2009): 251.

¹⁴¹ Barbara Heath, "Space and Place within Plantation Quarters in Virginia, 1700-1825," 167.

¹⁴² Frederick Lange and Jerome Handler, "The Ethnohistorical Approach to Slavery," 24.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁴⁴ Patricia Samford, "The Archaeology of Afro-American Slavery and Material Culture," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (1996): 101.

appear to be gaming pieces.¹⁴⁵ Other forms of alteration include the carving or incising of ceramics or bones. Markings on objects found in a slave house near Louisville, Kentucky, are very similar to the West African Bakongo cosmogram.¹⁴⁶ In South Carolina, archaeological investigation unearthed many colonoware dishes with analogous patterns. It is believed that these bowls were used in ceremonies that can be traced back to West Africa through the mythology and religious beliefs associated with the markings.¹⁴⁷

The recovery of mouth harps and drum remnants may relate West African musical traditions. This would fit with many travelers descriptions of slavery, as many record festivals with music and dancing in addition to slaves singing as they carried out their work.¹⁴⁸ Looking glasses have also been identified in archaeological slave sites; many scholars believe that slaves of African extraction used glass's reflective surface much in the same way that they used bodies of water to represent the home of their deceased ancestors.¹⁴⁹ Shards of glass, buttons and cowry shells have been found in sites occupied by Afro-Americans post-slavery, demonstrating that African traditions continued well into the twentieth century.¹⁵⁰

Archaeological artefacts have occasionally been found within architecture. artefacts being found *within* architecture. At Stagville in North Carolina, workmen discovered a walking stick wedged between the original house and a 1779 addition built

¹⁴⁵ Patricia Samford, "The Archaeology of Afro-American Slavery and Material Culture," 104.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 110.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 109.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 110.

by the owner, Richard Bennehan.¹⁵¹ According to scholars, the stick was intended to bring evil spirits to the Bennehan family.¹⁵² Then in 1980, again at Stagville, a diving rod was found fastened to the brick noggin behind the wooden planks of the exterior wall of an 1851 slave cabin; this artifact, however, was meant to bring protection from the ancestors.¹⁵³ This custom of marking space with objects can also be seen through what many Europeans perceived as “trash.” The lack of access to goods, meant that those in bondage often had to use whatever they could find, to make their mark on the world. Broken tools, glass, bits of wood – slave yards and quarters were often littered with artefacts. Scholars have found that what appeared as hoarding tendencies to many white Americans, was in fact, slaves simply surrounding themselves “with objects that commemorated their abilities to survive.. and their link to the past.”¹⁵⁴ In short, a form of resistance.

Color and Architecture in Africa

When examining the possible transfer of architectural painting traditions from one continent to another, it is necessary to consider the origins of those traditions. The use of color for artistic expression in Africa dates to as early as 100,000 BCE.¹⁵⁵ Depictions on

¹⁵¹ Alice Eley Jones, “Sacred Places and Holy Ground,” 105.

¹⁵² Ibid, 102.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 106.

¹⁵⁴ Ywone D. Edwards, “‘Trash’ Revisited: Slave Houses and Yards,” in *Keep Your Head to the Sky: Interpreting African American Home Ground*, ed. Grey Gundaker and Tynes Cowan (University of Virginia Press, 1998): 270.

¹⁵⁵ Christa Clarke and Rebecca Arkenberg, *The Art of Africa: A Resource for Educators* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006): 37.

rocks and in caves can be found throughout the African continent. Additionally, paints have also been used on architecture in many different African cultures. In many cases, certain colors have symbolic value. This section will briefly look at two cultural groups in Africa and their uses of color or painting in their architecture.

In South Africa, the act of painting architecture is interwoven with Basotho identity as it is an ancient art-making tradition. Once the earthen structures are complete, paint is applied to either wet or dry plaster in “complex patterns, like engravings, or large areas of wall may be simply decorated with a solid color, creating a color field, usually accented with borders of contrasting color.”¹⁵⁶



Figure R: Basotho painted dwelling¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Gary Van Wyk, *African Painted Houses: Basotho Dwellings of Southern Africa*. (University of Mich.: Harry N. Abrams, 1998): 81.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 39.

The meanings behind prominent colors can be found through native terminology values. The indigenous term for red is letsoku, meaning blood of the earth, which implies water or rain; reminiscent of clouds, white can represent peace, happiness, innocence or good intentions.¹⁵⁸ By painting a home in these colors, the Bosocho are honoring their ancestors and invoking peace and rain for their community. The color black is less prevalent but no less meaningful and is the color of the ancestors and the dark rain clouds they bring.¹⁵⁹ Thus, color and paint play significant roles in the daily lives of the Bosocho people.

The painting of earthen architecture can also be found among the Gurensi people, who live in Ghana and Burkina Faso. The patterns and designs on their earthen architecture are smaller and more intricate than the Bosocho's. In this culture, patterns are more meaningful than colors, but there is an obvious preference for red and black, similar to the Bosocho.

¹⁵⁸ Gary Van Wyk, *African Painted Houses: Basotho Dwellings of Southern Africa*, 96.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 15.



*Figure 5: Gurensi wall painting*¹⁶⁰

Differences in the meaning of color and painted designs that might have been transferred to the United States during the slave trade naturally would have reflected regional traditions, especially those from West Africa and also East Africa, where the majority of slaves originated. Therefore, when looking at slave quarters in the United States, the original culture of the occupants needs to be identified in order to interpret certain colors. Tracing the genealogy of enslaved peoples is inherently difficult as they were largely treated as chattel and cultural identities were rarely recorded. In point of fact, “in most property inventories, slaves are listed after domestic possessions and just before the livestock.”¹⁶¹ Research directed at locating such inventories and records as

¹⁶⁰ Smith, Fred T. “Gurensi Wall Painting.” *African Arts*. 11, no. 4, (1978): 50.

¹⁶¹ John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, 164.

well as plantation owners' accounts of the purchase of their slaves offer the potential of yielding valuable information about the cultural origin of slaves.¹⁶²

Conclusions

The discussions and case studies above indicate that slavery was far from black and white in both the experience between slave and slave owner and the colors seen in slave quarters. The freedoms enjoyed by slaves ranged from slave owner to slave owner, making it difficult to make generalizations. However, most research indicates that, in some shape or form, slaves managed to reaffirm their identities as human beings with a homeland, religion and culture distinct from the people who now claimed to own them. This is evidenced by the wide range of archaeological artefacts and the architecture used in many of the early slave quarters, both of which were inspired by African traditions.

The unusual findings at the Aiken-Rhett and National Russell Houses are in contrast to the understanding that slave spaces were usually undecorated or unfinished. While some were purely utilitarian out of necessity or a lack of access to materials, the assumption that slaves sought “neither beauty nor comfort in their living quarters” but were “satisfied if their basic needs are taken care of in their accommodations” does not take their rich culture of self-expression into account.¹⁶³ Thus, it is possible that the cultural resistance seen through the archaeological and architectural evidence extended to

¹⁶² This research fell outside the time frame for this thesis.

¹⁶³ C. G. A. Oldendorp and Johann Jakob. Bossart, *C. G. A. Oldendorp's History of the Mission of the Evangelical Brethren on the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. Croix, and St. John*, (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Karoma Publishers, 1987): 221.

the interior of their living quarters by way of architectural finishes, though further research is needed to confirm this theory. The frequency of painting, variety of colors and the lack of coordination of colors between the mansion and slave quarters, suggest that these spaces were painted according to the tastes of the occupant. It is clear from the Bosotho and Gurensi that paint colors and patterns are imbued with meanings, but their symbolism is not representative of all African traditions. As Africa is a multicultural continent, the practices of color symbolism may vary widely; the cultures of Northern Africa with Islamic roots will most likely have very different uses of color than the indigenous populations south of the Sahara. For instance, in Islam the color green is significant due to its association with the Prophet Mohammed, while black is considered holy and modest.¹⁶⁴ Thus, the examination and comparison of each site's slaves and the practices of architectural color from their original cultures would provide more definitive conclusions as to the use of color as a form of resistance.

Evidence from the small number of case studies, although intriguing, are insufficient for drawing meaningful conclusions. Additionally, the poor state of preservation of the scarce extant slave structures seriously hinders an accurate understanding of finishes. While this area of study is hampered by the impermanence of many slave structures, the examination of a wider selection of slave dwellings is warranted while they still exist.

¹⁶⁴ Roland Michaud, *Design and Color in Islamic Architecture: Eight Centuries of the Tile-Maker's Art* (Vendome Press, 1996): 153.

Recommendations For Additional Research

Analysis of extant finishes at other slave dwellings offer the opportunity to expand upon this research. The author specifies eight other sites that may provide valuable material evidence for understanding the lives of slaves by future researchers. The first of these is the attic of the John Dickenson Plantation in Dover, Delaware, where the walls appear to have been originally white washed. In North Carolina's Durham County, Historic Stagville's four brick houses with whitewashed walls were inhabited by enslaved families dating from the 1850s and may contain evidence of original finishes. The nineteenth century slave quarter of McCollum Farm in Rockingham County, North Carolina, appears to be constructed of bare logs with perhaps some vestiges of whitewash. Examining the finishes there may also be warranted. The antebellum Riverlake Plantation in Louisiana has its original slave cabins, a rare occurrence given estimates that place the number of surviving cabin between forty and fifty.¹⁶⁵ These two structures, known as the Cherie Quarters Cabins, may contain vestiges of original finishes. In 2011, Macleod Plantation near Charleston, South Carolina, carried out paint analysis of their slave quarters' exterior finishes, which revealed a layer of whitewash. However, charred substrate indicates that burning might have been used as a method paint preparation. Small remnants of paint may still be found upon further investigation, and the interior was not examined at all.¹⁶⁶ The slave cabin at Kent Plantation seems to be

¹⁶⁵ "Cherie Quarters Cabins," National Parks Service, accessed April 29, 2018. <https://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/louisiana/che.htm>.

¹⁶⁶ Frances Ford, "McLeod Plantation Exterior Finishes Report," Charleston County Parks, 13. PDF Accessed April 29, 2018. <https://www.ccprc.com/DocumentCenter/View/5406>.

the only cabin which currently interprets its finishes as inspired African culture. Finished in brownish-red shades, the museum’s website states: “Among slave beliefs was one that evil spirits could be kept at bay by painting the windows, doors and porch timbers this color.”¹⁶⁷ However, when speaking with the staff, it became clear that no analysis has been done to determine whether this color is original, and the “slave belief” is an oral tradition.¹⁶⁸



Figure T: Kent Plantation Slave cabin: brownish-red timbers lining porch¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷ “Slave Cabin,” Kent Plantation House, accessed April 29, 2018. <http://www.kenthouse.org/slave-cabin.html>.

¹⁶⁸ Alice Scarborough, e-mail message to author, February 27, 2018.

¹⁶⁹ “Slave Cabin,” Kent Plantation House, accessed April 29, 2018. <http://www.kenthouse.org/slave-cabin.html>.



Figure U: Kent Plantation Slave cabin: brownish red finishes on window and door frames¹⁷⁰

Finally, the San Francisco Plantation House in Garyville, Louisiana, is renowned for its opulent appearance and rich colors. As much of this architectural work was performed by slaves, it is likely that the plantation’s slave quarters and school house might still have evidence of finishes, despite a recent restoration.¹⁷¹

The finishes analysis of these sites would provide more context for the existing studies and further our understanding of slavery’s interior. Naturally, this analysis would be more useful if carried out in conjunction with the architectural investigation of the spaces and an examination of any and all records pertaining to the slaves that lived there. By combining slave quarters’ finishes analysis with a review of the historic record, the

¹⁷⁰ “Slave Cabin,” Kent Plantation House, accessed April 29, 2018. <http://www.kenthouse.org/slave-cabin.html>.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

research would be focused on the slave's perspective. As the majority of slavery's history was not written by enslaved persons themselves, this comprehensive approach would provide a new and much needed perception of slavery and its built environment from within the institution.¹⁷² The completion of this research is challenged by the fact that not every historical site has extensive documentation of their slaves. Moreover, they often do not have the funding required to carry out in-depth material analysis of these spaces, because they are rarely interpreted. Joseph McGill, architectural historian at Magnolia Plantation in Charleston, South Carolina, believes that a national sense of shame prevents the interpretation and preservation of many slave sites. What little money historic sites manage to obtain goes to areas included in public tours.¹⁷³ A shift in the appreciation and understanding of the significance of slave spaces is necessary to make further research and analysis possible for these sites. By traveling to plantation slave cabins and mansion attics and spending the night in these slave quarters through the Slave Dwelling Project, Mr. McGill hopes to challenge the accepted narrative and "deliver the message that the people who lived in these structures were not a footnote in American history."^{174,175}

The need for further research in this area of study and the analysis of existing sites with a focus on the slave's perspective becomes increasingly important with every

¹⁷² Walter B. Hill, "Living with the Hydra: The Documentation of Slavery and the Slave Trade in Federal Records," 250.

¹⁷³ Slave quarters in attics and basements are also often left off public tours due to issues of access and fire codes, while quarters separate from the main house often serve as storage or gift shops as was the case at the Nathaniel Russell House slave quarters prior to its investigation.

¹⁷⁴ "Home," The Slave Dwelling Project, accessed April 29, 2018. <http://slavedwellingproject.org/>.

¹⁷⁵ Joseph McGill, e-mail message to author, February 27th, 2018.

passing day. In today's social and political climate, black representation has become a subject of much discussion and sensitivity. Advances in representing minorities and marginalized sectors of society in understanding the past can be seen in museums, historic sites, etc. Nationally significant sites like Monticello, Mount Vernon Montpelier are now developing or conducting archaeological research to further their understanding of the slaves who enabled three men to become Presidents of the United States. Slave spaces are receiving more attention, but are still often overlooked.

With the recent controversies over confederate monuments, the renaissance of African pride through blockbuster films like "Black Panther," and the increasing pressure to present black history with movements such as Black Lives Matter, Mr. McGill's project makes an important contribution to understanding and presenting black history through the eyes of the enslaved. His work is part of a rising tide of change. Black History Month sheds light on the stories that have been long overshadowed by white historical characters, ethnic diversity in the United States Congress is at an all-time high and research into black life, history and culture is finally being promoted in social studies by the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.^{176,177} All of these departures from the past have contributed to learning more about black history. But there is still much work to be done. Research suggests that some black Americans in rural parts of the South continued to suffer the brutalities of antebellum slavery up till the 1960s, such as

¹⁷⁶ Kristen Bialik and Jens Manuel Krogstad, "115th Congress Sets New High for Racial, Ethnic Diversity." Pew Research Center, January 24, 2017. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/24/115th-congress-sets-new-high-for-racial-ethnic-diversity/>.

¹⁷⁷ LaGarrett J. King, "The Status of Black History in U.S. Schools and Society," *Social Education*, 81 no. 1 (2017): 14.

being prevented from leaving the farms on which they lived.¹⁷⁸ The legacy of slavery is still palpable today through institutional racism, but there is a national lack of understanding, which can be traced to miseducation.¹⁷⁹

Perhaps the timeline of slavery will be redefined, greatly expanding the number of sites associated with that peculiar institution, and the interpretation of these sites will bolster our country's understanding of slavery. Moreover, as climate change and neglect threaten our vulnerable historic properties and poor documentation of their existence at one time, there is no time to waste; the already fragile finishes of neglected spaces will not survive for long.¹⁸⁰

Luckily, for Isabell Meggett Lucas who was born and raised in the Point of Pines Plantation slave cabin, the elements no longer threaten the chipped paint on its walls or the newspapers plastered over gaps. Although it was not built to last, her former home will stand in the National Museum of African American History and Culture for years to come. Seeing her birthplace installed in national center for education, brought back memories of her family and parents: "I don't think that [my parents] ever thought that they lived in a slave cabin. I don't think that. I think that that was they home, and they felt

¹⁷⁸ Rafi Letzter, "Blacks Were Enslaved Well Into the 1960s." February 28, 2018. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/437573/blacks-were-enslaved-well-into-the-1960s.

¹⁷⁹ Melinda Anderson, "What Kids Are Really Learning About Slavery," *The Atlantic*, Accessed April 29, 2018. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2018/02/what-kids-are-really-learning-about-slavery/552098/>.

¹⁸⁰ Michelle L. Berenfeld, "Climate Change and Cultural Heritage: Local Evidence, Global Responses," *The George Wright Forum* 25, no. 2 (2008): 68.

comfortable there, and they felt happy there."¹⁸¹ For Mrs. Lucas, this building was not just a remnant of the harsh reality of slavery or a learning opportunity for those who deny the far reaching consequences of racism. It was her home and her memories will be forever colored by the blue paint and newspaper print on the walls. Only by furthering the research into the African slave experience through scholarship and material preservation, can Mrs. Lucas and others like her fully comprehend how their ancestors survived enslavement by using their traditional practices to maintain their identity as more than just a white man's property.

¹⁸¹ Ari Shapiro, "Woman Returns to Her Slave Cabin Childhood Home In The Smithsonian." *All Things Considered*, National Public Radio, 14 April 2017. Transcript.

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