

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This research was designed to focus on what was recognized as a relatively small site producing a rather vague assemblage of primarily eighteenth century remains. We believed, based on the assemblage present, as well as the location of the site, that it represented the dwelling of an overseer.

Historical Conclusions

This project provided the impetus for a far more detailed exploration of eighteenth century overseers than has been available previously. While we found that the historical accounts and documents are sparse, it is nevertheless possible to reconstruct a view of the eighteenth century overseer. More complex and variable than many historians would have us accept, these individuals were living on a razor-thin line between polite white society and that of the African American slaves they oversaw.

At least a few historians have suggested that the cultural assemblage typical of these eighteenth century overseers would be Spartan, even impoverished. And some have suggested that this might well lead to a range of interactions between overseer and slave – the creation of a symbiotic relationship.

This study provides the first detailed analysis of newspaper advertisements for overseers, helping us to better understand what at least a portion of the planter elite felt were the critical characteristics of a “good” overseer. And we have these reinforced by at least a few period letters and accounts. We see that overseers were, in general, poorly paid (especially for the responsibility they possessed) and that much of

their pay might well have been provided in foodstuffs and alcohol – non-durable items that would leave little evidence in the archaeological record.

While we have a clearer view of the eighteenth century overseer and can better understand the origin of the nineteenth century overseer stereotype, there remain many unaddressed questions. For example, did eighteenth century overseers come largely from England as yeoman farmers, from out of state as yeoman farmers, or elsewhere (we tend to reject the idea that a significant proportion can from the ranks of the planters)? What was their social status prior to being overseers? How were the different classes of overseers related and how often were they employed? In fact, how often were overseers used to fulfill the requirements of South Carolina law that a white be on the plantation? And were overseers more commonly used by one “type” of owner as opposed to another?

Addressing these questions will be difficult, but not impossible. We have identified a number of resources that can be used to identify specific individuals who served as overseers. Additional research specific to these individuals, tracking down their introduction to Carolina and their presence in various parish records will provide the information to address at least a few of these questions.

In spite of this, it seems that our best understanding of eighteenth century overseers may come not from historic documents, but rather from the remains that these individuals left behind. And that brings us to our focus on the archaeological remains.

Archaeological Results

Archaeological investigations revealed no clear archaeological footprint, although artifacts were found clustered tightly in one area that also exhibited a clear brick concentration. We discovered that there were nearly equal quantities of European ceramics and African American Colono wares. When this proportion was examined more closely we noted that it lay midway between what we see at eighteenth century slave sites and eighteenth century planter structures. Moreover, the proportions are duplicated by other eighteenth century sites that have clear overseer links. Consequently, we believe that the proportions of Colono and European wares may be one key to the identification of overseer sites.

We found that the European collection was dominated by lower status ceramics - wares such as slipware and delft, with a very low incidence of porcelains or white salt-glazed stonewares. In other words, we found indicators of a plebian table; even the vessel forms - with over two-thirds representing hollow wares - are characteristic of a common person's table, one-pot stews, and other simple fares. Even the small assemblage of tea wares does not change the overall impression of the assemblage as being that of a yeoman farmer, not a wealthy planter.

When the remainder of the collection is considered, for example using South's pattern approach, we see distinct differences between this collection and that of both slaves and masters. For example, this collection has an exceedingly low architectural contribution, similar to slave collections, but the modestly high activities contribution and the very high tobacco contribution set it apart.

When the assemblage is compared to the previously documented overseer collection from the Mazyck settlement in Goose Creek (Trinkley et al. 2003a) there are differences - for example at the Mazyck overseer site there was a lower incidence of kitchen artifacts and a higher

incidence of architectural remains. This, however, can be easily attributed to the presence of a somewhat clearer archaeological footprint - lacking at the Belle Hall site perhaps through years of cultivation. Nevertheless, the Mazyck and Belle Hall sites are similar to their high ratios of activity-related items and tobacco remains.

These archaeological remains support the historic documentation (and speculation), helping to support the idea that eighteenth century overseers were in constant competition with slaves for scarce resources, had very few material possessions, had very few opportunities to add material possessions, and had close interaction with their slave populations at a variety of levels. While these conclusions can be criticized for being based on sparse evidence, what is more regrettable is that often these seemingly small, inconsequential sites are ignored or missed in archaeological study. Without an intensified effort to identify, and study, these sites our understanding of eighteenth century overseers will remain rudimentary and one-dimensional.