#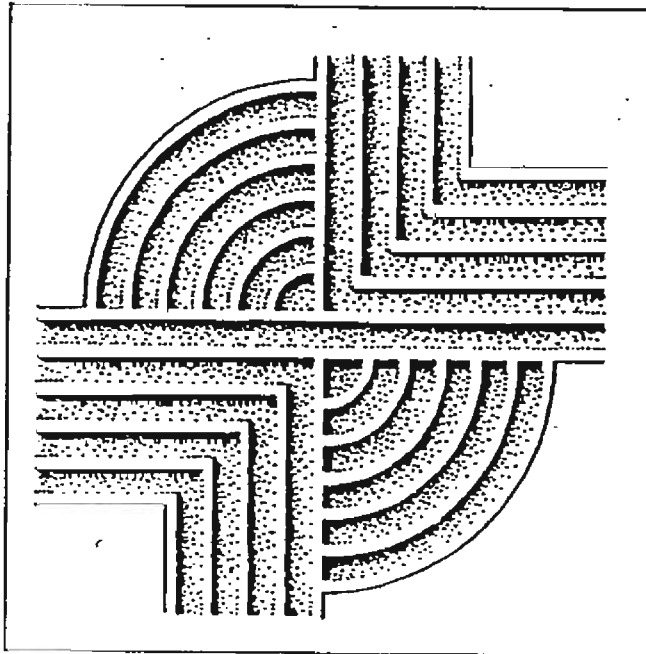 THE LIFESTYLE OF FREEMEN AT MITCHELVILLE, HILTON HEAD ISLAND: EVIDENCE OF A CHANGING PATTERN OF AFRO-AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL VISIBILITY

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION 21

THE LIFESTYLE OF FREEDMEN AT MITCHELVILLE, HILTON HEAD ISLAND: EVIDENCE OF A CHANGING PATTERN OF AFRO-AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGICAL VISIBILITY

Michael Trinkley

Chicora Research Contribution 21

In 1964 Willie Lee Rose wrote her masterful, award winning historical study entitled, **Rehearsal for Reconstruction: The Port Royal Experiment**. In the Introduction to that study, C. Vann Woodward commented that the events on South Carolina's Sea Island from 1861 to about 1868 offered "a rare opportunity to review the vast spectacle [of Reconstruction] in miniature and see it in its germinal phase" (Woodward in Rose 1964:xi). Rose reviewed the politics, philosophy, and personalities behind Southern Secessionism, the fall of the Sea Islands, and then carefully recounted the course of military and civilian actions which either intentionally or unintentionally affected the black population of the area. Rose is one of the few historians to examine Sea Island black culture during this important period of transition from slavery to freedom (see also McGuire 1985 and Williamson 1965). Herbert Gutman notes that,

> [e]mancipation altered the social circumstances in which southern blacks, former slaves, lived. But emancipation did not radically transform the culture of the enslaved. It is therefore possible to examine the behavior of the recently emancipated and learn about the beliefs and values they held during enslavement. From this evidence we can also learn much about the adaptive capacities of enslaved Afro-Americans (Gutman 1981:140).

The same situation is found in the archaeological literature. While there are abundant studies of slave archaeology (e.g., Ascher and Fairbanks 1971; Drucker and Anthony 1979; Fairbanks 1972, 1984; Orser 1984; Otto 1984; Singleton 1980; Wheaton et al. 1983), the study of postbellum blacks is in its formative stage and freedmen archaeology is characterized by the single study on Colonel's Island by Theresa Singleton (1978, 1985). Obviously, as suggested by Gutman for historians, archaeologists could profitably study black culture both during slavery and immediately after emancipation to better understand the entire nature of Afro-American adaptive responses.

I certainly do not intend to imply that archaeologists have uniformly ignored the need to study freedmen and the associated changes in black culture. One obvious problem is that many, if not most, postbellum black freedmen sites are also antebellum black slave sites. Pat Garrow (personal communication 1987) has noted that it is very difficult, perhaps even impossible, to understand black culture change by examining such mixed sites. A possible solution may be the use of the South Carolina Land Commission records to identify and guide research into postbellum black settlements in the Sea Islands (see Bleser 1969). Recently, however, Chicora Foundation was presented with the opportunity, through the auspices of The Environmental and Historical Museum of Hilton Head Island, to examine an intact portion of the Mitchelville freedmen's village (38BU805) on the north end of Hilton Head Island, in Beaufort County, South Carolina.

Mitchelville, established by the Union army for contraband blacks after Hilton Head Island's fall in November 1861, is an integral, although obscure, aspect of the "Port Royal Experiment." Mitchelville, an "experiment in citizenship" designed by General O.M. Mitchel, was radically different from the other military camps established in the Port Royal region. It was developed as an actual town, with neatly arranged (and named) streets, 1/4-acre lots, a town supervisor and councilmen elected by the black residents, laws regulating sanitation and community behavior, and a compulsory education law -- perhaps the first in the South. Period accounts describe individualist structures (each house was built by its occupants, not by the military), garden plots behind the houses, and about 1500 inhabitants by 1865 (Coffin 1866:231-232; National Archives, RG 105, Monthly Report of Lands; Nordhoff 1863:11). There are also accurate maps of the village (although the census cannot be located) and a series of photographs taken in 1864 by Samuel A. Cooly.

After 1867 there is evidence that the village continued relatively unaltered and intact into the early 1870s. The economy of its inhabitants, however, turned away from the declining wage labor opportunities and returned to an agrarian base -- the inhabitants entering the sizable "black yeomanry" class. Sometime in the early 1880s Mitchelville ceased being a true village and became a small, kin-based community. This community apparently continued into the early twentieth century, based on the nucleated settlement observed on the 1920 Hilton Head topographic map. This settlement, as could be predicted from Rose (1964:407), was centered around a church.

The historical accounts of Mitchelville are useful not only because they provide an interesting, if not altogether clear view of freedmen lifestyle, but also because they offer an opportunity to more clearly focus our archaeological study. Based on the historical record we are able to formulate certain archaeological expectations which serve as topics for further study.

Of particular importance, there is no evidence of antebellum occupation at Mitchelville -- the only archaeological patterns present are those of the black freedmen. In addition, although occupation into the twentieth century was anticipated based on the historical accounts, our work found almost no evidence of occupation past the late 1880s. The archaeological study of the site has yielded a large quantity of remains -- over 25,000 artifacts -- which provide a detailed, yet preliminary reconstruction of the freedmen's lifestyle. At least four structures were examined, one intensively by the excavation of 950 square feet. Over 2000 square feet in different areas of the Mitchelville village were excavated.

While there was no antebellum occupation at Mitchelville, which was a cotton field prior to the village's establishment, there are numerous antebellum artifacts in the collections. The bulk of these "early" specimens are high status items, such as fancy jewelry, furniture hardware, lead crystal, silver utensils, fancy buttons, and transfer printed ceramics, which are found in an area of the site identified as the "village dump."

This area, adjacent to the marsh bluff, was used to dispose of trash during the military occupation period from 1862 to 1867. It was during these first six years of Mitchelville's occupation that the bulk of the high status items, probably obtained from plantation houses, were broken and discarded. Although some high status or early items are found throughout the examined site areas, nowhere else is there such a pronounced concentration.

One way in which historical archaeological collection have traditionally been examined is through an analysis of the artifact patterns, a technique developed by South (1977). The patterns in the archaeological record are thought to reflect cultural processes and can assist in delimiting distinct site types. While I am aware of the problems with this analytical technique and with its application, it is still useful to examine the Mitchelville collection from this perspective.

The largest structurally specific collection at Mitchelville comes from the 161-162 Block, where a well constructed structure was dated to 1869.3 using South's (1977) mean ceramic date (this is only 1.7 years older than the mean historic date for the village). This structure, which produced almost 16,000 artifacts, evidences a pattern in which the Kitchen Group accounts for 41.0% of the artifacts and the Architecture Group accounts for 54.2%. Furniture is 0.6%, Arms are 0.3%, Clothing is 1.0%, Personal is 0.1%, Tobacco is 0.6%, and the Activities Group accounts for 2.2% of the specimens. If specimens from the three other examined structures are included, increasing the total artifact count to over 20,000 specimens, the percentages change very little. The Architecture Group is still dominant, accounting for 57.0% of the collection, followed by the Kitchen Group at 36.8%.

This artifact pattern may be compared with those of the Revised Carolina Artifact Pattern (Garrow 1982; South 1977), the Carolina Slave Artifact Pattern (Garrow 1982; Wheaton et al. 1983), the Revised Frontier Pattern (Garrow 1982; South 1977), the Georgia Slave Artifact Pattern (Singleton 1980), and the Tenant/Yeoman Farmer Artifact Pattern (Drucker et al. 1984). It is not surprising that the data from Mitchelville are similar to the synthesis of piedmont postbellum tenant and yeoman farmer sites. Of greater importance, although no more surprising, is that the Mitchelville pattern is situated midway between the polar extremes of the Carolina Artifact Pattern and the Georgia Slave Pattern. This suggests that the Mitchelville residents, as freedmen, were considerably better off, materially, than they were as slaves, although they clearly did not attain the lifestyle of the antebellum planter.

It would be useful to compare the pattern analysis from Mitchelville with that from nearby slave sites, such as those excavated by Larry Lepionka at Dataw, Callawassie, and Daufuskie islands. While most of this work has unfortunately never been published, Ramona Grunden (1985) does offer some very informative preliminary patterns from three black settlements on Dataw Island. One, with a mean ceramic date of 1856, is a slave settlement; another, with a mean ceramic date of 1860, is a slave

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settlement with very limited postbellum occupation; and the third is a postbellum settlement spanning the last half of the nineteenth century and first quarter of the twentieth century. The slave site exhibits a pattern very similar to the Coastal Georgia Slave Artifact Pattern (Kitchen Artifacts account for 18.1% of the assemblage and Architectural Artifacts account for 78.8% of the assemblage). The site which suggests some limited postbellum occupation exhibits a jump in Kitchen Artifacts, as well as both Clothing and Personal Artifacts, although the Tobacco Artifacts decline. The final site, which appears to represent a black yeoman farmstead, reveals almost equal proportions of Kitchen (47.7%) and Architectural (49.4%) Artifacts, with a noticeable drop in Clothing and Personal Artifacts. These data tend to support the evidence from Mitchelville, while further suggesting that outside the village, life among the rural yeoman farmers may have been harsher.

These artifact pattern analyses, however, may serve to obscure, rather than elucidate, some aspects of the Afro-American lifestyle. For example, Amy Friedlander (personal communication 1987) has suggested that the practice by archaeologists of including beads, which were worn by the slaves and freedmen as jewelry, in the Clothing Group rather than in the Personal Group with other items of decorative jewelry, tends to skew our understanding of black personal adornment. Simply shifting beads from the Clothing to the Personal Group for the Mitchelville sample tends to increase the quantity of personal artifacts to a level equal to that typical of the Revised Carolina Artifact Pattern.

Similarly, small pieces of twisted copper wire and miscellaneous fragments of cut copper and brass are routinely included in the Activities Group, under the subheading of "Miscellaneous Hardware." Yet, there are numerous accounts of the Sea Island blacks from the early twentieth century using twisted copper as bracelets for both personal adornment and for good luck. One account notes that "his wrists and arms were encircled by copper wire strung with good luck charms," while another states that "around his ankles were two brass wires, which helped to take the pain out of his legs" (Georgia Writers' Project 1986:20-21, 191, see also 3, 7, 78, and 92). If these possibly decorative items are removed from the Activities Group and placed in the Personal Group then the percentage of Personal artifacts increases noticeably. In fact, a conservative estimate would place the Personal Group accounting for about 0.3% of the 161-162 Block collection.

Viewed as a total complex, jewelry may provide insight on a significant Afro-American trait. The freedmen's use of personal adornment may be analyzed at several levels of meaning. At one level the blacks may have been mimicking the "master class," adopting and exaggerating traits they observed among the plantation whites. The adoption of these traits may have assisted the freedmen to distance themselves from the experience of slavery. At another level, however, the use of jewelry (and perhaps even specific items) may be a retention of an earlier tradition similar to the survivals of Colono ware (Ferguson 1980) and black naming practices (Gutman 1976). The survival

studies by the Georgia Writers' Project of the WPA suggest that many of these jewelry items were related to magic or supernatural protection. If, as I believe, there is an increase in personal artifacts from slavery to freedom, it may indicate that there were accompanying psychological stresses or perhaps increasing freedom to practice African rituals.

There are additional differences in the assemblages expected of slaves and those found at Mitchelville. Tobacco pipes, previously supplied by the slave owner as part of the ration, may account for up to 9.7% of the artifact pattern on Georgia coastal slave sites, yet they account for only 0.6 to 0.7% of the Mitchelville assemblage. Obviously, this does not necessarily indicate that the use of tobacco declined, but perhaps only that the breakage and discard of kaolin tobacco pipes decreased. Similarly, calomel medicine vials are less common at Mitchelville than they are at many Georgia coastal slave sites. While freedom may have promoted better living and working conditions, and hence less need for medicine, it seems as likely that other purchases or other forms of medicine were given a higher priority. Indeed, there are a number of patent medicine bottles found in Mitchelville.

Another technique useful in the examination of the freedmen's lifestyle is the application of George Miller's (1980) ceramic index values to the collection. This technique provides information on the economic value of the ceramic assemblage, which, at least in theory, will provide information on the economic position of the source household. The index values for the 161-162 Block structure yield the very low indices of 1.00 to 1.29. In addition, there is strong archaeological and historical evidence to support the use of considerable quantities of tinware at Mitchelville. Miller (1980:10) notes that tinware was lower in price than even plain CC ware. It seems clear that for whatever reason -- economics, culture, choice, or ethnicity -- the freedmen were not spending their money on fancy tablewares.

If the ceramics present in the 161-162 Block are examined by shape and function, then tablewares predominate, accounting for 67.4% of the collection. Tea and coffeeware account for 21.7% of the collection, and the remaining 10.9% is identified as utilitarian and storage vessels. Of the tablewares, 58.1% are plate forms. The abundance of tablewares, of course, is typical of Otto's (1984:68-69) slave pattern, although the relatively high proportion of plate forms is more typical of the overseer pattern and suggests that food preparation and serving habits were beginning to change among the freedmen.

When the artifacts of Mitchelville are viewed as an entire assemblage, it becomes clear that the freedmen were actively participating in a cash economy and were beginning to purchase (or otherwise acquire) higher status goods than they previously owned. Although the assemblage reflects a prevailing poverty which continued to typify black farmers and tenants into the twentieth century, there is no evidence that the slave artifact pattern was simply transported into freedom. Our understanding of the

economic well-being of the Mitchelville blacks must also be tempered by the historic accounts. The wholesale cost of items shipped by New York suppliers to Mitchelville store owners (prior to the addition of the retail profit) was from 108% to 557% higher in price than identical goods bought on the New York market and shipped by the American Missionary Association. The wholesale Mitchelville prices are also 105% to 308% higher than the retail prices charged Louisiana freedmen at plantation stores under the careful scrutiny of the Freedmen's Bureau (Seagrave 1975:118-119). It is probable that the Mitchelville blacks would have been more prosperous had it not been for profiteering by the merchants.

Otto (1984:171-175), based on excavations at a number of antebellum slave and free black house sites, has suggested a tentative pattern of "Afro-American archaeological visibility."
Certain of those indicators, such as blue faceted beads, continue to be found at the postbellum freedmen site of Mitchelville. Other indicators, such as the dominance of banded and edged wares or the occurrence of calomel bottles, are not found. There is clear evidence of a shift in the "Afro-American archaeological visibility," with both greater quantity and a greater variety of personal goods, an increase in the quantity of flatware ceramics, a decrease in the occurrence of kaolin tobacco pipes, and an increase in the use of proprietary medicines.

The archaeological record at Mitchelville suggests that the freedmen may have chosen to distance themselves from some slave practices, such as the manufacture of Colono ware ceramics. Other practices, however, were being kept alive. There is archaeological evidence of basket making, providing continuity from the earlier slave tradition, brought from Africa, to the craft promoted by the Penn Center during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In addition, it is possible that some practices, such as personal decoration, may not only have increased, but may also have taken on additional meanings.

Further archaeological work, at both black freedmen and at lower class Euro-American sites, is needed to distinguish between race and class. While there are certainly cultural traits found among all poor peoples, it seems likely that some aspects of the Mitchelville freedmen pattern will be characteristic of a changing pattern of Afro-American archaeological visibility.

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