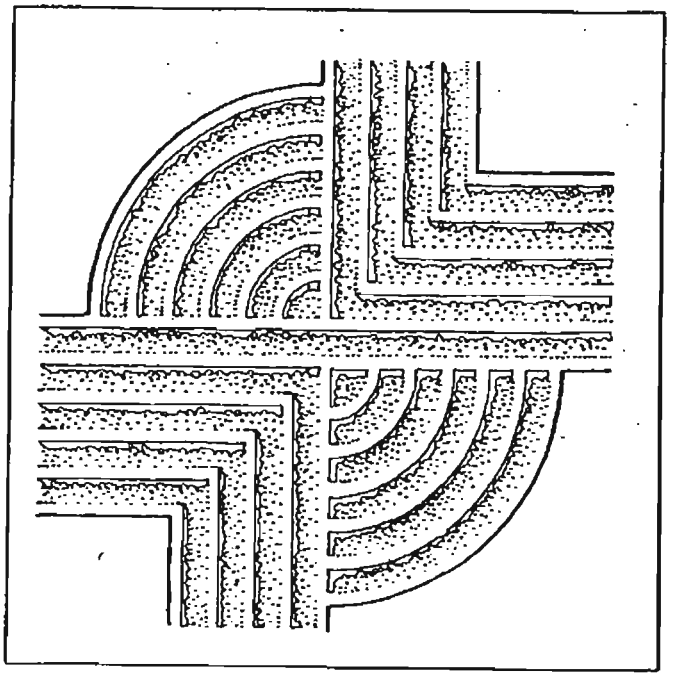
PLANTATION ARCHITECTURE: THE LOST ARTIFACT



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An examination of archaeological research from South Carolina over the past five years reveals exceptionally few studies of main plantation houses, or more importantly, plantation complexes. Of course, some of the bias against main house or upper status archaeology is the result of asking very simplistic questions. As Amy Friedlander (1991:--) has said, "it is already well known that the rich lived better than the poor" and one wonders how much further demonstration the topic requires. More appropriate as a goal for archaeology than highly particularistic studies are those which combine, as Singleton (1991) suggests, humanistic and scientific analysis in order to understand the nature of plantation life and labor.

From this perspective the "main house" becomes a telling artifact in its own right, illuminating a wide range of issues relating to the diffusion of technologies, capital investment, shifts in economic climate, division of labor, the movement of manufactured products, and available manual skills -- issues central to plantation regimes operating amidst geographically isolated areas such as the South Carolina Sea Islands.

Kelso (1979) has opened discussion on the building process of plantations, focusing upon the evolution and technology of tabby. In particular, this focus upon construction offers a dynamic picture underscoring the particular environmental and geographical circumstances besetting the coastal planter who was often forced to devise structural systems for which no local precedent existed. Our own work has followed Kelso's lead, linking building methods with the ever-present factors of distance and isolation, with the harboring and expenditure of resources, whether these be of a material or human kind. We see modes which maximize limited skills, patterns of reuse, and co-existing traditions of building processing, long antecedents, and patterns which break fundamentally with traditional formal solutions. Indeed, when it comes to the Sea Islands, it is possible to sense through their buildings that these might be like other more distant islands, which, as Fernand Braudel has so eloquently said, are "both far ahead and far behind the general history . . . brutally divided between the opposite poles of archaism and innovation" (Braudel ----:--).

Another approach to local plantation archaeology stems from humanistic disciplines which many archaeologists tend to dismiss as being unscientific at best and woefully unquantifiable at worst. Yet as George Kubler (----) amply demonstrated for Central and Latin America, the critical apparatus which art and architectural historians have developed can crystallize our perceptions regarding

the more intangible factors molding the built environment of Colonial or immediately post-Colonial societies.

As an example, over fifty years ago Samuel Gaillard Stoney (----) observed in his Plantations of the Carolina Low Country, that around the time of the American Revolution there developed what he called "definite schools" in plantation architectural design. One group of houses is of particular interest since, to quote Stoney, "these attempted to give with some architectural distinction more and better spaces for windows and the cross ventilation so necessary to comfort in the low country" (Stoney ----:---). Unlike their compactly planned precursors, utilizing what Vlach called that perennial standby of folk housing, the central or through hall, buildings belonging to this group assumed linear and fragmented qualities in their planning and massing.

Perhaps the best known example of a linearly conceived house is Hampton in Georgetown County, where about 1768 a conventional, central hall dwelling (built about 1730), containing four rooms at first level, was enlarged by the simple expedient of adding new rooms right and left. The solution altered the original circulation pattern, requiring that new rooms be reached off the existing central space by way of the old rooms now partially enclosed by fresh construction.

On Spring Island in Beaufort County, needs for more living space were met in different ways. Here an existing tabby built house underwent enlargement by the addition of two flanking tabby wings. These were arranged to produce a "U" shaped configuration, screen walls and open porches linking new and old construction. Circulation between the three separate building masses was externalized by the porches -- an arrangement curiously at odds with practicality, but one which unified, at least in visual terms, the tripartite building form.

Another variant, representing a significant departure from traditional mid to late eighteenth century plan forms has been recently discovered at the Shulbred House on Kiawah Island. Excavation shows this almost completely ruined structure, built about 1790, was "T" shaped, consisting of a central block probably organized about some through passage arrangement, surrounded on three sides by porches and fronting two double story wings. Internally the wings were linked by living accommodation opening on one side into another porch and on the other into the central block by way of an ill-defined circulation area which probably contained stairs. During excavation it was thought at first that since the building fit into no conventional planning pattern it was the product of two separate building phases. Subsequent investigation indicate only one major building phase to be represented.

This circumstance, taken with the somewhat unorthodox plans seen at Spring Island and Hampton, suggests that the Shulbred House

reflects a regional trend involving the combination of old forms in new ways to create some surprising results with respect to the massing and circulation systems. No one hand can be discerned directing the process; rather, these variations upon traditional themes were very much a matter of individual taste and experiment. Along with change went its opposite -- the retention of conservative ideas. At the Shulbred and Spring Island houses older architectural models still proved useful when it came to accommodating functions which custom dictated should be separate from the main house. In both instances, paired flanking dependencies are found, perhaps housing a kitchen and laundry at the Shulbred House and possibly an office and store at the Spring Island House.

Flanking dependencies can be traced back at least to the mid-eighteenth century locally and were clearly derived from pattern book examples. However, if vaguely palladian in concept, neither main house can be exactly related to any one published model, each being within its own terms a unique expression.

Selective discarding of older expressive traditions together with the recombination of traditional planning or formal elements is well known to art historians, who use the terms "form splitting" and "disjunction" to describe analogous phenomena. Form splitting is a process of renovation whereby the successors of any given artistic inheritance "unconsciously obey a rule of least effort" as they unwittingly salvage large parts of a tradition without having to discard everything or reinvent everything. The results can "seem irregular, puzzling and bewildering" (Kubler 1985:78).

The point worth making here is that with the Shulbred, Hampton, and Spring Island houses, as well as with related buildings, we glimpse the beginnings of an architectural evolution. Despite being largely inarticulate, faltering, and spawning odd hybrids which left no obvious successors, this architectural evolution is a significant one since it slowly produced a new style of building, uniquely responsive (as Stoney perceptively noted), to local environments by means of a process known from widely disparate geographical and temporal localities.

There are more stylistic currents we might explore, which have to do with ideas central to art historical inquiry, for example the relationship between form and meaning. At Haig Point on Daufuskie Island, and at the Spring Island structure, there are indications of the main plantation house being set within a carefully orchestrated landscape organized not on the lines of those formal gardens familiar from Middleton Place or Crowfield, but rather on "picturesque" principles.

The concept of the picturesque landscape is too large a subject to be developed in this paper, but it should be stressed that in European contexts "the picturesque" has been a term loaded

with association ever since it was first defined near the middle of the eighteenth century. Most commonly, the picturesque landscape came to be associated with the idea of "freedom," in reaction against the tyranny expressed so profoundly by the rigid formalities of such absolutist gardens as those Le Notre created around the French royal court at Versailles. There is an idealism about the picturesque movement, an appeal to reason on the one hand and a hankering after an admittedly mythical golden age of rustic simplicity on the other.

It would be a supreme irony if the "picturesque" idea was transferred to coastal South Carolina with its connotations intact, becoming one more part in the formal language of a slave owning elite. Yet, we have a suspicion this may be precisely what happened. As abolitionist sentiment increased after 1800, planters made idealized, naturalistic scenes for themselves -- scenes which masked, what for us, is the entirely unacceptable face of slavery. To this attitude can also be linked the whole notion of "improvements" in slave housing, the tidy and carefully planned settlements which started appearing just before the American Revolution. These are not unlike the "model villages" where contemporary English landlords "tried to return people to a Rouseausque state of nature" -- a state they had never left in the first place. Tidy peasant houses conducive to rural virtues would theoretically ensure "sobriety, goodness, and perhaps productivity too . . ." (du Prey 1982:263).

Even at plantations which <u>appear</u> to lack evidence of landscape details, subtle landscape changes may be identified. At the Shulbred house, archaeological investigations have found evidence of intricate brick drains, some laid on the surface, others buried out of sight. Resembling features found in urban contexts, their function, of course, seems clear. Yet, more importantly, they provide clear evidence of the plantation owner's constant battle to tame what was perceived as a hostile, and at times foreboding, natural environment. The cultural implications of these seemingly slight landscape modifications has largely been avoided by archaeologists.

At the level of the plantation complex we again see a surprising lack of detail. Examination of recent archaeological studies would largely suggest that plantations consisted of nothing more than an occasional main house, maybe an overseer's house, and a single slave settlement, all frozen in time. Yet, a multiplicity of additional structures, such as barns, stables, kitchens, offices, wash houses, industrial settlements, and so forth, also existed. The plantation was serviced by roads, cart paths, and walkways. Gardens of some description were almost certainly present. Fences were common and marked off cultural and idealized boundaries, if not real places. Yet, most of these "other" features of the plantation fail to be either discovered or discussed.

Of course slave settlements and main houses are easier for the archaeologist to identify. And they yield larger quantities of artifacts. But they present only a limited picture of the plantation complex and our understanding of the lives of those who lived on the plantation is hampered and distorted.

Perhaps the first specialized slave settlement area in South Carolina to be examined was at Cotton Hope Plantation on Hilton Head Island. This work not only documented the gradual transformation of a general eighteenth century slave settlement into a more specialized settlement area, but also provided very different artifact patterns, inconsistent with "traditional" views.

The original of a late nineteenth century watercolor of the Shulbred Plantation house was located after nearly two months of searching. This view shows a series of eight structures, including a "Romanesque" boat house, a barn, the main house, two flankers, a possible overseer's house, and two unidentified buildings with spires, as well as a road network, landscaping associated with the house, and fences. Unfortunately, the original survey of the plantation located only two of these eight structures. By comparing placement, proportions, and scaling distances from the watercolor, we have been able to identify the locations of five of the remaining six structures. Excavations, however, we conducted at only three of these seven identified structures.

Much of recent plantation archaeology has emphasized the investigation of slavery -- cloaking itself in Marxian theory while examining power and racism on the plantation. The approach may well have merits and nobody will deny examining slave life is an extremely worthwhile undertaking. However, particularly disturbing for the architectural historian is a growing tendency among archaeologists to associate unusual or poorly documented building technologies with some insufficiently substantiated African origin.

As a result of Chicora's work at plantations in the South Carolina Low Country, and we have investigated nine settlements in the Beaufort area alone, one thing is clear -- we are only beginning to explore the diversity present in slave architecture. Until the range of this diversity becomes more clear, it is premature to speculate on "Africanisms," especially since the full impact of stimulus diffusion has yet to be either recognized or acknowledged.

Research on Callawassie and Spring islands has yielded probable slave structures vividly illustrating minimal building techniques, with minute floor areas, slight or absent foundations, plastered wattle or open walls, and possibly thatched roofs. The rudimentary nature of construction recalls South Carolina's earliest European settlements, but this is perhaps a false analogy. These structures demonstrate that building modes never followed straight line evolutionary paths in the isolated Sea Island

plantation world. Rather, differing architectural traditions co-existed, some primitive, others more sophisticated, the total spectrum of building reflecting overlapping areas of cultural experience and even function. Choice was a matter of expedience, following cycles of expansion and retrenchment, of prosperity and hard times induced by fluctuating market forces.

On nearby Daufuskie we find unsubstantial log structures with plaster chinking being built as late as the 1850s, repeating a mode of construction originally found on the same plantation 60 to 70 years earlier. And at Mitchelville, postbellum freedmen's community we find tabby being used in domestic architecture nearly 40 years after it largely went "out of style."

While correlating certain building modes with certain ethnic groups or geographical areas is tempting (wattle and daub construction being a noteworthy case), to do so without qualification over simplifies complex architectural patterns. Wattle and daub might well have come out of native North America, West Africa, or even the West Indies. It might equally have sprung from deep seated European memories of colonial settlement.

The investigation of South Carolina's plantations is not solely the province of the archaeologist, although that is certainly the impression when one examines much of the current research. Social historians, architectural historians, and landscape historians all have a large stake in the results, going far beyond the limits of any given archaeological procedure, methodology, or theoretical perspective.

We have had varying degrees of success over the past few years in our efforts to preserve some of the artifacts of plantation life -- ceramics, glass, nails, and food bone. Many of these items of household use are preserved in perpetuity for future generations of South Carolinians. But what isn't preserved, and is even often ignored, is the setting in which these artifacts derive a larger, and more significant, meaning. We may find out, albeit too late, that what we have chosen to disregard, might have told us as much, perhaps more, about plantation life, than what we saved.

History extracts demands upon all of those individuals entrusted with exploration of the past. It also imposes a cost upon its custodians. On Sea Island plantations where, before emancipation, almost every act modifying the natural landscape involved slave labor, there can be absolutely no justification for destroying, without full recordation, the works of subjugated and all too often silenced peoples whose testament the antebellum man-made landscape has become. Neither can there be any justification for sweeping aside, without thorough investigation, those creations (whether they be buildings, gardens, slave settlements, or temporary structures) reflecting aspirations and value systems of a planter elite, however foreign these systems seem to modern

sensibilities.

One key to saving the lost artifacts of plantation life is a more thorough understanding of the roles played by a variety of other disciplines and the questions that they recognize as significant for the preservation of the past. Although archaeologists frequently talk of inter-disciplinary studies, we too infrequently act on their need and importance. A second key is the realization that plantations are complex, multi-dimensional sites, requiring thorough research, exploration, and examination. A plantation does not consist of a main house and/or a slave settlement isolated in time and space from other architecture. These features must be recognized and acted upon. Survey must be sufficiently intensive to identify something approaching the whole, not just a fraction. Data recovery must then examine the whole plantation, not a few selected parts.

If these goals cannot be accomplished then we would better serve future generations by preserving plantations intact, set aside from development and vandalism, then to lose sight of the enormous variety of "artifacts" actually present.