

# African-American Archaeology

Newsletter of the African-American Archaeology Network

Number 9

Thomas R. Wheaton, Editor  
New South Associates, Inc.

Winter 1993

## Update #3: New York's African Burial Ground

(Submitted by Jerome S. Handler)

This newsletter has provided two earlier reports on the African burial ground in Lower Manhattan (Spring 1992 and Spring 1993). This update reports on major events as of November 1, 1993.

Artifacts from the site are still housed in a laboratory at the World Trade Center where they are being conserved by a team from John Milner Associates. In mid-September the first group of skeletal remains was shipped from Lehman College to Howard University. By the end of September Howard had received 79 skeletons, and by the end of October a total of approximately 270 skeletons had been received. The skeletons arrived in excellent condition. It is expected that Howard will have the entire collection of approximately 400 skeletons by mid-November. Michael Blakey, the scientific director of the project, estimates that the first phase of the research, involving basic laboratory procedures such as cleaning and measuring of the bones, will start by the beginning of 1994 and will take up to two years to complete.

The area from which the skeletons were removed, representing only a small portion of the total cemetery of approximately five and one-half acres, has been fenced in by the General Services Administration (GSA). Trees and grass have been planted and a large sign erected that describes how the fenced-in area is the "preserved part of the original African burial ground" that was "closed in 1794."

The Federal Advisory Committee (or Steering Committee on the African Burial Ground) was chartered in October 1992 for a two year period to make formal recommendations to the General Services Administration and the U.S.

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## To Whom Do They Belong?: Cowrie Shells in Historical Archaeology

(Submitted by Laurie E. Pearce)

Over the last two decades the field of historical archaeology has undergone an exciting shift away from focusing on the realm of the wealthy white planter, to include the study of African-American slaves and freedmen. Where porcelain and silver studies once predominated, Colonoware and cowrie shells are now taking their place as data in interpreting the lives of African Americans. The cowrie shell (*Cypraea annulus* and *Cypraea moneta*), indigenous to the tropical waters of the Pacific and Indian Oceans, has been postulated as a vestige of African culture. This brief report summarizes the general findings of a preliminary study of the archaeological evidence for cowrie shells in North America (Pearce 1992), and raises several questions as to their possible significance.

The cowrie shell was harvested off of the east coast of Africa for use as currency as early as 1200 BC. Its use subsequently spread throughout Europe, Asia, and eastern Africa. Through the centuries, in Africa and elsewhere, the cowrie shell became associated with a variety of activities beyond simply serving as a medium of exchange. The uses to which the shells were put varied according to the people using them, including Africans, Europeans, and Native Americans in North America. The known uses of cowrie shells include: as currency, ballast, medicine, gaming pieces, and decoration, for communication, in divination, and as charms and religious symbols. A critical examination of the evidence for cowrie shells from archaeological contexts in North America must take into consideration this wide range of possible uses

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**(African Burial Ground cont.)**

Congress. Chaired by Howard Dodson, the Director of the Schomburg Center in New York City, the committee submitted a report to the GSA and Congress on August 6, 1993. This report made several recommendations concerning the memorialization of the site and related matters. The committee, which continues to meet on the last Monday of each month at the Schomburg Center, is currently dealing with a variety of issues (some quite controversial), including those relating to memorialization and the possible construction of a major museum in the vicinity of the site. This museum is intended to "present the history of persons of African descent from the time of their forced migration to the present."

As reported a past issue of this newsletter, a National Historic Landmark nomination was submitted in January, 1993 to the National Park Service for the African Burial Ground. The nomination was approved in February, and the site was subsequently designated by the Secretary of the Interior. The National Park Service, which will probably manage the burial ground area, will place a National Historic Landmark plaque at the site to read as follows:

**AFRICAN BURYING GROUND**

*has been designated a*

*National Historic Landmark*

*This Site Possesses National Significance*

*in Commemorating the History of the*

*United States of America*

*1993*

Additional information can be obtained by contacting the Office of Public Education and Interpretation of the African Burial Ground, Dr. Sherrill D. Watson, Director, at U.S. Custom House, Room 239, 6 World Trade Center, New York 10048; phone (212) 432-5707.

**Other Burial Grounds**

The newsletter has received copies of newspaper articles on African-American cemeteries in Prince George's County, Maryland (Washington Times 1/6/93), and in Kerrville, Texas (San Antonio Express News 6/1/93). The first cemetery, Cherry Hill Cemetery, was previously unrecorded. When a developer applied for a permit to put a driveway across the unmarked cemetery, nearby residents brought it to the attention of county officials. It has now been officially recognized and is protected under state and county law. It is planned that the cemetery will become a county park. The Kerrville cemetery was the burial ground for approximately 90 African-American patients who died at the state-run tuberculosis sanitarium in the 1940s. The adjacent cemetery for mentally ill patients at what later became Kerrville State Hospital, the state mental health institution, was placed next to the older cemetery. Over time, the earlier cemetery was all but forgotten. Recent inquiries from the Austin American Statesman forced the Texas Department of Mental Health and Mental Retardation to hire archeologist David Brown to locate the graves. The cemetery will now be maintained and accessible to the public.

**(Cowry Shells cont.)**

and the identity of the associated group. The cowries recovered from the following sites (Table 1) could have fulfilled one or more of the above named functions, or could have taken on additional meaning according to the specific context.

In this study cowrie shells were found to have been recovered from 19 sites, with the great majority (16) located in Virginia, and from one site each in Massachusetts, North Carolina, and Connecticut. The temporal range of occupation for the sites as a whole spans the period circa 1675 to 1790. The great majority of the sites were occupied by both Anglo and African Americans, with the Pequod site (circa 1790) in Connecticut as the sole Native American site represented. Europeans are known to have used cowries in trade with northern Native American tribes, and gradually cowries became incorporated into their ritual life as well.

While Europeans were present at all of the other sites, the shells were generally found in or near kitchens, other outbuildings and

storage areas. These locations are associated with the domestic sphere of colonial life, linked traditionally with African presence. Cowries found in these contexts, therefore, may be more significant symbolically than those found at industrial sites, for example. Cowries were stowed in the hulls of ships to be traded by the barrel for slaves in West Africa, so their presence near wharves seems likely a byproduct of that trading activity. The 150+ shells found on the domestic Lightfoot site are associated with Phillip Lightfoot, a slave trader at the port of Yorktown, Virginia, who may have found a practical use for remaining ballast.

Given the admittedly limited scope of this project, the recovery of cowrie shells from 19 sites suggests that cowries occur more often archaeologically than generally has been supposed. That 16 of the sites are from Virginia undoubtedly is at least partially explained as survey bias, but the strong association with African-American occupations is at least suggestive of some connection. The potential meanings for the use of the shells remain indetermi-

nate at this time, however, with due caution required in attempting to assign significance to the presence of the shells in relation to African-American beliefs. Any meanings attached to the shells undoubtedly reflect cultural affiliation and functional and temporal context. Given the cross-cultural use of cowrie shells, the mere presence of a cowrie should not be inferred out of hand to be associated with African occupation and/or ritual beliefs. The question of the range of uses of, and meanings attached to, cowrie shells is a topic meriting further study not only for its meaning to Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans, but also for its apparent role as an object that moves between and transcends cultural boundaries.

#### References Cited

Pearce, Laurie E.

1992 The Cowrie Shell in Virginia: A Critical Evaluation of Potential Archaeological Significance. Unpublished M.A. thesis, Department of Anthropology, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg.

Table 1. Archaeological Data

Site Name	State	Date	Eur.	Afr.	N.Am.	Context	Cut*	Total
Anderson	VA	1745	X	X		Domestic	1	7
Bermuda 100	VA	1700	X	X		Indust.	1	1
Brush-Everard	VA	1779	X	X		Domestic	2	2
Chiswell	VA	1770	X	X		Domestic		3
Curles Plnta.	VA	?	X	X		?		?
Custis Well	VA	1780	X	X		Domestic	1	1
Derby Wharf	MA	?	X	X		Indust.		1
Digges	VA	?	X	X		?		?
Grissell-Hay	VA	1731	X	X		Domestic	1	1
Great Valley RD	VA	?	?	?		?		?
Hornsby	VA	1675	X	X		Domestic		1
Jones Cellar	VA	1730	X	X		Domestic	1	1
Lightfoot	VA	1720	X	X		Domestic	2	150+
Monticello	VA	1770	X	X		Domestic		1
Nelson	VA	1720	X	X		Domestic	1	4
Pequod	CT	1790			X	Domestic		1
Rogers	VA	1720	X	X		Indust.	3	17+
Stagville/Benn.	NC		X	X		?		?
Wetherburn	VA	1750	X	X		Domestic	2	5

Note: To facilitate transport, the dorsal side of the shells sometimes were cut to allow them to be strung on cords.

## Current Research

### Archaeological Research In Brazil

(Submitted by Charles E. Orser, Jr.)

For the second year in a row, Charles E. Orser, Jr., Director of the Midwestern Archaeological Research Center and Associate Professor of Anthropology at Illinois State University, conducted field research in Brazil. The research again focused on the Serra da Barriga, a large hill in northeastern Brazil, about 35 miles from the Atlantic coast. The Serra da Barriga is one of the most important archaeological and historical sites in Brazil, because it is where seventeenth-century slaves ran away to avoid a life of bondage. Between 1605 and 1694, the runaways built Palmares, an African kingdom of at least ten villages. These villages included Brazilian Tupi Indians, peoples of different African cultures, and even Portuguese settlers. Both Portuguese and Dutch colonial governments sent almost annual expeditions against Palmares, but the Portuguese were not able to destroy it until 1694. Today, Palmares and its final leader, Zumbi -- beheaded by his Portuguese captors -- are regarded in Brazil with the same reverence that we hold for George Washington. The Serra da Barriga is a national landmark administered by Brazilian Heritage.

Last year, using funds from the National Geographic Society and Illinois State University's Office of Research, we found ten archaeological sites at the Serra da Barriga, long regarded as the site of Macaco, the capital of Palmares. The research team was composed of Orser, Dr. Pedro Paulo A. Funari of the University of Campinas, Dr. Michael J.J. Rowlands of the University of London, and several Brazilian college students. This season, with funds from the National Geographic Society and the Social Science Research Council, the research team found four new sites. These sites range from prehistoric or early historic Tupi villages to an eighteenth-century plantation. In test excavations at Site 1, regarded as the main village on the Serra da Barriga, we found numerous pottery sherds, two postholes and a hearth. Last year, we found the village's wooden stockade on the perimeter of this site. Assisting this year was Julie Ruiz-Sierra, a graduate student at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is currently preparing a master's thesis on the pottery

found at the Serra da Barriga. This pottery ranges from crude, thick Indian pottery to wheel turned, yellow-decorated majolica made in Portugal.

Our study of Palmares promises to modify the way in which we perceive the construction and maintenance of African cultures in the New World. It is clear from our research to date that the African-Indian connection was very important to the success or failure of Palmares. For example, some of the Indian material culture may bear African characteristics, and this is one important line of inquiry we are currently pursuing.

### Promised Land Plantation, New Providence, Bahamas

(Submitted by Paul Farnsworth)

During the month of July, 1993, a Louisiana State University archaeological field school directed by Paul Farnsworth focussed on locating, recording, and excavating the plantation's buildings and field walls. Students also participated in documentary research on the plantation, studying newspapers and documents in the Bahamian Archive and Registrar General's Department in Nassau. The Promised Land research was carried out in cooperation with the Government of the Bahamas and the Bahamas National Trust.

Promised Land was a small plantation on the southwestern coast of New Providence. It was founded in 1785 by British Loyalist William Moss. Upon William's death in 1796, the plantation passed to his brother, James Moss, until his death in 1821, when it passed to his nephew, also called James Moss. He, in turn, transferred all of the working age slaves to the colony of Demerara, leaving only the old and infirm to eke out a living into the late 1830s, when they appear to have relocated to the nearby, new settlement of Adelaide.

The ruins of the main house were cleared of brush and 26 one meter square test excavations carried out in and around the building. Although only a small quantity of artifacts were recovered, these dated to the late eighteenth century based upon the quantities of creamware and small amounts of pearlware recovered. The house was originally a two story structure, with a timber framed upper story built on a lower story of limestone block piers. This is an unusual style of building for the Bahamas (and the British Caribbean in general), and it is believed that parallels are

more likely to be found in the American Southeast, where William Moss lived prior to fleeing to the Bahamas. The floor of the house was of lime mortar. Human footprints and animal hoofprints, probably horse, were found impressed in the floor. Preliminary interpretations suggest that the ground floor was used as a stable and storage area, while the upper floor was the living quarters. A parallel for this arrangement was found in 1989 at Wade's Green plantation on North Caicos.

In addition to the excavations at the main house, a series of transects were cut at ten meter intervals, east-west across the area centered on the main house. Twelve transects, each approximately 180 meters long, were cut through the bush and shovel tested at ten meter intervals. In all, 212 shovel test pits were excavated in the systematic shovel testing program, most using trowel and brush, as the dense root mass prevented the use of shovels! In addition, the length of each transect, and as much of the area between as was accessible was surveyed with a metal detector. Metal signals and areas that looked likely for habitation were tested with judgementally placed shovel test pits, 40 being dug in all. These test pits recovered three particularly interesting artifacts: a lead name plate from a chest, box or crate stamped "MOSS"; a brass artifact also stamped "MOSS"; and an elaborate brass seal with a lion rampant on one side and a lion rampant over a crown within a shield on the other side. Finally, an area extending 200 meters to the east, west and north of the core area of the plantation (the sea is to the south) was surveyed and visually inspected for ruins and artifacts. However, none were located in this area.

The extensive shovel testing located the remains of what appears to be two structures approximately 50 meters south of the main house with a yard area between, and archaeological deposits approximately 40 meters west of the main house, that may, or may not, reflect the former presence of a small structure in that area. The structures to the south are of particular interest for their technique of construction, which was a variant of wattle and daub, presumably with a thatched roof. However, rather than using mud or clay for the daub, these structures used a lime and sand mortar to coat walls that were made of small vertical poles and sticks, whose impressions were preserved in the mortar. No evidence of horizontal members, as used in a true wattle and daub structure, was found. At least some of the walls were then plastered and painted yellow. The

result is an interesting hybrid of African and European construction techniques.

Relatively large quantities of domestic artifacts were recovered from the 25 one meter excavation units in the area around and between these structures. Creamware again dominated the ceramic assemblage, although pearlware, delftware, slipware, agateware, white salt-glazed and scratched blue stoneware, brown and gray stonewares and soft-paste porcelain were also recovered. Wine, liquor and medicine bottle fragments, cast iron cooking pot fragments, small numbers of nails, clay pipe fragments and conch shell fragments composed the bulk of the remainder of the assemblage.

### **Riverlake Plantation, Louisiana**

(Submitted by Laurie A. Wilkie and Paul Farnsworth)

Rarely do archaeologists have the opportunity to excavate sites with standing slave cabins and a history of continuous occupation from the antebellum period through the late twentieth century, let alone ones which were home to a famous African-American writer whose work is based on his experiences there. As such, Riverlake Plantation in Oscar, Louisiana, represented a unique archaeological opportunity. However, the removal of the four standing slave cabins from the site to a historical museum, and subsequent destruction of the archaeological resources for agriculture, allowed for only very limited salvage excavations. While the scope of excavations were as great as possible given the minimal budget, weather conditions, restrictions placed on the salvage by property owners and contractors, and the time frame, they were woefully inadequate for the cultural and historical importance of this site.

Archaeological investigations began at Riverlake Plantation in late February and continued until mid June, 1993. During this time, faculty, staff and student volunteers from Louisiana State University worked during weekends and term breaks under the direction of Paul Farnsworth of LSU and Laurie A. Wilkie of UCLA. Four sites were tested archaeologically. Two of these were still associated with standing cabins at the time, the other two were the locations of cabins that had been standing within the last thirty years. A total of 22 one meter excavation units and five shovel test pits were dug and mapped. Sid Gray, an independent architectural consultant, recorded elevations of all four standing structures before they were moved and noted details

of the cabins' construction revealed during dismantling. Artifactual materials recovered from Riverlake include nineteenth and twentieth-century ceramics and glass, numerous animal bones, iron nails and bone and shell artifacts. Material recovered from the excavations is currently awaiting washing, cataloging and analysis.

Locus A, the northernmost standing house on the western side of the plantation road, was the most extensively tested. Four excavation units were dug behind the cabin an area which was covered by a twentieth-century shed addition to the house. This area was tested because it had been protected since the early twentieth century and it was hoped to have the greatest potential for containing intact antebellum deposits. Late nineteenth-century materials were found in abundance, including medicine bottles, buttons, and ceramics. In addition, a number of antebellum ceramics and glassware were recovered. One unit was excavated immediately behind the addition and contained exclusively twentieth-century materials. Three units were excavated in the front porch area of the house, and contained some nineteenth and twentieth-century materials.

Locus I was located immediately south of Locus A, and represents the site where the next house in the row once stood. Units were placed by measuring the distance found to separate the second and third standing houses in the row south from Locus A. Excavation revealed the remains of a substantial brick foundation. A block of five one meter units were excavated to reveal the extent of this foundation, and one additional unit was excavated immediately behind the original cabin. The foundation corresponds to the location of the chimney in the standing houses, and is half of the typical "H" shaped chimney foundation pattern. Materials recovered from the construction trench of the foundation date to the 1840s, corresponding to the approximate construction date suggested by the architectural style of the standing cabins. Unfortunately, before excavations could be completed, the area was bulldozed.

Locus B was the site of the standing cabin south of Locus A. Two one meter units were excavated in the front porch area of the cabin. A small trash-pit was found in one of these, but only that excavation unit could be completed before both were destroyed by house removal and site "cleaning."

Locus II was located immediately south of the third standing cabin going from north to south. It was characterized by a large pile of chimney-

fall bricks. David Biben, who grew up in the quarters, remembered this house to have been the one lived in by Ernest J. Gaines as a child. Gaines, best known as author of *Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, has written many novels based upon his experiences growing up at Riverlake, and is probably Louisiana's most famous living African-American author, thus making this site of particular interest.

Three one meter units were excavated westward from the chimney fall, placed to locate the back of the house, and test the backyard deposits. An additional two units were excavated in the chimney pile, corresponding to the location of the two hearths. The southern side of the chimney, near the surface, contained a layer of bricks forming a flat, very burned surface. Under this layer was additional brick rubble and chimney fall. This profile and careful arrangement of the bricks suggests that after the house was abandoned and had fallen to ruin, this side of the chimney had been reused as a barbecue or other outdoor cooking surface by the occupants of the house to the south, which was still standing at the beginning of the project. Few artifactual materials were recovered in the chimney area, but some quantities of late nineteenth and twentieth-century artifacts were recovered in the units behind the house.

As the materials from these four areas are analyzed, they will be used, in conjunction with documentary materials, oral histories and Ernest J. Gaines' writings, to reconstruct the changing patterns of everyday life on the plantation from the period of slavery through the twentieth century. Family life, communal activities, comparative socio-economics and African-American ethnic traditions will be among the topics explored.

## Announcements

### Keeping in Touch

Dr. Jerome S. Handler of the Black American Studies program at SIU has asked that persons working, or contemplating work, in the Caribbean notify him or this newsletter so that everyone can benefit from knowing what is going on. Also, please feel free to drop us a line when you have a new project starting up, whether or not it is in the Caribbean. Dr. Handler's address is Black American Studies Program, SIU Carbondale, Carbondale, IL 62901-4329.

## Renewing Subscriptions

It is the time of year when everyone is asking for membership fees, and this newsletter is no exception. Please complete the form on the back page and send in your \$5.00 check for 1994 membership. The cut off date to stay on the computerized list is May 1, 1994. Persons submitting checks after that date will be reinstated at that time and will receive back issues for 1994. If you keep sending in the material I may be able to get out three issues next year.

Please make your check out to: AAA Newsletter

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## Research Opportunity St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands Summer 1994

Between 1799 and 1956, on the Virgin Island of St. John, a community of free blacks existed on the arid East End of the island, independent of the plantation/slave culture. Why did this community evolve and how did it survive?

An archaeological team is needed to conduct a study of midden(s) of this community during the summer of 1994. This study will coordinate with an ongoing research protocol (information supplied upon request). Project coordinators are prepared to assist in the following ways:

- help identify the most productive sites
- facilitate access to the site: permissions, maps, etc.
- provide some local workers
- help find housing
- assist in obtaining funding
- assist in providing a place on St. John to house artifacts

For further information, please contact: Ann Hobbs, Box 347, St. John, USVI 00831.

## 1994 African-American Cross-Cultural Workshop

The 1994 workshop will be held on Wednesday, January 5, from 1:00 to 4:00 P.M. at the Society for Historical Archaeology conference in Vancouver. The time will allow for networking early in the conference without competing for time with other seminars and symposia. The theme this year will be "Approaches to African-American Archaeology". The approaches can be meth-

odological or theoretical. The first half hour or so will be taken up by brief position statements given by various researchers who will hopefully have provocative and diametrically opposing points of view. Once the juices start flowing, all participants are expected to jump into the general discussion. As always the workshop is an attempt to channel all of those interesting exchanges held in conference hallways into a more public forum where we can all benefit from the exchange. Come along and bring a friend.

Next year in Washington D.C., there is talk of having a show-and-tell (I'll show you mine, if you show me yours!) at the laboratory of Alexandria Archaeology. Pam Cressey has tentatively provided the place and Esther White has volunteered to help organize it. We hope to have a lot of Colonoware ceramics, among other things. This is what we wanted to do in Jamaica but could not get around the customs problems.

## Conferences

### Call for Papers National Association of African-American Studies National Conference

February 15-19, 1994  
Virginia St. Univ., Petersburg, Va.

Fifty-word abstracts should be submitted on letterhead which relate to any aspect of the African-American Experience. Subjects may include, but are not limited to, literature, demographics, history, politics, economics, the arts, religion, education, health care, the family, international relations, agriculture, business, the sciences, sports, computer science, women's studies, multi-culturalism, social services, and many other areas. Abstracts must be post-marked by December 17, 1993, and submitted to:

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