



## March 2007 Newsletter

### **Autonomous, but Shackled: A Community Model of Slave Life and its Archaeological Testing**

By Amy C. Kowal

**Abstract:** Kowal's dissertation, entitled *The Affinities and Disparities within: Community and Status of the African American Slave Population at Charles Pinckney National Historic Site, Mount Pleasant, South Carolina* (Department of Anthropology, Florida State University) investigates how patterns of consumption reflect internal patterns of social hierarchy among the enslaved plantation community and what were the degrees of resistance and accommodation of those enslaved and their structure in relation to white plantation owners. Family, community, customs and practices, religion, and settlement patterns are the factors used to interpret the African American presence at Charles Pinckney's Snee Farm in Mt. Pleasant, South Carolina and to perform a regional comparison with similar plantations of the period. This study utilizes ethnological, archaeological, historical, and physical resources to determine status differences within this slave community. Its strength is the use of a holistic and interdisciplinary approach along with the integration of anthropological and archaeological theories of agency and consumption. To determine how enslaved Africans defined their community and daily lives utilizing a comprehensive, multidisciplinary method is necessary. Analysis of consumption patterns through archaeological evidence reveals interactions between slaves and other peoples defining the ranges and boundaries of the enslaved community and its elements of resistance. Agency and consumer theories provide an explanation of how individuals possess the ownership of choice and the ability of anthropologists to characterize populations in terms of their own community through the factors deemed most important by the members' own standards in the face of outside pressures.

This research provides the ability to compare this community with others in the United States aiding in the development of a theory of modern African American ethnicity formation. Ultimately, this study will contribute to African Diaspora research as more investigations are undertaken with Atlantic populations and large cultural patterns of the African Diaspora are described.

The following paper is derived from that larger study.

## **Introduction**

This is an investigation of the patterns of consumption that reflect internal designs of social hierarchy among the enslaved plantation community and the hierarchy structure in relation to the white plantation owners. Also examined are the degrees of autonomy those enslaved exhibited. Family, community, customs and practices, religion, and settlement patterns are the factors used to characterize the African American presence at Charles Pinckney's Snee Farm in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina (Figure 1) and perform a regional comparison with similar plantations of the period. This study is a presentation of a model of slave life that utilizes archaeological, historical, and literary resources to determine status differences within a slave community. Analysis of ceramic consumption patterns through archaeological evidence reveals interactions between slaves and other peoples delineating the ranges and boundaries of the enslaved community and its degrees of autonomy. Its strength is the use of a holistic and interdisciplinary approach along with the integration of anthropological and archaeological theories of agency and consumption demonstrating the degrees of autonomy through choice and the ability of a population to define its own community through the factors deemed most important by its own standards in the face of outside pressures.

## **Setting**

The hot and humid coastal setting of the rural lowcountry of South Carolina provided the ideal venue for rice plantations, and a perfect haven from the city for Charleston residents in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Just fifteen miles outside the former state capital is Snee Farm; the Pinckneys "country seat" was purchased by Col. Charles Pinckney in 1754 (Figure 2). Here slaves cultivated rice and raised livestock on the original 715 acres largely without the supervision of their masters, as Col. Charles Pinckney and then his son Gov. Charles Pinckney

were often absent from the farm due to occupational, military, and political service. With the assistance of an overseer and the implementation of the task system, the farm prospered early in its history, then fell into disrepair and was sold in 1817 to settle Gov. Pinckney's debts. Snee Farm was declared the Charles Pinckney National Historic Site in 1991, and is currently administered by the National Park Service. The park's mission includes preserving and educating the public about Gov. Pinckney and his life as well as enlightening visitors about all occupants of Snee Farm, including the slaves that lived, farmed, and built the plantation at the time (NPS N.D.:2).

### **Community Model**

A model of slave life is presented here incorporating community theory and anthropological investigations of agency and consumption (Table 1). Yaeger and Canuto explain the community "as a dynamic socially constituted institution that is contingent upon human agency for its creation and continued existence" (Yaeger and Canuto 2000:5). "(It) can serve as a crucible where multiple and potentially incompatible or antagonistic identities such as factions, lineages, genders, and ethnicities interact, competing with or complementing one another" (Yaeger and Canuto 2000:7). In the study of slave communities, archaeologists must not neglect the inclusion of other status groups including white owners, overseers, and merchants that composed slaves' daily interactions as these relations often determined the slaves' choice of action.

In the initial step of the methodology, the community must be characterized exercising three principal factors: self-identification, holistic approach, and self-reflection. The goal of a community study is to identify the community from its own point of view as much as possible. Using resources from the inhabitants own words, behaviors, remains, and beliefs is ideal.

Historical documentation, slave narratives, oral histories, and descendant stories of the site within the time and local area in question should be analyzed to identify cultural behaviors and customs, meanings and ideals, and objects used. Also the researcher needs to have an awareness of her/his own position and periodically examine the questions being examined to ensure they are those the community itself is concerned with. Ideally the study should begin with the cooperation of the descendant community from the outset as it will have its own agenda and questions. If this is not possible, as in this case where the study began after the archaeology was completed, an approach that considers the slave community's point of view within the research should be conducted.

Slave narratives and African American historical investigations are valuable resources for archaeologists studying African American culture that demonstrate the agency, power, and resistance exhibited by African American slaves. For those archaeological sites that lack documents of slave names and family evidence, I encourage archaeologists to look at the slave narratives and histories from the same state and define what patterns existed in the area. The black community established their own cultural rules despite the conditions they endured, and their community centered on establishing a strong extended family and pride in one's history that is still held today and can be documented from the past.

In the second step of the methodology, the archaeological resources studied and to be compared are identified. The context of the site must be identified in chronology and geographic area. A history of the physical environment is important to characterize as it provides explanations of materials utilized within the site. Every site has different periods of occupation, from prehistory to present day. In historical community studies, each historical occupation must be identified using public records of deeds, probates, maps, and wills.

The expected patterns to be found within the archaeological evidence should be identified as predicted by the community definition, and previous agency and consumption studies. This evidence cannot be thoroughly presented here, but is found in my forthcoming dissertation “Affinities and Disparities Within: Community and Status of the African American Slave Population at Charles Pinckney National Historic Site, Mount Pleasant, South Carolina.” Ideally the entire artifact assemblage would be examined for patterns observed in architecture, foodways, and personal items.

The slave community is not restricted to a household, living quarters, or even the single archaeological site. It is defined by the interactions of its members with the surrounding community including the work areas, the neighboring plantations, houses, and towns. These all should be included in the archaeological assessment of the slave community as a whole. The resulting information will not be a complete record of the slave community as this is quite impossible as contextual resources have been destroyed and altered over the centuries. The objective is to identify the most accurate picture of the community as possible.

The fourth step is assessing the model and determining if the archaeological evidence supports the community definition described in the first step. Are the expected living conditions for the slave community there? What observable differences in status and hierarchy of all members of the community can be identified? At this time what cultural processes can be identified such as agency, consumerism, and autonomy? This step determines if the community definition successfully predicted the archaeological evidence and the conflicts between the social classes. Some results may be unexpected; these should be clearly identified and explanations offered for their occurrence.

The last two steps, regional level and cultural processes studies, are beyond the scope of this paper, and are recommended for future research. Community level studies provide a level of comparison that can be duplicated in any area. Research of the local African American community including slave narratives, oral histories, historical and literary documents as well as archaeological investigations can be conducted and a specific model constructed for a particular local area. This enables one to compare communities of similar times to each other to assess regional differences and perform synchronic studies, and communities of similar areas over time for diachronic analysis. On a larger scale, regional comparisons can be used in African Diaspora studies and analyses of cultural processes on a larger scale such as ethnicity formation and world systems theory.

### **Archaeological Testing**

Briefly I will present some results of the ceramic component of the slave community for comparison. With the assistance of historic plat maps, archaeologists, including Larry Lepionka, Paul Brockington, Julia King, and Bennie Keel, from 1987 through 2000 were able to survey and identify many areas, structures, and components of Pinckney's Snee Farm. These include the 18<sup>th</sup> through early 19<sup>th</sup> century structures of the slave village or Area B, a domestic slave quarter (structure 16), the kitchen (structure 13), the overseer's house (structure 14), and the Pinckney's main residence (structure 17) located under the existing 1830s house (Figure 3).

John Otto Solomon was one of the first archaeologists to investigate hierarchy in the slave community (1977). Using Stanley South's analytical techniques for pattern recognition and functional categories that could be used to reveal behavioral patterns, Solomon attempted to determine social status of dwelling inhabitants from the ceramic assemblages associated with specific site structures (Singleton 1985:4). Prior to assessing status Solomon recommended that

a number of sites are used for comparison to demonstrate a pattern (1977:91). Further distinction should be employed that these sites should be in the same vicinity as the original excavation site to identify a community pattern that can then be used in regional and diaspora studies. The ceramic type distribution of the structures was found to be contemporaneous, was not the result of chronological changes but attributed to status differences.

The presence of different types of ceramics in different site areas may indicate different status levels in a community. George Miller has approached this hypothesis from a purely economical point of view determining the prices of various English ceramics in America (Miller 1980, 1991; Miller et.al 1994). Various levels of status would be indicated through the presence of less and more expensive types of wares as the price is the factor determining accessibility for a status group. Higher status individuals should possess greater percentages of more expensive wares, and lower status groups should possess less expensive wares. For the purposes of the investigation here, the ceramics have been divided into four groups, porcelains, refined earthenware tablewares and teawares, utilitarian wares such as stonewares and coarse earthenwares, and colonoware.

In addition to indicating status the occurrence of different wares in slave contexts denotes African aesthetic preference and cultural practices (Wilkie 1999:269). Many have assumed that the planter provided all possessions for his slaves, but African Americans despite the restraints slavery imposed were able to select and purchase their own goods from money earned or skills sold in the towns within their communities. Although money earned was used to purchase many things to help the household and family, ceramics was certainly one of them. The assemblage present in the slave village and quarters then represents their choices made through their purchasing powers.

The ceramic analysis of Snee Farm reveals the Pinckney family had the greatest ability to purchase the most expensive ceramics, porcelains, than the other inhabitants of Snee Farm (Table 2). This demonstrates the choice to belong to the elite white society the Pinckney's were members of and their preference to display their higher status. The high occurrence of these wares in the kitchen possibly reflects the frequency of use or indicates their place of storage. All groups exhibited a clear preference for European wares over handmade wares and plain refined earthenwares over their decorated counterparts.

If the enslaved population at Snee Farm did not have the ability to purchase ceramic products, the greatest percentage of wares present in slave structures would be colonoware. This is not the case at all. Colonoware is the second least frequent group in the slave village, and occurs in a much higher percentage in all other buildings. Instead, slaves certainly had the ability and desire to purchase European ceramics for their personal use. The abundance of European wares within the slave village (87.13%) and high frequency of decorated ceramics (37.37%) undoubtedly supports the concept that slaves had the ability and desire to purchase products from consumer markets and exhibit a social status within the community. If there was no such desire, then colonoware would be much more prevalent. Domestic slaves also displayed their social status, this time through the prevalence of porcelain wares (26.92%) in their own home. Other than this expensive ceramic, the remainder of the domestic slave assemblage is largely composed of plain refined earthenwares, utilitarian wares, and colonoware. This possibly demonstrates a preference for the serving wares and tea wares that likely were displayed in the home, although the unfortunate small size of the sherds prevents a formal analysis of vessel forms here. The overseer was expected to possess a larger percentage of expensive porcelains and decorated refined earthenwares than the slave population. This clearly is not the case as the

overseer's house had approximately 20% decorated wares and 67% of plain and utilitarian wares.

The data of the ceramic assemblage at Snee Farm certainly establishes that slaves were agents in their own lives and chose wares previously thought to be inaccessible or uncommon for slaves to own. They valued their possessions and lived in a community of varying social classes. This also supports the community theory as slaves must have had the ability to interact with others outside of the plantation and in the nearby city of Charleston in order to sell wares, sell produce and livestock, and/or sell their skills to acquire money and purchase European wares at market. Further investigations to examine these ideas of the other artifact groups, such as personal items, arms, and food remains in the future will assist this study of agency and community interaction.

### **South Carolina Lowcountry Community**

Analysis of sites in the vicinity of Snee Farm and the South Carolina Lowcountry surrounding the city of Charleston will assist in formulating the complete picture of the slave community. There are 29 sites or site components presented in addition to the five areas from Snee Farm providing a total sample size of 34 sites. The different sites are all located in the South Carolina Lowcountry in the vicinity of Snee Farm and Charleston. For easier comparisons all types of slave sites and owner sites have been combined to form two individual groups and are evaluated to overseers' houses and kitchen structures in Table 3. The averages of each ceramic group were used to compare the status levels of the types of sites presented.

This community, in contrast to the Snee Farm plantation site, does not exhibit the same choices and preferences for porcelains and elaborately decorated wares as the Snee Farm slaves do. The greatest average percentage of porcelains (11.10%) is found on owner sites in the community. Slaves also do not exhibit the greatest average percentage of elaborately decorated

refined earthenwares (7.55%); instead that is found in the kitchen sites (11.76%) and the owner sites (11.24%). Slaves in this community do, however, possess a greater percentage of expensive wares, both porcelains and refined earthenwares, than overseers.

Comparing the utilitarian and colonoware, the pattern also differs from that of Snee Farm. In the community the slave sites possess the largest percentage of colonoware (58.65%), followed by the overseers (37.07%), owners (30.57%), and kitchens (22.37%). The utilitarian wares are dominated by the overseers' sites (48.51%) and least occurs in slave sites (8.14%). This indicates that slaves preferred making and using colonoware than European utilitarian wares.

Overall it appears that slaves within the community as a whole did not choose or did not have the ability or opportunity to purchase the more expensive wares in the consumer market. This may indicate that status levels within this community were not the same as they were at Snee Farm Plantation. As these are all sites in the same vicinity, the physical access to the markets in Charleston was the same for each slave population. It remains to be answered why some families purchased their ceramic wares and others produced them instead.

### **Conclusion and Assessment**

In conclusion, the advantages of this model lie in the self-identification of the slave community and the use of a combination of resources to characterize it. It uses inductive reasoning to build evidence for studies of larger cultural processes. The theoretical models such as capitalism and world systems theory are engaged and applied to the results, but cautiousness is observed as not to use these to define the behaviors being sought. They are instead used to explain the behaviors observed from the remains. Replication of this model is easily accomplished with the same approach in identifying the slave community may be applied and

adjusted to any location. Starting from individual households and groups of households to larger community allows for family comparison, subcultural comparisons, and then bridges to regional and global inclusions.



**Figure 1. Charles Pinckney National Historic Site. (Courtesy of National Park Service.)**



Figure 2. Map depicting the location of Snee Farm.

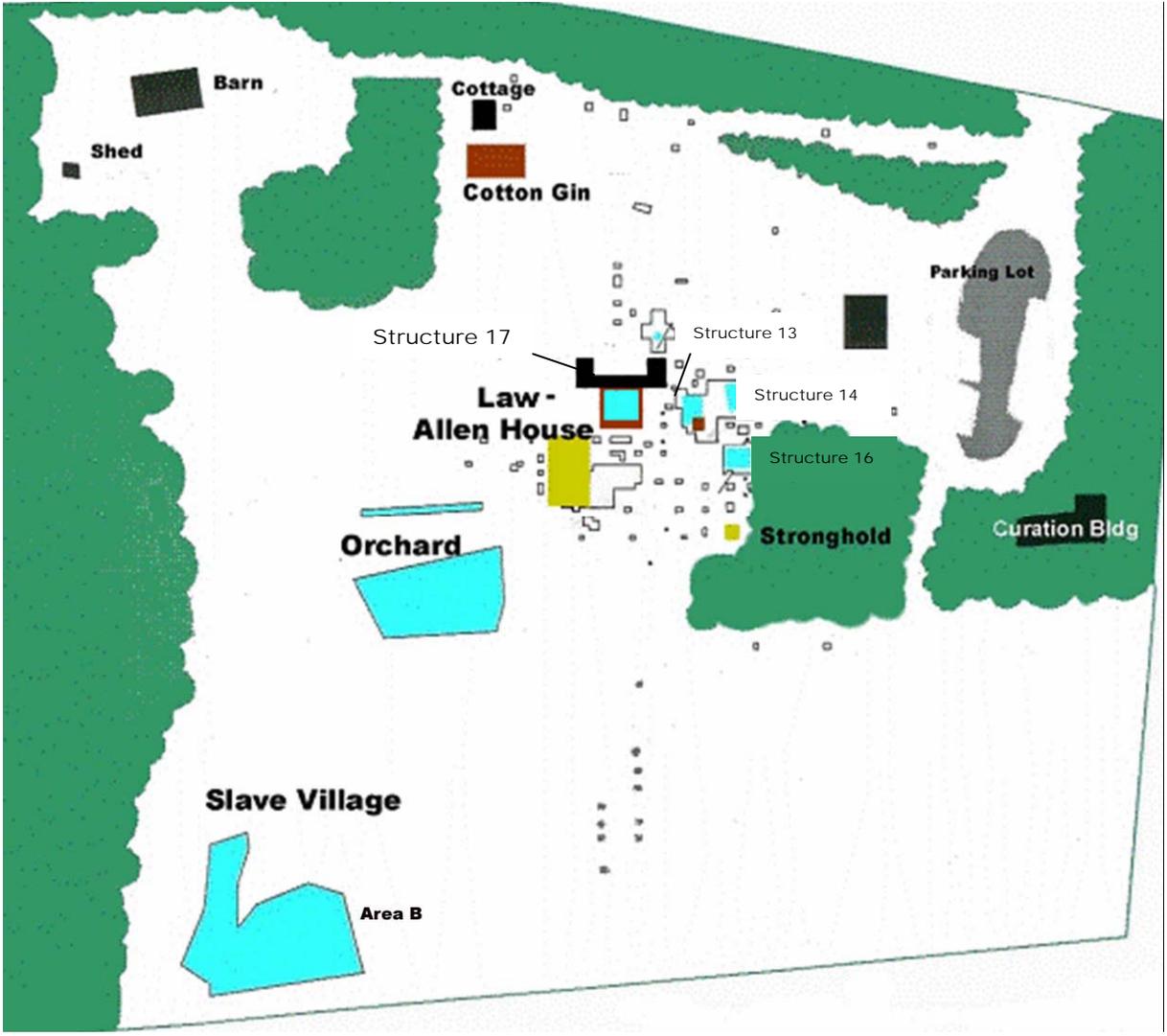


Figure 3. Archaeological features of Charles Pinckney National Historic Site. (Blue features are those of the Pinckney era).

TABLE 1.  
MODEL OF A SLAVE COMMUNITY METHODOLOGY

Step	Procedure
1	Define the community.
2	Define the archaeological resources of the primary site and within the community.
3	Conduct the archaeological tests of the observed patterns.
4	Assessment. Compare the archaeological tests to the community definition.
5	Perform larger regional analyses.
6	Cultural process investigations.

TABLE 2.  
INDIVIDUAL STRUCTURE ASSEMBLAGES

Structure/Area	Porcelain	Elaborate	Minimal	Plain	Utilitarian	Colonoware
Slave Village - Area B	0.78	10.04	27.33	49.76	8.91	2.03
Str16 - domestic slave	26.92	0.20	5.56	18.76	30.33	18.50
Str14 - overseer	6.85	2.70	11.11	24.44	20.72	21.53
Str13 - kitchen	8.09	0.42	10.26	19.02	28.09	24.33
Str17 - main house	20.02	1.66	6.69	21.23	27.31	14.19

TABLE 3.  
AVERAGES OF CERAMIC ASSEMBLAGES IN COMMUNITY

Type	Porcelain	Elaborate	Minimal	Plain	Utilitarian	Colonoware	European
Slave sites	6.95	7.55	11.93	43.17	8.14	58.65	46.68
Overseer	5.20	1.61	9.46	18.15	48.51	37.07	67.00
Kitchen	6.91	11.76	12.14	33.42	18.72	22.37	81.83
Owner	11.10	11.24	11.26	58.86	10.58	30.57	76.34

## **References**

Miller, George L.

1980 Classification and economic scaling of 19<sup>th</sup> century ceramics. *Historical Archaeology* 14:1-40.

1991 A revised set of CC index values for classification and economic scaling of English ceramics from 1787 to 1880. *Historical Archaeology* 25(1):1-25.

Miller, George L., Ann Smart Martin, and Nancy S. Dickinson

1994 Changing consumption patterns: English ceramics and the American market from 1770 to 1840. In *Everyday Life in the Early Republic*, edited by Catherine E. Hutchins, pp. 219-248.

Winterthur Museum, Winterthur, DE.

National Park Service (NPS)

N.D. *Developing and Interpreting the Rural Vernacular Landscape at Snee Farm*. National Park Service, Atlanta, GA.

Otto, John Solomon

1977 Artifacts and Status Differences – A Comparison of Ceramics from Planter, Overseer, and Slave Sites on an Antebellum Plantation. In *Research Strategies in Historical Archaeology*, edited by Stanley South, pp. 91-118. Academic Press, New York.

Singleton, Theresa A, editor

1985 *The Archaeology of Slavery and Plantation Life*. Academic Press, Orlando, FL.

Wilkie, Laurie A.

1999 Evidence of African Continuities in the material Culture of Clifton Plantation, Bahamas. In *African Sites Archaeology in the Caribbean*, Havisser, Jay B., ed., pp. 264-275. Markus Wiener, Princeton.

Yaeger, Jason, and Marcello A. Canuto

2000 Introducing an Archaeology of Communities. In *The Archaeology of Communities: A New World Perspective*, edited by Marcello A. Canuto and Jason Yaeger, pp. 1-15. Routledge, London.

**Return to March 2007 Newsletter:**

**<http://www.diaspora.uiuc.edu/news0307/news0307.html>**