



March 2009 Newsletter

Quarters in Comparison: The Fairfield Quarter in a Temporal and Geographical Context

By Elizabeth Clites*

Abstract

Less than a stone's throw from the Fairfield manor house are the archaeological remains of a series of eighteenth-century slave quarters. Analysis of their artifacts and features provides insight into the daily lives and activities of the plantation's enslaved labor force. But how does this quarter compare with those from other regions? How might a visitor from abroad view this structure, its occupants, or their master? Using data compiled by the Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery from slave quarter sites throughout the Atlantic World, this paper explores the Fairfield Quarter within a larger temporal and geographical context.

Introduction

Although not many details or documents remain about the lives of slaves at Fairfield plantation, there is one surviving document that references a specific Fairfield slave and provides a glimpse into his life. An entry from 1772 in *Hening's Statutes at Large*, a record of Virginia legislative actions from 1619 to 1792, states the following:

“Sam, a Negro Slave of Elizabeth Burwell, widow of Nathaniel Burwell, among others involved in a conspiracy to rise up ‘in Arms and to kill and destroy several Persons in the County of Middlesex and elsewhere’ are sent to Barbados, Jamaica, or some other island in the West Indies to be sold as slaves, to return to Virginia on the pain of death” (*as quoted in Fairfield 2008*)

The idea of revolt and rebellion is of course striking, but what is more intriguing is the idea of what this slave, Sam, encountered and experienced during his lifetime. He saw, lived, and experienced what few did; terrifying voyages on the Atlantic, slave markets in different regions, and, what interests us most as archaeologists, the lifestyles of enslaved populations in different regions during the early eighteenth century in the Atlantic World. What differences did he see in the way he and his fellow workers lived, labored, and adapted to enslavement in

different regions? After living in the Colonies for a short time, was he better equipped to cope with the move to the Caribbean, or was he starting from scratch like so many of the enslaved there? Did any of the skills, traditions, or other cultural traits that he brought with him from Africa, and then Virginia, survive in his final home? This paper, through cross-site comparisons based on data from the Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery (DAACS), explores these questions and provides a preliminary analysis of the Fairfield quarter site and how it relates to our understanding of eighteenth-century slave cultures in the Atlantic World.

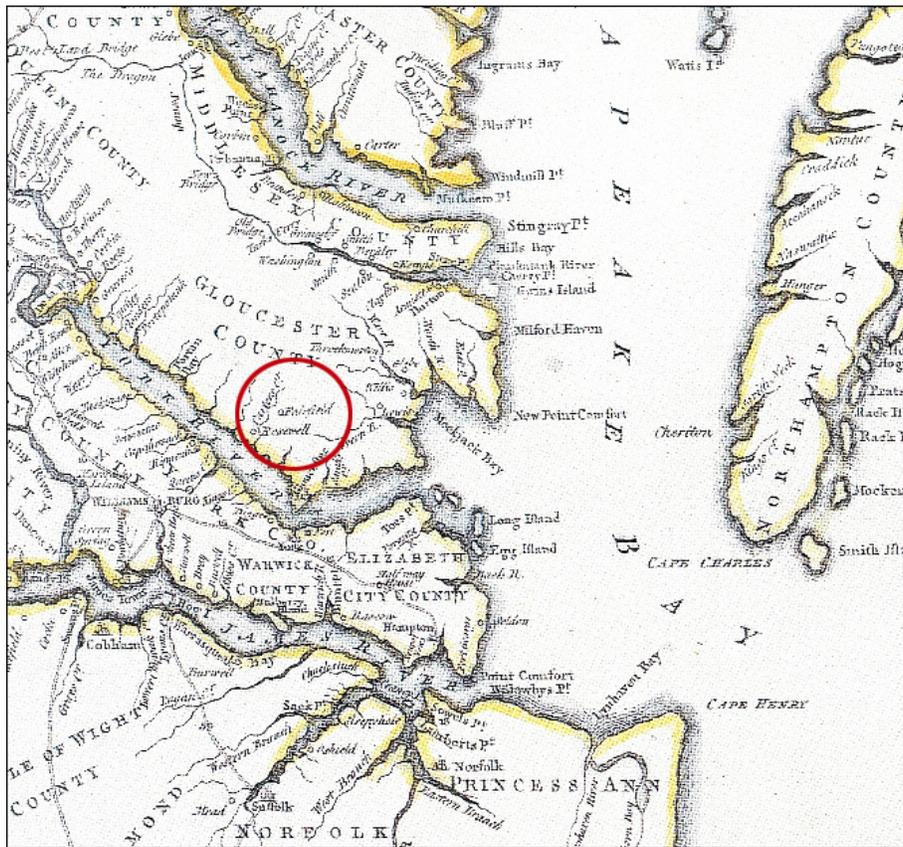


Figure 1: Fairfield Plantation on the Fry and Jefferson Map of Virginia, 1751. Fairfield Plantation and Carter's Creek outlined in red.

Fairfield Plantation Quarter Site

Fairfield is located along the banks of Carter's Creek and within easy reach of the York River and waterways that connected the fledgling farm to other settlements in the burgeoning

Virginia colony. First owned by Lewis Burwell I, Fairfield began as a tobacco plantation in 1648 and prospered as a prominent Gloucester County plantation until the second half of the

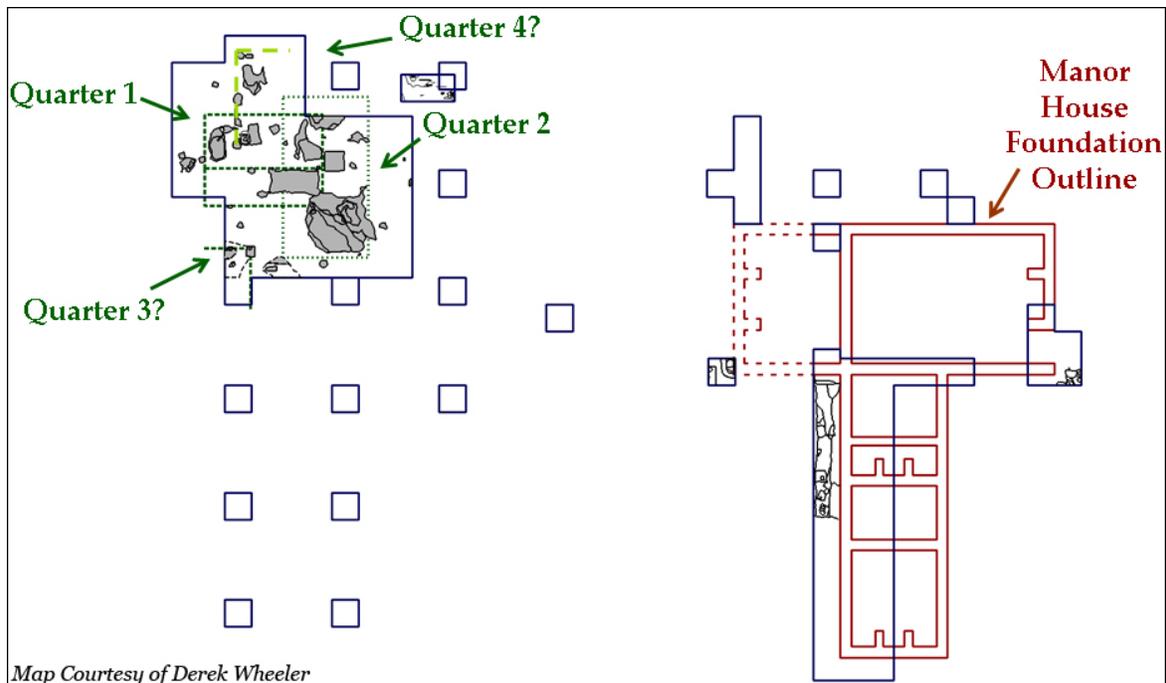


Figure 2: Overview of Fairfield Quarter and Manor House Excavations.

18th century. At the height of its prosperity, Fairfield encompassed 7000 acres, had a large slave population, an elegant manor house, and practiced diversified agriculture, including corn, wheat, and cattle production (Abercombie and Slatten 1992: 3). Yet by 1779 the family had accrued large debts and after the death of Lewis Burwell II, of the second series, the plantation was sold to Robert Thruston.

The structures composing the Fairfield quarter site were occupied during the “golden years” of Fairfield plantation, beginning in the early 1700s. While no documents survive that record the presence of slave quarters near the mansion, archaeological excavations reveal clues about the architecture of these structures, as well as the people who dwelt within them. Remains of the earliest two structures indicate that they were modest buildings, constructed on ground-laid sills or piers.

The first dwelling measured approximately 10-by-22 feet and was likely divided into two rooms (Brown 2003). Features associated with this structure include a subfloor pit (Feature 8) and burnt subsoil areas to the east and west (Features 78 and 79) that are most likely all that

remains of chimneys located on each end of the house. An addition ran the entire length of the southern façade, measuring 7-by-25 feet, with an entrance to the north, similar to the manor

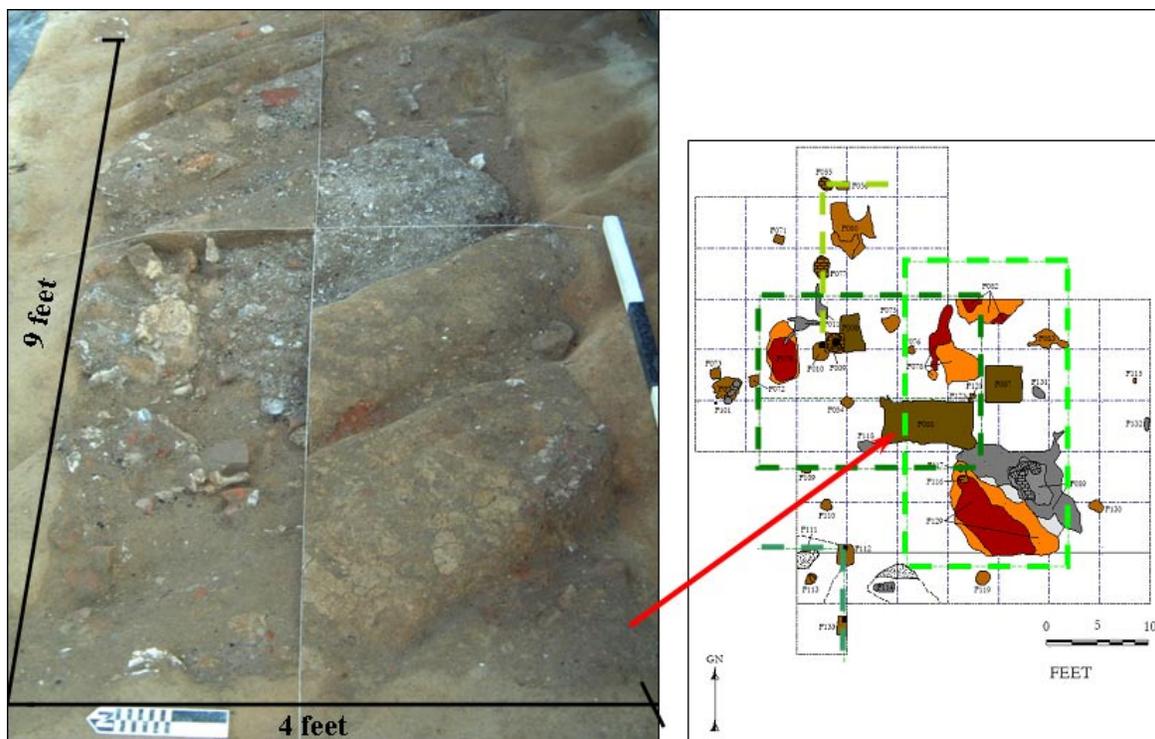


Figure 3: House 1 Cellar (Feature 88) Excavations. Image provided by Brown and Harpole. Site map provided by Jesse Sawyer and available online at www.daacs.org.

house. This quarter also included a cellar (Feature 88) and five postholes related to the superstructure of the addition. A significant concentration of window glass was found in this area, suggesting the quarter had glazed windows.

As with House 1, House 2 was constructed with ground-laid sills or simple piers and measured an estimated 16-by-27.5 feet. This dwelling post-dates the first quarter, and is situated perpendicular to, and overlapping, the earlier house. A burnt subsoil concentration (Feature 82) to the north suggests the presence of a hearth or chimney and, like its earlier counterpart, this structure also includes a subfloor pit (Feature 87).

In contrast to Houses 1 and 2, the third building at this site was a more substantial, post-in-ground structure. Two large postholes with clear postmolds were located seven feet apart and additional postholes recently discovered to the southwest represent the eastern wall of this

structure. The full outline has yet to be uncovered, but this house was likely oriented in the same direction as House 2.

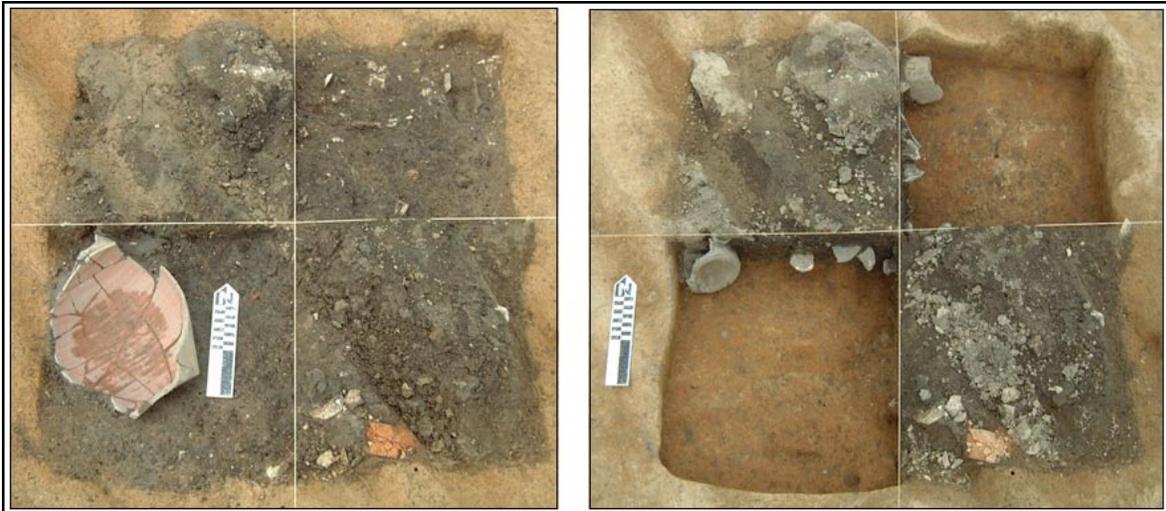


Figure 4: House 2 Subfloor Pit, Feature 87. Pre- and post-excitation. Image provided by Brown and Harpole and available online at www.daacs.org.

Finally, there is also evidence for a fourth dwelling or structure in this area. However, at the time of this analysis, only 3 brick-filled postholes, one of which cuts through an earlier subfloor pit feature in House 1, were located. If more evidence for this later structure is unearthed, it may prove to be a structure from a later occupation, and therefore was possibly contemporary with House 3. Features related to one or more additional structures were recently located to the north of this area as well.

The excavation area also includes artifacts associated with a kitchen midden, located to the south and west of the quarter structures. The proximity of this midden, combined with intense plowing in this area after site abandonment, poses a possible problem of the mixing of deposits from the kitchen and the slave quarter sites. For this reason, analysis draws only from feature deposits that were uncovered beneath the plowzone. Similarly, artifacts in deposits on the western portion of the site were analyzed while bearing in mind the proximity of the kitchen midden.

After excavation, all context records were entered into the Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery (DAACS) database and likewise all artifacts were catalogued using the protocols established by the DAACS project. Established in 2000, DAACS is a Web-

based initiative housed at the Monticello Department of Archaeology and designed to foster inter-site, comparative archeological research on slavery throughout the Chesapeake, the Carolinas, and the Caribbean (DAACS 2004). Artifacts from these sites are all catalogued using the same rigorous protocols, providing data that can be not only easily accessed but also easily compared between sites. This database provides the basis for all artifact analysis in this paper.

Using artifact data from the DAACS database, Mean Ceramic Dates, or MCDs, were calculated for the quarter feature deposits and were derived from mean dates for ceramic ware types, decoration techniques, and TPQs (*terminus post quem*) related to non-ceramic artifacts. Fill from the features indicates that occupation of these dwellings peaked in the mid-eighteenth century (Figure 5, below).

One feature of the DAACS database is the establishment of site “phases,” which are groups of assemblages that, after detailed stratigraphic and statistical analysis, are inferred to be broadly contemporary (DAACS 2003). DAACS staff assessed the Fairfield quarter site and divided the excavated contexts into three main phases of occupation, based on results from correspondence analysis. These phases include feature deposits related to all the structures in this area, with the exception of small deposits with artifact counts too small to be statistically significant. Mean ceramic dates and mean pipe-stem dates, derived using the Binford dating

Feature Number	Quarter	Description	MCD	Count
F08	Quarter 1	Subfloor Pit	1758	61
F88	Quarter 1	Cellar	1758	65
F87	Quarter 2	Subfloor Pit	1747	753
F10	Quarter 4	Posthole	1748	1

Phase	MCD	Ceramic Count	Binford Pipe-stem Date	Pipe-stem Count
P01	1756	114	1738	132
P02	1746	702	1772	283
P03	1773	14	N/A	0

Figure 5: Dating of Major Site Features (top) and Site Phases (bottom).

method, were calculated for each of these three phases. The site occupation phases loosely correlate with house and feature dates, yet it is not possible to definitively label all of the Phase 1 period artifacts as being related exclusively to House 1, and so forth. Finally, the phasing data indicates that there is a later period of occupation (Phase 3) that post-dates Quarters 1 and 2 and possibly extends into the 1770s.

As seen in the above chart, the mean ceramic dates and Binford pipe-stem dates provide contradicting dates for the Fairfield quarter phases. The phases are labeled in order by their pipe-stem dates, yet the MCDs do not correlate with this ordering. Instead, if the MCDs alone were used to order the phases, Phases 1 and 2 would be flipped. This contradiction is also seen in the site feature MCDs, which indicate that the second quarter actually pre-dates the first, contrary to excavator interpretations and stratigraphic analysis.

What is causing these perplexing contradictions? Even discarding the pipe-stem data, which could be inaccurate due to the late date of their deposition (see Smith, et al, 2008), the MCD data is still at odds with the site stratigraphy and the excavator interpretations previously discussed. This may indicate a variety of sources for the feature deposits, with some possibly representing secondary deposition. Future research, including a possible re-phasing of the Fairfield site, will explore this possibility. This paper takes these issues into account, yet still uses the existing DAACS-assigned phases as the best current estimate for grouping the site into different periods of occupation.

Moving beyond site chronology, is it possible, from the artifacts recovered, to identify who occupied these structures? At this time in Virginia, most laborers lived in barracks-style houses, with many unrelated individuals living together, rather than in family-based dwellings (Stamford 2007: 140-141; Neiman 1997, 2004). Yet the presence of a large number of beads and straight pins from Houses 1 and 2 suggests that at least one occupant of these quarters was female. Excavations of features at these houses uncovered 142 beads and 271 straight pins. While these artifacts are not inherently gendered, beads and straight pins are typically attributed to women's clothing or to women's sewing activities. While these artifact counts are the product of only a preliminary analysis, they do hint at the idea that at least one female enslaved worker, perhaps a cook or maid for the manor house, dwelt in these structures.

Metal artifacts recovered from the same features, including 85 non-iron scrap metal fragments, suggest that some metal-working activities were conducted in or near these dwellings.

Regional Inter-Site Analysis

In order to analyze Fairfield within a larger geographical and temporal context, we must first establish what excavated quarter sites were contemporary with Fairfield and which sites have similar artifact assemblages. Using DAACS data, Karen Smith, Fraser Neiman, and Jillian Galle recently created a chronological seriation of 78 phased slave quarter sites in the Atlantic world (Smith, et al, 2008). All of these sites are fully catalogued in the DAACS database, and therefore provide data that is easily comparable.

Using ceramic data, Smith et al. created a ceramic seriation for these sites (see Figure 7), which was then verified through the implementation of correspondence analysis. Correspondence analysis, or CA, is an analytical statistical tool that enables patterns in a series of data to become easily visible. Assemblages with similar ceramic attributes group together on CA graphs, as seen below in Figure 8. The resulting collaborative data shows that the DAACS sites can be grouped into nine phases, or distinct temporal groupings, spanning between 1700 and 1770.

Using this analysis, it is easy to identify DAACS sites that are not only temporally related to the Fairfield quarters, but are also similar based on the composition of their ceramic assemblages. The Fairfield quarters appear in this seriation in phases 1 and 3. Most of these sites are geographically close to Fairfield, while others are more than a thousand miles away. As seen in Figure 8, the sites that are temporally and ceramically similar to Fairfield Phase I include quarters at Utopia, Richneck, Ashcomb's Quarter, North Hill, Governor's Land (JC298), and JC546 (unnamed plantation quarter site in James City County), all in the Chesapeake area. Fairfield Phase III is similar to quarters at Upper Rawlins, Pope, Utopia, Palace Lands, Monticello, and Chapline Place in the Chesapeake, as well as Seville Houses 15 and 16 in Jamaica. For this analysis, sites that are not, to date, divided into phases have been removed, so that the analysis of the remaining sites draws from comparable deposits. The remaining six Chesapeake area sites include Richneck, North Hill, Utopia II, Utopia III, Utopia IV, and Ashcomb's Quarter.

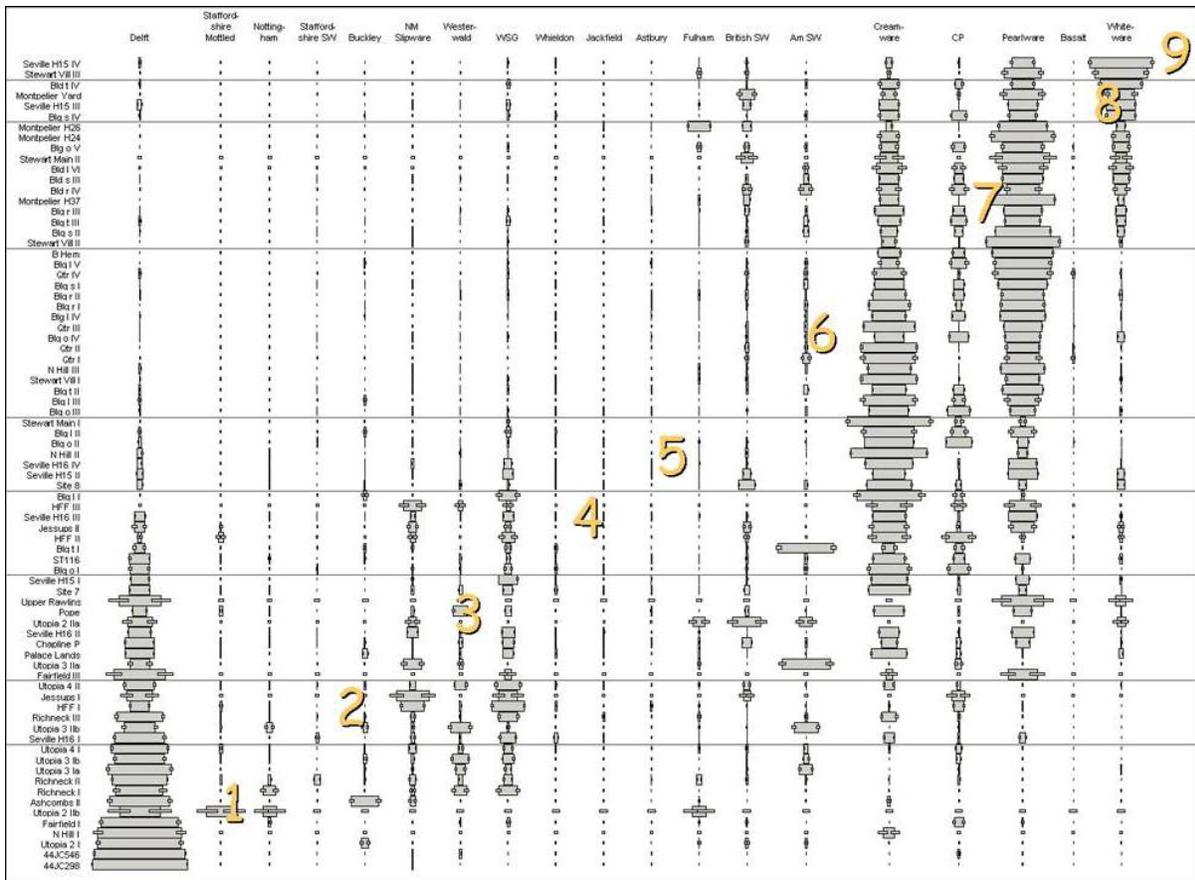


Figure 7: Ceramic Seriation of 78 Phased Slave Quarter Sites (Courtesy of Smith et al. 2008).

Besides being occupied at approximately the same time as the Fairfield quarters, all of these sites share common threads. Quarter architecture, landscape manipulation, access to imported goods, and evidence of African ritualism are points of comparison for these sites.

The simple, ground-laid sills or basic post-in-ground structures found at Fairfield are representative of slave architecture elsewhere in the region. The Utopia quarters, for example, had both post-in-ground and ground-laid sill construction. Similarly, the subfloor pits found in each of the Fairfield quarters are temporally and geographically distinct features. Common only in the Chesapeake region from the late-seventeenth to the early-nineteenth century, the presence of these features is most likely linked to the ethnic background of the enslaved in this area, as well as to the organization of labor on tobacco plantations. Research conducted by Fraser Neiman, Patricia Samford, and numerous other Chesapeake area archaeologists have provided several different hypothesis for the function of these pit features. Food storage, personal

property storage, and ritual practices each have been proposed as uses for these features (Samford 2007; Neiman 1997, 2004).

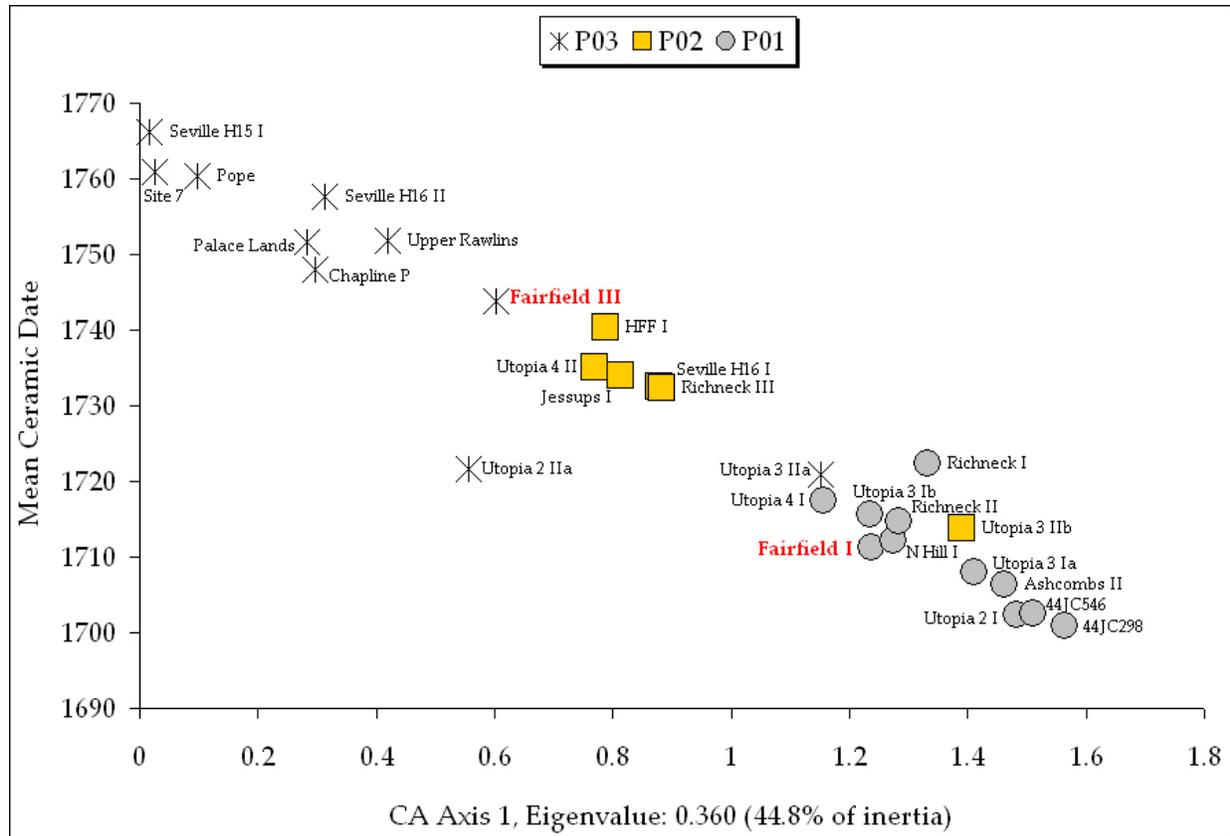


Figure 8: Graph of CA Axis 1 Scores and Mean Ceramic Dates for DAACS Site Seriation Phases 1 through 3 (Courtesy of Smith et al. 2008).

Another commonality between Fairfield and other regional quarter sites is the configuration of the slave dwellings and related landscape manipulation. Located close to the manor house, the Fairfield quarter area was at least partially visible to those approaching the house through the formal, northern entrance. The orientation of the first dwelling indicates that it was aligned with the original 1694 manor house (see Figure 2, above). Similarly, House 2, with its perpendicular orientation and later occupation date, may relate to a shift in plantation landscape design that included the construction of an addition to the manor house and the expansion of the formal, enclosed gardens to the rear of the house (Brown and Harpole 2003).

Since these changes in quarter construction and organization relate to changes made to the manor house architecture, it is likely that this quarter was visible from the formal approach to

the front (northern) side of the house. Therefore, rather than contriving a way to hide the quarter area from the formal landscape, it was incorporated into the formal landscape and reflected the orientation, and possibly the architecture, of the manor house. Furthermore, the high quantity of window glass associated with the earliest Fairfield dwelling indicates that it likely had a formal, finished appearance that matched the manor home.

At the same time, however, the activities around the quarters could be shielded from view with clever manipulation of access between the quarters and the manor home. For example, archaeology has shown that slaves likely entered the Fairfield manor on the west side of the house only, and did not use the most formal entrance-way on the north façade. Similarly, at Monticello in Virginia, those inhabiting slave dwellings in the southern dependency and along Mulberry Row had access to the manor house through an underground passage, which connected the basement and dependency areas to the main house by two flights of stairs. In this way, the household servants at both plantations could easily access the manor house without being seen.

Moving beyond architectural remains, the artifacts found at these sites demonstrate that slaves had access to markets and imported goods. In what little time they had to themselves, slaves often tended their own gardens or raised animals such as chickens, the products of which could be sold at local markets or to plantation owners. Slaves could then use this income to purchase imported goods, such as ceramics, beads, clothing, buttons, etc. The presence of

	Total Decorated	Total Ceramics	% Decorated
Richneck	193	1427	13.5%
North Hill	1	22	4.5%
Utopia II	22	178	12.4%
Utopia III	171	1568	10.9%
Utopia IV	121	734	16.5%
Ashcomb's	5	224	2.2%
Fairfield	110	1082	10.2%
Seville House 15	252	1718	14.7%
Seville House 16	244	1092	22.3%

Figure 9: Relative Frequency of Decorated Ceramics on Phased Sites.

decorated ceramics, while not the majority of ceramics on these sites, illustrates this access to goods beyond the plantation provisioning system. These ceramics also represent a variety of ware types imported from Europe and China, demonstrating a desire to acquire imported goods.

Imported personal items, such as metal buttons, glass beads, clothing buckles, and imported tobacco pipes, were found on all the sites in this analysis in relatively high numbers. As with the presence of imported and decorated ceramics, these artifacts demonstrate that the enslaved had access to imported goods. Furthermore, while these artifact counts are the product of only a preliminary analysis, they do hint at the idea that these personal items provided a conspicuous means for slaves to signal their wealth to others, giving these artifacts a potentially symbolic as well as functional purpose. This idea of “costly signaling” has been explored by several archaeologists at other Chesapeake slave quarter sites in recent years (Heath 1997, Galle 2006). Additional statistical analysis to test this theory of costly signaling at Fairfield will be an aspect of future research.

	Clothing Buckles	Buttons	Beads	Imported Tobacco Pipes
Fairfield	1	4	142	121
Ashcomb’s	0	0	0	25
North Hill	0	0	0	0
Richneck	3	58	42	745
Utopia II	1	8	120	923
Utopia III	6	41	16	722
Utopia IV	1	52	42	607
Seville House 15	0	8	4	412
Seville House 16	0	4	13	395

Figure 10: Personal Items. Quantities represent artifact counts.

As discussed at length in her book *Subfloor Pits and the Archaeology of Slavery in Colonial Virginia*, Patricia Samford suggests that some of the subfloor pit features in the Chesapeake perhaps served as small shrines and were part of a system of African ritualism. In the early to mid-eighteenth century, many slaves in the Chesapeake were still new arrivals from Africa, or first generation American-born slaves. Furthermore, most of them were taken from Western Africa, particularly the area belonging to the Igbo-speaking group.

Evidence suggesting some African ritual traditions were still practiced in the Chesapeake by these individuals is found at Fairfield. A raccoon baculum and cowrie shells, both possibly ritually symbolic, were discovered in the fill of a Fairfield subfloor pit. Cowrie and other shells were discovered at both Utopia and Richneck quarters. Similarly, several pits at Utopia appear to have been constructed for, and used as, shrines. Shells, glass, and iron artifacts, all possibly relating to African ritualism, were found in these pits (Samford 2007: 157-166). Finally, blue, red, white, and black glass beads discovered at Fairfield, Utopia, and Richneck may also relate to African ritual practices.



Figure 11: Raccoon Baculum from Fairfield Subfloor Pit (left) and Utopia Subfloor Pit with Shells (right). Images available online at www.daacs.org.

It is particularly interesting to note the aforementioned similarities between the Fairfield and Utopia plantations because both of these plantations were owned for a time by the same family, the Carter family. Could these similarities, including architecture, access to imported goods, and African ritualism, between these slave quarters hint at a mobility within the Carter family's enslaved workers? Is it possible that some of the same people could have inhabited quarters at both sites?

In her work, *From Calabar to Carter's Grove*, Lorena Walsh mentions that the Fairfield plantation may at one time have served as a training and redistribution center for the other

plantations owned and operated by the Burwell and Carter families (Walsh 1997: 12, 38, 49). Fairfield was perhaps a flagship for a fleet of plantations, as it were. Conceivably, laborers may have lived on any number of plantations within the Burwell and Carter families, including Utopia and Carter's Grove.

It is possible, then, that Fairfield is similar to other plantations in the area because the slave families may have, at one time, resided and worked at Fairfield before being moved to other plantations. While difficult to prove analytically, this idea would explain why sites near Fairfield are so similar to one another; perhaps the inhabitants themselves were the same, creating similar patterns in different locations. This concept also hints at a fluid system of residence, with at least some possible mobility between plantations for the enslaved. This idea of slave mobility could relate to, and possibly change, our understanding of kinship systems and organization, labor organization, architectural practices, coping strategies, and numerous other aspects of daily enslaved life.

Inter-Site Analysis: Beyond the Chesapeake

Finally, how does the Fairfield quarter compare with sites beyond the Chesapeake? Can this site be used as a representative example of slave life in the greater Atlantic region? In many ways the daily lives of the enslaved in the Caribbean were very similar to those of their northern counterparts. Going back to the DAACS site seriation, there are two quarters from Jamaica, Seville houses 15 and 16, that are in the same phase as Fairfield Phase I and whose ceramic assemblages are very similar to that of Fairfield.

Located on Jamaica's north coast, Seville plantation included a "slave village" where both houses 15 and 16 were excavated. The architecture for these houses was similar to their northern counterparts, although both houses had stone foundations and floors (Figure 12, House 15 image). The walls, however, were constructed from simple posts and wattle-and-daub.

The organization of the slave dwellings at Seville into a "slave village" is similar to the Chesapeake examples previously mentioned. Like their northern counterparts, the establishment of a "slave village" created a division between activity or work areas and the formal landscape of the manor. The clustering of houses together on the landscape also occurred in the Chesapeake at such plantations as Monticello, where Thomas Jefferson constructed a long road of both activity and domestic structures that was separated from, and shielded from view of, the manor

house. However, this type of grouping of slave work or dwelling areas was not universal in the Chesapeake, and therefore may relate more to differences between plantations rather than regional variations.

Subfloor pits are conspicuously absent from these structures, and other storage techniques were likely used. Labor organization and housing patterns different from those of the



Figure 12: Seville House 15 Excavations. Note the cobblestone floor in the upper right. Available online at www.daacs.org.

Chesapeake may account for this lack of pits, as they were perhaps not a necessity in the Caribbean. Use of pits for storage may have also proven impractical due to the tropical environment of the Caribbean.

The artifacts recovered from the Seville houses are very similar to those found in the Chesapeake region. Again, ceramics from these sites included a high number of imported and decorated sherds, and imported personal items were also recovered in high numbers (see Figures 9 and 10, above). As in Virginia, the slaves in Jamaica had access to imported goods and likely used these items as a means of displaying status.

Similar to the Chesapeake sites, blue, red, and white glass beads were found at both of the Seville Houses which may relate to African ritual practices. Furthermore, the presence of

cowrie shells and other possibly symbolic shells were found in features from these sites. However, given their proximity to the ocean, these artifacts are not conclusively related to African ritual practices.

Conclusions

By far not an exhaustive study of slave sites in the Atlantic World, what this research has hopefully demonstrated is that analysis of the Fairfield quarters provides clues and insights into slave culture as it existed in the American Colonies and Caribbean. Quarter architecture and landscape manipulation, slaves' access to imported goods, and evidence of Africa ritualism are all aspects of the Fairfield quarter that are shared with plantations within the Chesapeake and greater Atlantic region.

Other concepts and questions brought to light through examination of the Fairfield quarter, such as the idea of mobility of the enslaved between different plantations, will be the subject of future research. Finally, this analysis has hopefully demonstrated the advantage and usefulness of comparable data, as produced by the DAACS database, and the benefit of inter-site analysis to further our understanding of not only the Fairfield quarter, but of slave culture throughout the Atlantic world.

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