



December 2023 Newsletter

“If It Looks Like a Barn, Then It’s a Barn:” Examining New Archaeological Research and Interpretation of the Levi Jordan Plantation Quarters Community

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Introduction

From 1986 through 2002, I directed historical archaeological research at the Levi Jordan Plantation in Brazoria County, Texas (Brown 2013). Historical research and test excavations at the sugar mill have continued to the present. One of the results of this research was the purchase of approximately 90 acres of the original plantation by the Houston Endowment in 2002, and the transfer of the property from descendants of the Jordans to the State of Texas. The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department managed it for several years before the Texas Legislature shifted management to the Texas Historical Commission (THC). Since 2002 the two state agencies contracted with several firms to add to our knowledge of the archaeology of the main house and the area around the Jordan Plantation Quarters.

From 2016 through 2018, Coastal Environments, Inc. (CEI), conducted excavations into a portion of one of the four cabin blocks previously defined as making up the Jordan Quarters Community (JQC) (Figure 1). In 2022 this firm produced a report on this work entitled *Archaeological Investigations at the Levi Jordan Plantation (41BO165) State Historic Site, Brazoria County, Texas* by J. Ryan, D.G. Hunter, B. Haley, and D.B. Kelley. They stated: “A

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synthesis of all published archaeological data from previous investigations conducted at 41BO165, with that recovered in 2018, strongly suggests that the Block I-IV structures were not slave/tenant quarters but large, likely antebellum, livestock barns” (Ryan et al. 2022: iii). The CEI report led directly to this unfortunately long-delayed and overly short rebuttal.

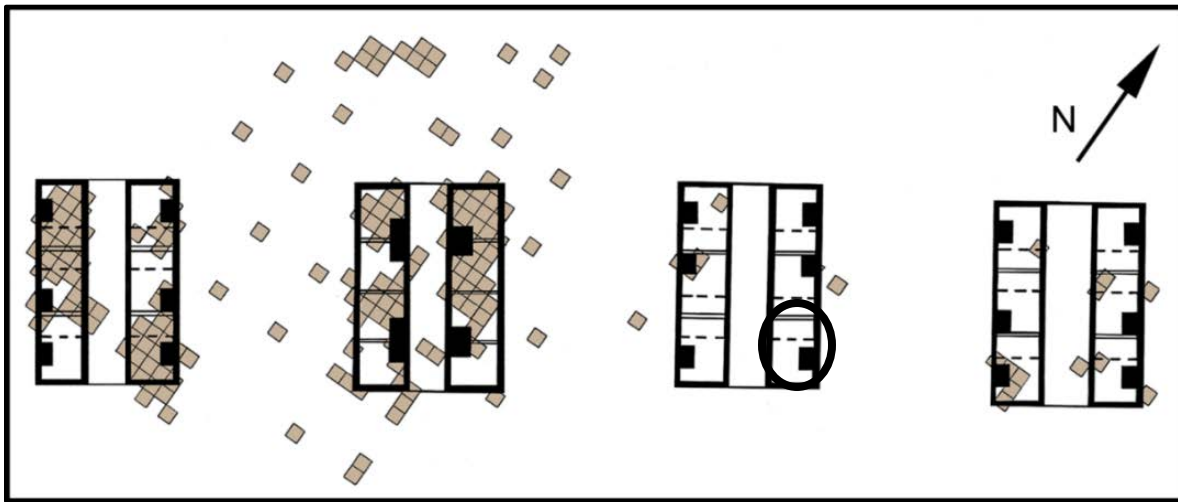


Figure 1: Drawing of the hypothesized JQC with the University of Houston project excavation units (shaded squares) and the approximate area excavated in Block III by CEI (oval).

The interpretations made within the CEI report appear to be primarily based on the authors’ forcefully and often asserted, though largely unsubstantiated, opinions concerning the function of four structures on the site and certain architectural features within them.

Unfortunately, there is not room here to discuss all of the numerous methodological and interpretive problems contained within this report. However, two major problems will be discussed: CEI’s lack of testing for function; and the excavation methodology employed.

The Four Buildings Were Not Like “Normal” Slave Cabins, They Were Shaped Like Barns

As slave/tenant quarters, the floor plan of the Block I-IV structures at 41BO165 is completely aberrant and has no known equivalents (Ryan et al. 2022:197).

To demonstrate the aberrant nature of the cabin blocks, Ryan et al. created a chart using a sample of 25 cabins, derived from 11 quarters sites. These included sites from Virginia (1), Maryland (1), Texas (2), and Louisiana (7). A vast majority of the cabins selected for inclusion were located in Louisiana (19 of 25), with 10 selected from a single plantation. Employing this data, the JQC cabins were unquestionably outside CEI's defined "norm." In fairness, once we were able to define the footprint of Block II in 1987-88, several of the University of Houston (UH) crew (including myself) stated that it looked like a barn or stable. The JQC cabin blocks are clearly "aberrant," but that means they are different, outside the norm. However, it takes archaeological testing to determine their function, not a simple statement that they are different and what they look most like. CEI, and apparently the THC, elected to conclude that the blocks could not have served as residences for human beings: they lacked hearths, interior walls, and yielded an artifact assemblage like a barn. I would be the first to agree that *if* the blocks lacked hearths and interior walls defining cabins, then the four blocks likely functioned as barns. Indeed, this issue was one of the reasons we refined our research design in order to test for the presence of walls within the blocks. Ryan et al. state that the typical artifact assemblage for barns is poorly known, and then stated that their collection is like that from a barn. CEI hypothesized that the majority of artifacts recovered by the UH project were likely the result of people dumping trash or caching artifacts after the barns ceased to function as barns.

The point here is that an "aberrant" footprint does not, by itself, determine function. The question of no interior walls and the lack of hearths are tests for the function of the buildings, but here again, the CEI investigation simply stated that the hearth features we defined were too aberrant for hearths. CEI contended that the interior walls we identified were based on an almost

complete lack of evidence, and CEI incorrectly stated that walls were defined in the laboratory after leaving the field.

The Question of Hearths

The CEI report claims the hearths we defined in the JQC blocks were “interior pier supports” for the large posts supporting the roofs of each block. CEI contended that the features were not hearths, because they were “aberrant” in terms of construction and location within the blocks. The CEI report states that hearths built at the time had “solid brick foundations.” CEI stated that in the JQC these features were simply brick retaining walls surrounding a rubble-filled void. They stated that these brick walls were not strong enough to support the typical one-and-a-half to two-story chimney found in slave cabins. They conducted no testing to determine the accuracy of this statement. Therefore, it is simply another assertion. Interestingly, the CEI report notes that four of the known hearths connected with the main house (3) and its original kitchen (1) (Leezer 2006; McWilliams 2013; Brown 2013) were brick-walled, rubble-filled void features very similar to those that CEI did not consider to be hearths in the JQC blocks. However, testing the function of these brick features is not accomplished by comparing what they look like compared with “standard hearths.”

The function of these features should be based on their archaeological context and artifact associations. CEI did not attempt such a test, likely a result of their excavation methodology being unable to provide the required detailed data. The CEI report states that their excavation of a small portion of Block III, was excavated by employing 2m by 2m units with standard 5cm levels. This means that they removed 43.06 square feet and 7.06 cubic feet per level. They claimed to have maintained “tight” provenience control by photo-mapping artifacts after they were exposed and prior to collection. Each photo-mapped artifact was assigned a unique lot

number. Thus, they could map artifacts and record each artifact's exact location, except for those found during screening. Unfortunately, no photo-maps with artifacts were included within the copy of the report that I was able to obtain. In an attempt to use the data from the approximately 120 pages of artifact appendices, including provenience information, it became clear that their actual methodology recorded considerably less than "tight" vertical and horizontal provenience for a vast majority of the artifacts listed. For example, unit N118 E94 had approximately 337 artifacts recorded in the artifact appendices for level #4. Of the 337 artifacts recorded and classified, only 16 were assigned a separate field specimen number. The remaining 321 were given the same lot number. A metal ring found within this level received the number "103.16," while two coins were recorded as "lot 103" along with the 319 other unmapped artifacts recovered from the screen (Ryan et al. 2022:320). For this unit and level CEI's excavation strategy provided tight provenience control on 4.7% of the artifacts, and no photo-maps. If CEI did not map the artifacts collected as lot #103, before taking them from the ground, they would not have been able to identify or define linear "wall shadow" features, nor would they have been able to identify artifact associations with architectural features like the brick-walled, rubble-filled void features.

The provenience control employed by the UH project from 1988 until 2002 (Brown 2013) involved dividing each standard 5ft by 5ft unit into 25 1ft by 1ft subunits. Each level was excavated as an arbitrary 0.1 foot in depth, unless a soil or artifact feature was defined, and then shallower levels or features were excavated separately. Thus, we generally removed 1 square foot or 0.1 cubic foot per provenience unit. As much as possible, artifacts were left in the ground and mapped prior to removal and screening. We produced field drawings of subunits and levels.

The question is, did all of this detailed excavation permit us to test issues such as the function of the brick-walled, rubble-filled void features and the presence of interior cabin walls within the JQC blocks?

Analyzing types of artifacts, and their distributions across the interior of the JQC blocks, is a way of testing the function of the brick-walled, rubble-filled void features. CEI excavated the interior space of the southeastern portion of Block III-B and stated that “CEI’s 2018 excavations confirmed that the floor plan of Block III was similar to that of Block I, and perhaps to that of Block IV” (Ryan et al. 2022:216). The “hearth” in III-B-2 in my hypothetical map of the block (see Figure 1) had been misplaced by CEI. As the UH project conducted limited excavation in Block III, I have employed artifact data recovered from an equivalent portion of Block I for this, and another test to follow (Figure 2). In testing the function of the brick-walled, rubble-filled void features from cabins I-B-2 and -3, the artifacts employed were recovered from near the base of the so-called “abandonment deposit” through the underlying “sub-floor deposits” (Brown 2013). For comparative purposes, artifacts were also drawn from levels excavated below the overburden according to the CEI report. If the brick-walled, rubble-filled void features functioned as hearths, then a higher frequency of artifacts that reflect this function, should be recovered in close association with the features in the JQC blocks. The artifact types should include food preparation (particularly cooking) as well as hearth cleaning. On the other hand, if the features were part of the roof support structure for barns/stables, then artifacts related to food preparation and hearth cleaning would not be expected to have built-up in the area of the internal pier foundations.

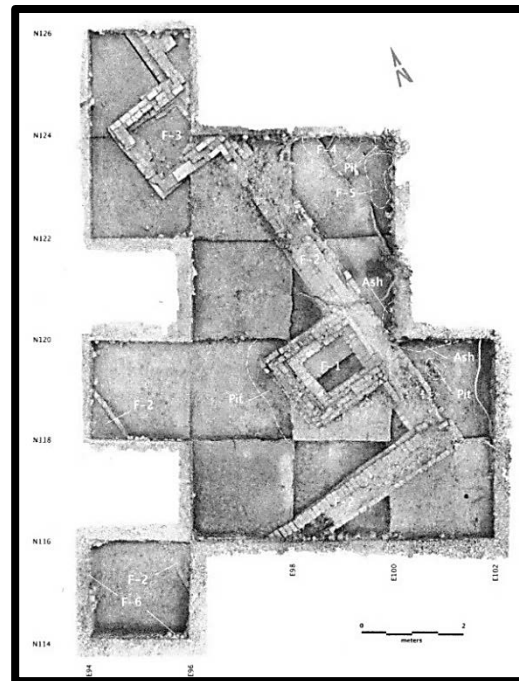
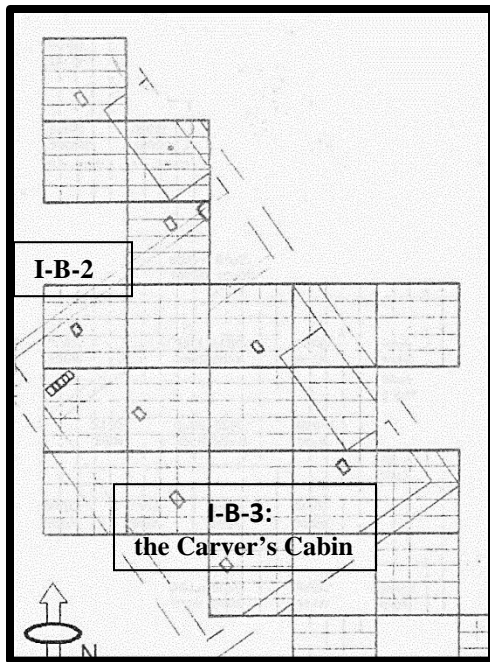


Figure 2: Maps of the excavations within cabins I-B-2 and -3 (left) and the 14 units excavated by CEI in Block III. Both units and subunits were drawn over pen I-B. (Photo-map on the right was adapted from Ryan et al. 2022:140)

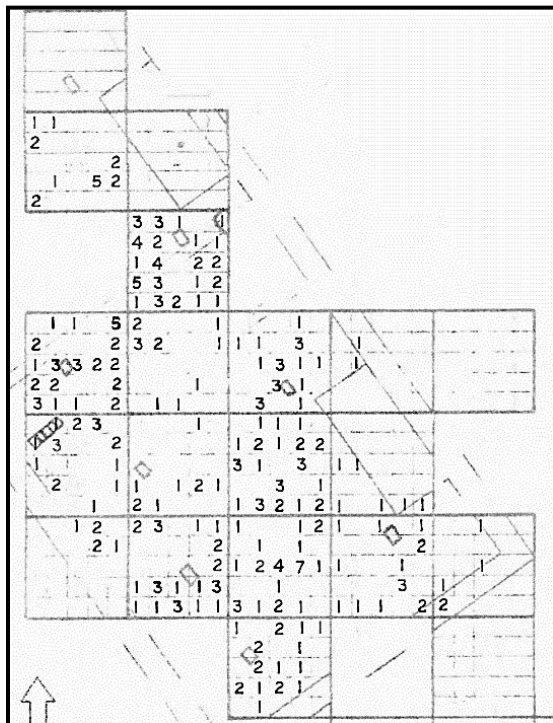


Figure 3: The distribution of **buttons** within cabin I-B-3.

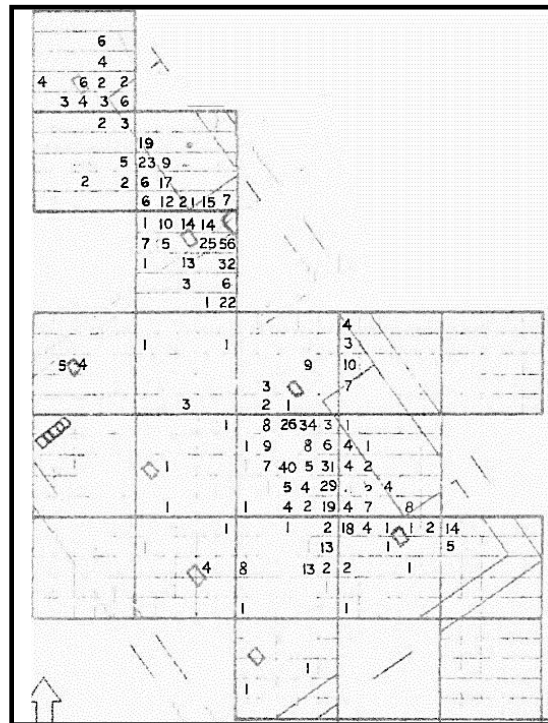


Figure 4: Distribution of **eggshell** fragments within I-B-3 and the hearth area of I-B-2.

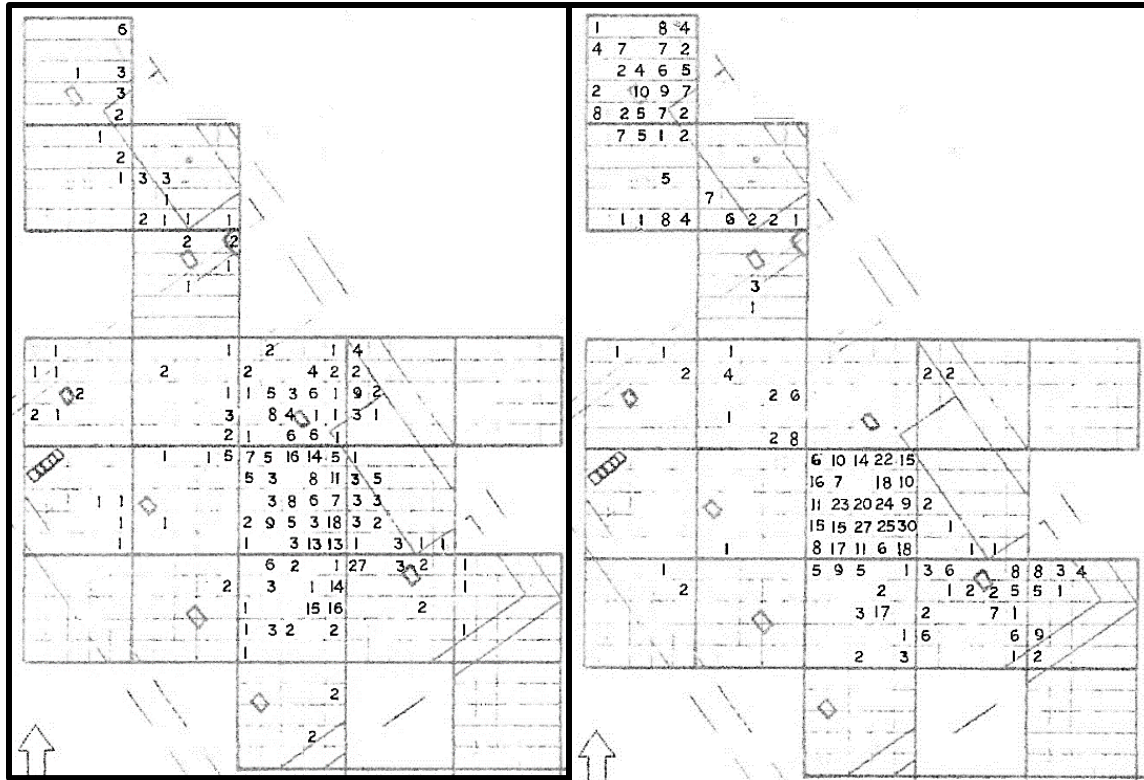


Figure 5: The distribution of **fish scales**. Figure 6: The distribution of “**burned bones**.”

In order to test the function of these features in the JQC, the distribution of three artifact types were mapped over the 11 units excavated by CEI inside cabins III-B-2 and -3, and the units excavated by UH within cabins I-B-2 and -3 (Figures 3-7). Artifact types utilized included: eggshell, burned bone, and fish scales. “Burned bone” included three individual artifact types including bone fragments that were charred, calcinated, or bore signs of having been cut or butchered. These three “types” were selected because they represent artifacts that resulted from the use of a hearth floor during food preparation, cooking, serving, and hearth cleaning. Charcoal was not mapped because complete counts were not available from either investigation. The artifacts included from cabins I-B-2 and -3 are generally small to tiny (the UH project weighed all artifacts by type during cataloguing). The small size of these artifacts made it possible for them to fall through cracks and holes in the floorboards, gaps between floorboards, and gaps between the floorboards and brick walls of the hearths.

Figure 7 illustrates the frequency and distribution of the “burned bone” and buttons overlaid on the published photo of the CEI excavations into III-B-2 and -3. This data was compiled from the artifact listings in Appendices “E” (buttons) and “G” of the CEI report (Ryan et al. 2022: 327–330 and 337–363). This source recorded six pieces of eggshell, all recovered from a feature outside of the floorspace of III-B. As no eggshell or fish scales were recorded as having been recovered from within the footprint of Block III, only the “burned bone” artifacts were mapped. Therefore, only the bone fragments that were calcinated, charred, or cut or butchered, recovered from the interior deposits of Block III-B, and recorded in Appendix “G” (Ryan et al. 2022: 337–363), were used to produce this “distributional map.”

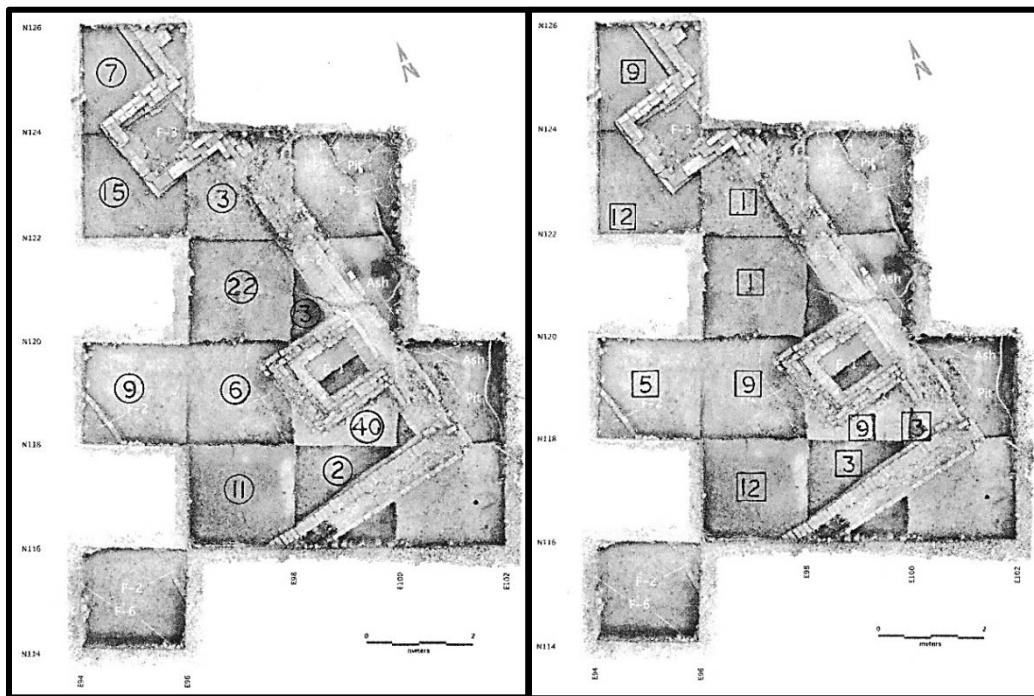


Figure7: Maps showing the distribution by unit of “burned bone” fragments (left) and buttons (right) recovered by CEI in Block III. (Unit map adapted from Ryan et al. 2022:140)

These maps demonstrate the major difference in the distributional data obtained by the two excavation projects. However, Figure 7 also demonstrates that the highest frequency of “burned bone” fragments appear to be more closely associated with the brick-walled, rubble-

filled void features in cabins III-B-2 and -3. Thus, the result of mapping the burned, calcinated, or cut and butchered bone fragments, might provide limited support for the hypothesis that features 1 and 3 functioned as hearths, not interior pier supports. For cabins III-B-2 and -3 the highest density of bone fragments occurred north, west, and south of feature 1, and north and west of feature 3. Buttons appear to have been distributed more evenly across the floorspace with the exception of the area between the two features. Based on measurements taken from the CEI excavation photo-map, the lowest density of both of these artifact types appeared in the location where I hypothesized the presence of two internal walls (see Figure 1). As with the maps from I-B-2 and -3, the walls may have blocked the deposition of these artifacts.

The Question of Internal Walls

According to Ryan et al., CEI failed to identify anything they considered as evidence for internal wall(s) in the portion of Block III they excavated. They stated that the evidence obtained during the UH excavations was not substantial enough to support our hypothesis that internal walls were present. Unfortunately, CEI did not define what they would have accepted as evidence for internal walls, they just asserted they did not find it.

[The UH project evidence included] “wall shadows” (linear artifact-free zones) which were discerned through artifact distribution studies conducted in the lab long after the fieldwork was completed. CEI encountered no archaeological evidence for the existence of interior walls dividing Block III-B into separate cabins, or the space within theoretical cabins III-B-2 and III-B-3 into two-room dwellings, as proposed by Brown. . . . The almost complete lack of structural evidence for interior walls in the Blocks I-IV structures supports the theory that they were not quarters buildings (Ryan et al. 2022:231).

To correct a part of CEI’s statement: *ALL* of these linear “artifact shadow” features were defined in the field during excavation. The first “wall shadows” were identified in Block II

during the 1989 field season, approximately 13 years prior to leaving the field. We hypothesized that “wall shadows” were formed when wood-frame walls were built to define individual cabins. These walls were anchored by posts set along the foundation walls. The base sill of an interior wall was nailed to the floorboards. The effect of the wood “siding,” the framing posts, and the sill created a block to the deposition of artifacts beneath the interior walls, thus “an artifact shadow.” The excavation strategy we employed included making artifact distribution maps during the excavation of subunits as artifacts were exposed. This technique identified artifact

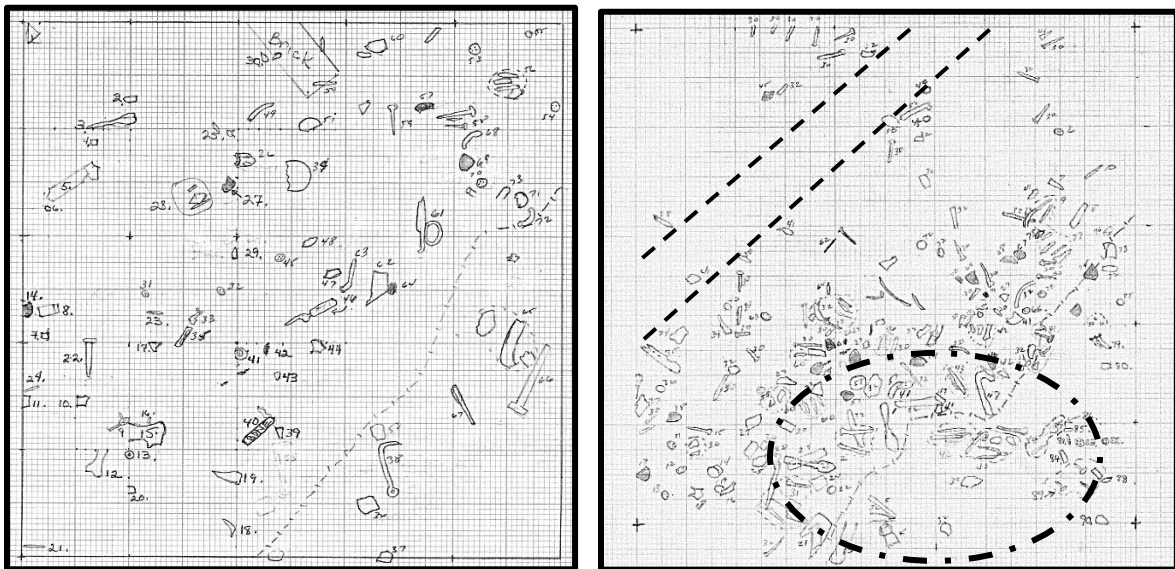


Figure 8: Copies of UH field drawings of the distribution of artifacts from L4 (left) and L5 (right) of unit 945E/995N. The “artifact shadow” (linear dotted lines) appeared near the top of level #5. Many of the tools, raw materials (including several larger pieces of debitage), and an unfinished cameo, were concentrated in the oval area in levels #5-6.

features and associations. It also identified areas with few artifacts. Figure 8 shows copies of two field maps made during the excavation of two successive levels in unit 945E/995N. The “wall shadow” is clearly defined in the drawing of level #5 and was found to continue to the northeast through unit 950E/1000N. These drawings illustrate that the northwestern portion of the unit yielded far fewer artifacts throughout the three levels (5-7). The linear, low artifact frequency

feature can be observed running approximately eight feet to the northeast and terminating at a large posthole feature near the exterior brick wall of pen I-B. As illustrated in Figure 8, our excavation methodology also permitted the rapid identification of artifact features, in this case a shell, bone, and wood carving location in cabin I-B-3 (Harris 1999; Brown 2013).

Some Concluding Comments and a Personal Note

One of the ironies of the CEI interpretation is that UH project personnel looked at the shape of the buildings nearly 30 years before they did, and several participants, including myself, noted that the footprints of Blocks I and II looked like barns or stables. However, unlike the CEI report, we recognized that the artifacts and contexts being recovered and identified did not fit what the building footprints “looked like.” Our survey of available literature on housing for the enslaved ended like CEI’s: we could find nothing like the JQC blocks. Consequently, unlike CEI, our response was to test both functional hypotheses. In order to accomplish this we altered our excavation strategy, redesigning it to provide the evidence necessary to determine the function of the buildings. The CEI report suggests that their knowledge of what barns and stables and “typical” quarters buildings should look like, made the JQC structures too “aberrant” for quarters but right for barns and stables. This is nothing more than employing a limited selection of “cultural knowledge” to interpret the past and is “proof by assertion.” It is not testing. I can add, as an aside, that I was involved in building and maintaining a stable over several years, even occasionally interacting with its 12 inhabitants. The JQC buildings look similar to my barn. However, the artifacts and artifact features in the JQC were not like those found in my barn, nor were the internal divisions (stalls versus cabins), or the floor.

I understand that the data derived by the CEI research “differs” from the UH project. That is hardly a rare occurrence in archaeology. I would argue that discussion and debate on such

differences is healthy, and that I have no issues with debate. However, in this instance I think that Ryan et al. and the THC “editors” have crossed a major line. In reading CEI’s edited report, I was surprised at the derogatory tone of their comments, not by the repeated assertions that we were wrong. I have been wrong before, and Ryan et al. certainly are not the first to point that out. As is clear from this overly brief rebuttal, I do not believe that the CEI interpretations are valid and are certainly not supported by their own data. However, I was more than a little “surprised” to discover that they alleged a lack of professional integrity on my part as a contributing factor as to why I was “wrong” and CEI was “correct.” The report’s abstract states that my “unpublished field maps, notes, and photographs should be examined” (Ryan et al. 2022: iv) in an effort to provide support for the interior pier supports hypothesis, as well as the lack of interior walls. I have no problem with going over this material. They should have done this prior to going into the field. Unfortunately, they go on to recommend that all of our units be “re-excavated to verify the accuracy of Brown’s excavation map” and “**locate his unmapped features**” (Ryan et al. 2022: iv) (my emphasis). This is a theme that was repeated in several locations within the report, but never addressed with examples or proof of these mythical “hidden features.” It is both unfortunate and unnecessary that today debate includes the apparent need to trash another person’s integrity, and not simply debate ideas and the meaning of data. I was taught way back in the 1960s and 1970s that archaeology moved forward by the reasoned discussion of differences, not through questioning the integrity of those with differing views.

Members of the THC, including the site director for the Jordan Plantation, have stated that the data sets are different and not comparable, so I should just “move on.” The CEI report purports that one goal was to examine the UH project’s conclusions. CEI and the Park staff have taken the excavation of a small portion of one of the blocks and stated that the UH project’s

functional interpretation is wrong (Ryan et al. 2022; S. Shannon, personal communication, 2023). Given the CEI approach to debate, I wonder if the new narrative might be the result of THC hiring past members of the CEI crew from the Jordan research, to work on and interpret the Park? Recently the interpretation of the site presented to visitors included the statement that “the slave quarters were somewhere else on the plantation, the earlier work was wrong” (G. Raska, personal communication, 2023).

This alteration of the narrative related to the enslaved and tenant families who resided in the JQC by the THC is concerning. I once commented that a map of the main house area of the Jordan Plantation, made by a descendant, seemed to have removed a majority of the plantation’s residents from history, as it failed to include the JQC. This is at least partly understandable because the JQC was long gone before the descendant was born. A park, managed by the THC, and originally purchased to present interpretations of the lives and culture of African Americans in the rural south during antebellum and postbellum times, now seems to be attempting to repeat that removal. The THC appears to be employing a single contract report full of untested assertions. The primary conclusion of that report removes a majority of the people and their behaviors from the area of the State Park, while replacing those people with livestock. The THC and the Park staff may be correct in their belief that the data sets are different, but they appear to have done nothing to determine why that is the case. Maybe it is just easier at this time to choose the data set that removes people. Building a small “19th century-like” brick kiln and letting visitors make a brick, and presenting reenactments of historic activities (like cooking) is important and useful for visitors. However, such exhibits are not sufficient when they are a replacement for a narrative about the people who actually performed many of those activities on the original Jordan Plantation. Although some people, including a number of Texas politicians,

might be happier with just the reenactments. According to a recent news report in *Texas Monthly* magazine, the THC has removed books on slavery from the shops in visitor centers on state parks in Texas (Monacelli 2023; see Boboltz 2023).

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