

## **Note on Reconstructing and Interpreting the Domestic Architecture of Slavery**

Given the gravity of the topic, any attempt to interpret the daily lives of the enslaved should never be undertaken without seriously considering all of the related issues. One of the first, of course, is to determine what exactly is the goal of the endeavor. Given the wide array of circumstances and possible outcomes and audiences, this is probably the most crucial part of the exercise, and should provide direction for how the rest of the effort will develop. There are many questions to answer. Is the interpretation intended to be a permanent or temporary installation? Is the overall goal to depict the domestic circumstances of slavery as accurately as possible given the evidence and the resources? Is the installation meant to represent a specific place at a specific point in time? Is the presentation aiming to be as historically accurate and credible as possible? How will the educational messages be transmitted – ie. what other resources will be available/used to augment the physical representations? How COMMITTED is the organization to quality and responsibility? And finally, why is a recreated quarter the best choice to meet the organization's educational goals?

If we assume that the answers to the above all lead to a high quality, lasting educational experience that will accomplish a variety of institutional and educational goals, then the effort to construct a slave quarter will be lengthy and involved. Much research has been carried out over the last 25 years re: the appearance and overall character of the domestic structures occupied by the enslaved in Virginia and Maryland from the late 17<sup>th</sup> until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. One outstanding outcome of that research has been to indicate that although there are many similarities that have been documented, there are easily as many variations. The domiciles of enslaved workers living at plantations and towns, where the number of individuals might range from hundreds to less than five, and over time and space, have been found to be accordingly variable. Any interpretation that aims to be a serious scholarly and educational enterprise must be rooted in the research that has been carried out to inform the many decisions related to recreating the dwellings of slaves and, therefore, the building in question.

Once the many decisions have been made relating to the type of structure, furnishings, and related interpretive programs, the matter of recreating a structure that is authentic and historically credible is both time consuming and expensive. When we recreated the slave quarter aimed at representing the quarters of the enslaved living at the Mount Vernon outlying farms, it was only after several years of research, determining the programmatic goals and interpretive messages, and then gathering the resources to construct an authentic cabin. The total cost of building the cabin alone was easily in excess of \$100K. For a more recent example of this type of effort, refer to the recently completed slave cabins at Thomas Jefferson's Monticello plantation and at James Madison's Montpelier plantation.

In conclusion, I would urge anyone who is considering undertaking such an ambitious project to balance the potential benefits against both the financial expense and the potential for unintended and serious negative consequences if the effort is not carried out in a systematic, thoughtful manner.

Dennis J. Pogue, PhD  
University of Maryland  
2-10-20