

# Measuring the Social, Spatial, and Temporal Dimensions of Virginia Slave Housing<sup>i</sup>

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As scholars from a range of fields have increasingly embraced the history of slavery in America as a focus of inquiry, and as the general public has become more invested in the issue as the result of publications, museum programming, and other outlets, questions pertaining to the conditions of the daily lives of slaves have taken on greater significance. Central to developing a nuanced interpretation of the living conditions experienced by the enslaved is an understanding of the size, layout, and quality of the housing afforded those individuals, and of how and why the characteristics of those structures appear to have varied across time and space. The project, “Measuring the Social, Spatial, and Temporal Dimensions of Virginia Slave Housing,” was a two-year effort supported by a National Endowment for the Humanities Collaborative Research grant (RZ-50619-06), which was aimed at contributing to the ongoing study of this topic by compiling and analyzing a corpus of data pertaining to slave housing in Virginia.



Figure 1. The stone Arcola slave quarter, Loudoun County; the two phases of the building's construction were dendro-dated to 1813 (left) and 1845 (right).

While anthropologists, historians, architectural historians, folklorists, and archaeologists all had made significant contributions to this work over the last four decades, the lack of a database of slave domestic structures has rendered those interpretations anecdotal at worst and statistically suspect at best. More specifically, while we know that patterns in the characteristics of slave

housing existed, the ability to explore those patterns by framing larger comparative questions has been hindered by the lack of consistent information. The goal of this project was to begin to address those issues by carrying out the following tasks: (1) compiling an array of information on Virginia slave housing from architectural, archaeological, and documentary sources; (2) generating new data by recording a sample of extant buildings according to standardized architectural information, interpretive field notes, and photographs; (3) improving the temporal framework for slave buildings by dating selected standing structures through dendrochronology (tree-ring dating); and, (4) making the results and the various databases available to scholars and the public through a website hosted by the Center for Historic Preservation at the University of Mary Washington.

Gathering the extensive but often fragmentary and widely dispersed information from previous studies constituted a particular priority, as this data would guide the subsequent investigations. Project staff and student researchers examined scholarly treatments of slave buildings, National Register forms and files, and field records compiled by researchers at regional institutions and, most important, the architectural site files housed at the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (DHR) in Richmond. A second major source consisted of architectural information from archaeological excavations and surveys, primarily derived from reports on file at the DHR. Finally, documentary records, particularly period tax data and census schedules, and fire insurance policies prepared by the Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia (from 1796 to 1865), provided an additional source of primary evidence. Importantly, over half of the Mutual Assurance buildings relate to urban slave housing arrangements, a category that architectural historians and archaeologists, to date, have largely neglected. While represented only by counts rather than architectural details, the United States Census for Virginia in 1860 recorded literally thousands of slave buildings in association with individual owners and their variably sized slave holdings.

In reviewing records from past studies, it became clear that the vast majority of standing structures had been only minimally and inconsistently documented. Our goal for improving this situation called for developing a system that would require a higher level of recording than typically has been carried out during preliminary or reconnaissance-level architectural surveys conducted as part of cultural resource management projects, but falling short of full architectural documentation that may necessitate multiple days of study and considerable expense. We adapted an existing recording system and form that had been developed by Willie Graham of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and Fraser Neiman of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation for use in cataloging examples of earthfast architecture, mainly from archaeological sites (called the Database of Early Chesapeake Architecture, or DECA). We proposed to record a minimum of twelve slave buildings using the revised DECA form, capturing information about building types, construction form, architectural details, and dating evidence.

Assigning dependable dates of construction for slave houses is a particularly important objective for studying how these buildings developed and varied over time and space. Generally speaking, tightly dating old buildings is problematic at best, even with available documentary sources and diagnostic technological and stylistic characteristics. In the case of slave houses, this exercise is particularly challenging, as specific documentary evidence is generally lacking and the typically simple manner of construction offers only a limited range of potentially helpful metrics. When

this project was initiated only a single Virginia slave house (Prestwould, in Mecklenburg County) had been dated based on dendrochronological testing. In order to expand our sample and as a test to determine the efficacy of the approach, we proposed to dendro-date at least eight additional buildings.



Figure 2. Michael Worthington of the Oxford Dendrochronological Laboratory taking a sample from a rafter for dendro-dating, while Professor Gary Stanton of the University of Mary Washington records the location.

Over the two-year span of the project we managed to gather information on more than 900 structures. The largest portion consists of 355 extant buildings that had been previously identified (post-1965) as slave domestic structures; these range across sixty-six counties and five cities. Another 124 buildings derive from archaeological sites, specifically more advanced excavation projects that produced direct evidence of slave dwellings. Less complete information is available for another 136 buildings generated from survey level archaeological investigations. Nearly 300 slave buildings were recorded between 1796 and 1865 in the fire insurance policies of the Mutual Assurance Society of Virginia, each with a sketch plan and details such as dimensions, height (number of stories), material for roof and walls, and function (quarter,

servant’s dwelling, servant’s lodging rooms, etc.). While not providing a perfect correlation of the number of occupants per building, the 1860 census data elucidates broader trends pertaining to the vexing question of how many slaves typically occupied a given structure. Considerable variation exists as to the degree and quality of information per building contained within the overall database, but the above examples and counts are much larger than had existed before, and they constitute the first comprehensive compilation of this kind.

As discussed in more detail in the project’s final report, we now understand more of what we do and do not know about slave housing in Virginia. As to surviving buildings, they remain largely confined to the antebellum period, but with distinct temporal and regional variation. We lack more detailed information for the Shenandoah Valley, the western regions of the state, and the Eastern Shore, whereas eastern and southeastern Virginia are relatively better represented. In terms of construction types, more log buildings seem to survive than was previously thought, as compared to the better built quarters of stone, brick, and frame. Archaeologically, while researchers have focused on the period between 1775 and 1825, the additional data has broadened the temporal array, extending back to the seventeenth century and forward to the middle of the nineteenth century. Archaeological sites provide repeated examples of slave buildings of earthfast construction, a category of building type that does not survive today. Evidence from fire insurance policies and census data underscores that urban slavery regularly relied upon rental arrangements for slaves “hired out” and “living out” and reinforces the commonality of female-dominated households.

We proposed recording a minimum of twelve slave buildings using the revised DECA form, but we have significantly exceeded that goal with thirty structures recorded to date. At the outset, we assumed that we would further revise the recording system as our experience in documenting and interpreting slave buildings improved, and this turned out to be the case. In general, the changes increased clarity and captured more detailed information. It remains to be seen whether we accomplished our goal of achieving the greatest return for the amount of effort expended, and it is likely that the form will continue to be refined, but the fact that we were able to document thirty buildings over a relatively brief period of time seems to testify to the value of the approach. The buildings are distributed among twenty counties or cities, ranging as far to the east as Middlesex County, to Brunswick County on the south, as far west as Bedford County, and to Loudoun County on the north.

Table 1. Standing Structures Investigated

<b>Building Name</b>	<b>County/City</b>	<b>Construction</b>	<b>Format</b>	<b>Stories</b>	<b>Comments</b>
Arcola I	Loudoun	Stone	Duplex	1 w/garret	
Arcola II	Loudoun	Stone	Duplex	1 w/garret	
Bacon’s Castle	Surry	Frame	Duplex	1.5	Heated garret
Ben Lomond	Prince William	Stone	Duplex	1 w/garret	No int. access to garret
Berry Plain	King George	Frame	Duplex	1.5	Heated garret
Clover Hill	Manassas	Stone	Duplex	1 w/garret	
Four Square	Isle of Wight	Frame	Duplex	1 w/garret	
Green Level Farm	King William	Brick	Duplex	1 w/garret	Heated garret

Hartland	Fauquier	Log	Duplex	1	No access to attic
Howard's Neck B	Goochland	Log	Duplex	1 w/garret	
Howard's Neck C	Goochland	Log	Duplex	1 w/garret	
Icy Cliff	Bedford	Log	Duplex	1.5	Double pen
Logan Farm	Isle of Wight	Frame	Duplex	1 w/garret	Cellar
Mineral Springs I	Brunswick	Frame	Single	1 w/garret	
Mineral Springs II	Brunswick	Frame	Single	1 w/garret	
Presquisle I	Culpeper	Brick	Duplex	1	No access to attic
Presquisle II	Culpeper	Brick	Duplex	1	No access to attic
Pruden	Isle of Wight	Frame	Duplex	1 w/garret	Cellar
Sanford-Burgess	Stafford	Log	Single	1 w/garret	
Santee	Caroline	Brick	Duplex	1 w/garret	
Sherwood Forest	Stafford	Frame	Duplex	1 w/garret	
Spring Hill I	Culpeper	Frame	Duplex	1 w/garret	
Spring Hill II	Culpeper	Frame	Duplex	1 w/garret	
Tetley I	Orange	Frame	Single	1 w/garret	
Tetley II	Orange	Log	Single	1 w/garret	
Tuckahoe A	Goochland	Frame	Duplex	1 w/garret	
Tuckahoe B	Goochland	Frame	Duplex	1 w/garret	
Tuckahoe D	Goochland	Frame	Duplex	1 w/garret	
Walnut Valley	Surry	Frame	Single	1 w/garret	
Wilton	Middlesex	Frame	Duplex	1	No access to attic

The buildings investigated were selected according to a range of criteria, not least being reasonable proximity to Stafford and Prince William Counties, home bases for the project's co-directors. As a result, the sample is hardly representative of the diversity of slave houses to be found across the state. For example, sixteen of the structures are frame, with six log, four brick, and four stone. This appears to dramatically under represent the log buildings that documentary evidence indicates made up the most common type of construction for slave houses in Virginia during the last half of the eighteenth century and the antebellum era. On the other hand, it undoubtedly over represents the better built slave houses that were typically found near masters' home farms. In addition, we made a conscious decision to focus our efforts on houses arranged as duplexes rather than on those comprising a single room, as duplexes seem to be more confidently associated with slave occupation; of the thirty buildings, twenty-four are duplexes.

Since the eight buildings that we successfully sampled and dated include three that were erected in two phases of construction, we wound up with that many additional dendro-dates. As it turned out, savings in testing costs would have allowed us to sample at least two additional structures, if likely contenders could have been identified. However, restrictions on testing imposed by owners, combined with the poor condition of the timbers found in several of the buildings, reduced the number of viable candidates. Nevertheless, interpretive results far exceeded our hopes. Adding a second eighteenth-century structure (Four Square, in Isle of Wight County,



dated 1789 and 1830), to the database is an unexpected coup, bolstering the information provided by Prestwould (I 1790, II 1840), the only other dated eighteenth-century slave building in Virginia. As such, the span of time covered by the sample is roughly seventy years, with ten of the eleven datable phases falling within the period from 1813 to 1858. As this is precisely the time period that we identified as particularly difficult for establishing construction dates based on building fabric alone, this represents a major advance in knowledge. On the other hand, the sample remains relatively small, and any analysis based on these results must be viewed as tentative at best. Finally, the preliminary findings clearly indicate the value of dendrochronological testing for better understanding temporal variation in construction practices, building technologies, and hardware.



Figure 3. The frame quarter at Four Square plantation, in Isle of Wight County, was erected in two phases, dendro-dated to 1789 (right) and 1830 (left).

Table 2. Dendrochronologically Dated Buildings

Building Name	County	Construction Material	Dendro Date	Comments
Four Square I	Isle of Wight	Frame	1789	Hand-headed nails
Prestwould I	Mecklenburg	Frame	1790	Hand-headed nails
Arcola I	Loudoun	Stone	1813	Hand-headed nails
Walnut Valley	Surry	Frame	1816	Hand-headed nails
Bacon's Castle I	Surry	Frame	1829	Heated garret
Four Square II	Isle of Wight	Frame	1830	
Ben Lomond	Prince William	Stone	1834	
Logan Farm	Isle of Wight	Frame	1838	Reused timbers (1786)
Prestwould II	Mecklenburg	Frame	1840	
Arcola II	Loudoun	Stone	1845	

Sherwood Forest	Stafford	Frame	1846	
Bacon's Castle II	Surry	Frame	1848	Circular sawn rafters
Spring Hill	Culpeper	Frame	1858	

The dating evidence provides support for some earlier hypotheses pertaining to the character of slave housing, while raising additional questions. The four earliest buildings dated – Four Square I, Prestwoud I, Arcola I, and Walnut Valley – all exhibit hand-headed nails in their original members, a manufacturing technique that was largely superseded in Virginia by circa 1830. The nails found in the other six buildings, and in the second phases of construction for the three earliest quarters, all are machine-headed, further reinforcing this temporal distinction. Wire wound nails, the next stage in the development of fasteners, are seldom found in secondary Virginia buildings until the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in our sample they only were found associated with much later repairs and additions. Similarly, hand hewn, pitsawn, and riven framing members predominate in the early cabins, with sashsawing becoming more prevalent over time. Somewhat surprisingly, testing also revealed the earliest known Virginia example of a circular sawn member, a collar from the second construction phase (1848) in the quarter at Bacon's Castle.

The findings also support the observation made by Dell Upton more than 20 years ago, that slave housing varied remarkably both in size and quality. In our sample of single-cell cabins, the range in the sizes of the rooms is considerable, between 146 and 336 square feet. No temporal pattern is evident, as one of the largest buildings (Four Square I) and one of the three smallest (Prestwoud I) have been dendro-dated to within a year of each other. The same general results pertain to the duplex structures, and with no apparent correlation between size and construction material, as cabins made of logs, frame, stone, and brick all were found to range across the size spectrum. Finally, proximity to the master's house does not seem to have been a primary determinant of size, as several structures located in that situation fall well below the mean size. All of the buildings in our sample are located in relative proximity to the home house and as expected, several, but not all, of these cabins exhibit a mixture of more stylish architectural characteristics and amenities such as plastered walls, higher ceilings, and glassed windows.

As this study developed, we soon realized that many more slave-related buildings survived than was previously thought. That finding is the “good news,” and it represents a call to scholarly and public action, partly for the positive gain of gathering more information from a variety of geographic contexts. As for the “bad news,” many of the extant structures are in seriously deteriorated condition and are under threat of imminent destruction, including several that were recorded for this project. In addition, we still do not know how many of the slave quarters recorded since the 1960s remain standing. Generally speaking, these buildings are especially susceptible to significant changes or damage from a wide range of factors—poor maintenance, neglect, natural deterioration, and purposeful destruction. On the other hand, many will undergo either larger scale renovations into modern housing or face rehabilitation for other uses, and thus they will lose their integrity as original fabric is lost. Now is the time to act.



Figure 4. The central fireplace mass and chimney in the Four Square quarter has almost completely fallen, and the entire structure is in imminent danger of collapse.

Another message calls for preservation beyond the traditional safeguarding of the physical record of slavery. We also must encourage the greater public interpretation of slave housing, of enslaved African Americans, and of slavery—especially in contrast to the pattern of preserved or restored slave houses within pristine landscapes obscuring the former harsh reality of slave life and slave ownership. While accommodating the various needs of current owners, we should actively interpret and, if possible, restore more accurate landscapes of slave housing and slave life. Descendants of enslaved African Americans have different questions and challenging views of such places and buildings, perspectives that remind us of the issues of social and scholarly responsibility surrounding our research. Slave housing represents a shared, but still problematic American heritage with a palpable public and political context.

From the outset, the primary means of disseminating the information that we compiled was envisioned as a website. Freely available to scholarly and public audiences, the site would include the searchable databases of architectural, documentary, dendrochronological, and archaeological evidence, along with the full results of the DECA-based fieldwork (forms, drawings, and digital photographs). In addition, the website would include the following elements: (1) background information on the project's purposes, methods, and staff; (2) a newly developed bibliography of references for slave housing in Virginia; (3) a searchable state map allowing website users to determine the number of slave buildings within any municipality (city or county) and link to further information on those individual structures; (4) links to relevant websites; (5) copies of conference papers or public presentations made by staff during the project's duration; and, (6) the final completion report. To access this information, go to: ([www.slavehousing.org](http://www.slavehousing.org).)



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