

## The “Archaeology Site Slave Buildings-2008” Database

### *Database Introduction and Background*

The collected information concerns 124 slave-related buildings discovered within archaeological sites in Virginia. The database’s focus is on architectural information pertaining to these buildings, rather than broader archaeological information concerning enslaved African Americans’ personal possessions, living standards or diet, or other site features and evidence of period landscapes. Similarly, the database does not contain artifact information per site.

The compiled information comes from a variety of sources, including: published secondary sources (including PhD dissertations); the archaeological site files of the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (VDHR; [www.dhr.virginia.gov](http://www.dhr.virginia.gov)); archaeological site reports generated by private organizations (such as the archaeological staffs at historic house museums at Monticello, Mount Vernon, and Poplar Forest) or Cultural Resource Management (CRM) firms; and, from the Virginia-based site files of the Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery (DAACS; [www.daacs.org](http://www.daacs.org)), a website for slave-related sites both in the Chesapeake region, the Carolinas, and portions of the Caribbean. The gained architectural information was entered into an Excel spreadsheet (see below).

Former Department of Historic Preservation, University of Mary Washington student, Lisa Wilkerson compiled this information in during the 2007-2008 academic year, as part of the National Endowment for the Humanities grant project (RZ-50619-06) “Measuring the Social, Spatial, and Temporal Dimensions of Virginia Slave Housing.” Staff from the VDHR, along with Prof. Douglas Sanford (formerly of the Department of Historic Preservation) and Dr. Dennis J. Pogue (formerly of George Washington’s Mt. Vernon), as co-directors of the Virginia Slave Housing project, assisted Wilkerson with the research.

Wilkerson used the VDHR’s Data Sharing System (DSS, now V-CRIS) to recover architectural information from the Archaeological Site Inventory Forms within this system. Queries chose “domestic” as the search term in the Historical Context field; “African American” as the search term in the Cultural Affiliation field; and, “17<sup>th</sup> century” to “19<sup>th</sup> century – third quarter” as the search terms in the Temporal Range field of DSS. These queries generated 287 archaeological sites, but many were excluded from consideration for various reasons. For example, many sites did not contain detailed architectural information or the excavations did not reveal architectural features or were limited to Phase I survey and Phase II test units. Other excluded sites corresponded to free black settlements, were non-domestic, or dated more recently than the 1865 cut-off date.

It must be emphasized that the amount and quality of the information for the individual buildings varies considerably, for a variety of reasons. Despite the logical desire to have consistent architectural data per building, the different goals and methods of past archaeological efforts affected what information exists at present. For example, since most archaeological surveys and excavations involve sampling schemes and time and money limits for research, many studies did not fully reveal slave-related buildings. Also, many slave quarters were log cabins composed of wood walls and roofs, with wood and mud chimneys, meaning that little architectural evidence survives below ground, making it difficult to determine building dimensions and features. Similarly, the conditions under which buildings were demolished and how archaeological sites

have been disturbed by later activities limit the degree of preservation for architectural remains, beyond nails, hardware, and window glass. Consequently, at times it is difficult for archaeologists to ascertain a building's size and whether or not it was a frame or log quarter.

Archaeologists have found several slave quarters that utilized a construction format known as earthfast or post-in-the-ground. Based on setting vertical timbers in postholes and then framing the rest of the structure to those posts, earthfast buildings, while common in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, rarely survive into the modern era. These structures most often had dirt floors and wood and mud chimneys.

Furthermore, archaeological recording conventions and research interests for sites related to enslaved African Americans changed over time and this database reflects surveys and excavations conducted between the late 1960s and 2008 (see below). Similarly, archaeological researchers applied varying temporal estimates, often based on artifact dating methods and/or historic documents. Hence, many sites have buildings dated to a given range based on the dates for ceramic types, but others may be estimates of particular decades or portions of a given century.

#### *Database Structure (fields of information) and Limitations*

Below is a descriptive listing of the 17 fields of information used to structure this architectural database of slave buildings revealed by past archaeological investigations. These fields correspond to the individual columns seen within the database's Excel spreadsheet (letters A through Q). With each field are notations concerning the field's definition, the terms used to structure the field, and as relevant, methods used that affected the information field's limits of consistency or degree of coverage.

- A. Site Number:** if a State archaeological site number, one assigned by the VDHR, exists, then that site number is supplied. If not, the field is left blank. State site numbers follow a three-part, number letter convention. For example, site 44AB89 becomes translated as found in the state of Virginia (44<sup>th</sup> in the nation, alphabetically), within Albemarle County (AB), and as the 89<sup>th</sup> archaeological site on file with the VDHR for that county.
- B. Site Name:** either the temporary or permanent name of the archaeological site. Many of the designations combine the name of the property on which the site occurs and then a name or number for the specific site and/or building from that property. "Shirley Plantation, Cabin C" is an example, with this building being part of site 44CC372 (in Charles City county), which also contains another building, "Cabin D."
- C. Municipality:** City or county where the property (and slave building) is located.
- D. Date Range:** most often, an estimated time period of use for the site and/or building, typically when the building was occupied by enslaved African Americans (see dating discussion above).
- E. Construction format:** material used for the building's main walls (earthfast, brick, frame, log, wood, stone, stone/brick, unknown).
- F. Stories:** number of stories in the building (1, 1.5, 2, 2.5, etc.), if known.

- G. Dimension 1:** one of the building's overall dimensions (length or width) in feet and tenths and hundredths of feet.
- H. Dimension 2:** the building's other overall dimension.
- I. Sq. Ft.:** Dimension 1 multiplied by Dimension 2, resulting in the amount of square feet for the building's ground floor.
- J. Chimney location(s):** location of one or more chimneys per building, such as end, center, interior, or exterior, as best determined.
- K. Chimney Construction:** material for the chimney's composition (brick, stone, stone & brick, wood & mud, etc.).
- L. Foundation:** material for the building's foundation (brick, stone, brick piers, earthfast (post-in-ground), sills or piers, etc.).
- M. Addition:** dimensions for one or more additions to the original building.
- N. # Sub-floor pits:** number of sub-floor pits within a building and/or site. These belowground archaeological features represent holes of varying size and shape dug beneath the floors of slave quarters. Termed "sub-floor pits," these features were used by enslaved African Americans for food and personal storage, and according to some interpretations, for religious purposes. The pits could be large enough to qualify as cellars, but are distinguished from half and full basements. The number and placement of sub-floor pits often reflect a building's orientation, size, fireplaces, and its room division. Hence, archaeologists consider such features important architectural and cultural evidence.
- O. Source:** one or more sources of information for this database. Most sources consist of one or more authors' last names and a date of publication. DAACS = Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery. Refer to the website's bibliography for the full references to these secondary sources.
- P. Date Exc'd:** date excavated, namely the year(s) in which the site and/or building was excavated, if known.
- Q. Comments:** further information regarding the archaeological site or project, or the building's condition, its history, or its unique architectural elements.

### *Database Patterns and Future Needs*

The following is an initial and partial assessment of the database rather than a detailed analysis. As noted above, the database was compiled in 2008 and obviously additional slave-related buildings from archaeological sites have been recorded in Virginia and placed on file with the VDHR since that date. While we plan to update this database in the future, current researchers are encouraged to contact the VDHR staff to obtain the latest inventory of slave-related buildings within a given county or city and to consult the DAACS website.

Of the 124 buildings in this database, only 1% were surveyed in the 1960s; 10% stem from recording work in the 1970s; 24% from the 1980s; 45% from the 1990s; and, 20% of the excavations were conducted in the 2000s. Overall, 65% of the information for these buildings derives from recent efforts, those about 25 or fewer years ago. In most cases, the artifact, written, and digital information for these archaeological projects (reports, field notes, drawings, maps, and photographs) remain with the sponsoring organizations or exist within the archives of the VDHR.

Given the dominance of rural based slavery in Virginia, nearly all of the sites and buildings within the database derive from former plantations and hence, from higher style architectural settings and elite property and slave owners. Still, some properties do correspond to former operations for small plantations or large farms, contexts that to date have received much less scholarly attention. This database does lack sites and buildings from urban contexts for slavery.

The physical limits of building remains on archaeological sites radically affect the discussion of these structures' materials. Slightly over 45% of the buildings remain either unknown as to building material or lumped within a wood category that may have corresponded to frame, log, or earthfast quarters. In contrast to what we see for standing and previously recorded slave buildings, log construction dominates archaeologically at 25% of the entire assemblage and 45.6% of the buildings known as to material. This figure also underscores how archaeologists more readily encounter the lesser and more common formats for slave house construction, as compared to better surviving masonry structures. In keeping with this point, the 15 earthfast buildings represent 12% of the overall assemblage and 22% of the buildings known as to material. The database contains only one brick building and three stone buildings, along with eight frame buildings, with the latter amounting to just under 12% of the known buildings.

Virginia has over 100 counties and cities, while only 22 municipalities are represented in this database. In that respect, there are numerous counties and cities, and multiple regions that need survey and excavation work to record archaeologically surviving, slave-related buildings. Regions without representation or with less than a handful of examples include the Eastern Shore, Southwestern Virginia, the Shenandoah Valley, the Appalachian highlands, and the southern Piedmont.

Finally, owners forced their enslaved African Americans to occupy buildings that had other uses beyond slave housing, such as kitchen, laundries, stables, and carriage houses. If past and recent researchers do not record such buildings as involving slave housing or such information is not entered in the VDHR database, we cannot recover these instances.

If you have questions concerning this database, please contact Doug Sanford:  
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*Generated 9/21/17, Douglas W. Sanford*