

The “Previously Recorded Slave Buildings-VDHR” Database

Database Introduction and Background

The collected information concerns slave-related buildings found within the architectural property (survey) files of the State Historic Preservation Office for Virginia, the Virginia Department of Historic Resources (VDHR) in Richmond (www.dhr.virginia.gov). 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 and Prof. Douglas Sanford, formerly of the Department of Historic Preservation, assisted Wilkerson with the research.

Different search terms, such as “servants quarters” and “slave quarters” were used to query the VDHR architectural files database, along with the condition that the property’s main house dated prior to 1865. These searches produced 389 properties, although ultimately a few properties were eliminated because either buildings were misidentified as slave-related or the buildings could not be determined to be slave-related with confidence. Overall, this database contains 391 slave-related buildings, with 384 buildings contained with the VDHR’s architectural survey files and another seven buildings found in other published sources. Compiled information was entered into an Excel spreadsheet (see below).

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 goal of having consistent architectural data per building, the different goals and methods of past survey efforts affected what information exists on file at present. For example, many buildings were recorded as part of reconnaissance or intensive architectural surveys or National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) nominations wherein the descriptive and interpretive emphasis was on the main house of a particular property owner, such as plantation mansion homes. Functional outbuildings typically received less attention and documentary detail. Building descriptions for slave quarters often were limited to wall materials (frame, brick, stone), the roof’s form, and the number of stories, along with perhaps a single black-and-white photograph. Properties associated with a National Register or a Virginia Historic Landmarks (VHL) nomination typically supplied a paragraph-length architectural description of a slave quarter, along with one or more labeled photographs.

Furthermore, recording methods and conventions changed over time and this database reflects slave-related buildings surveyed between the late 1960s and 2008 (see below). Similarly, surveyors applied varying date estimates, with some incorporating a particular date or period of significance, while others used different time ranges (decades, quarters of a century). In many instances surveyors either had documented dates or developed specific dates for the main house on the property, but did not distinguish dates for other buildings.

Database’s Structure (fields of information) and Limitations

Below is a descriptive listing of the 24 fields of information used to structure this architectural database of previously recorded slave buildings. These fields correspond to the individual columns seen within the database’s Excel spreadsheet (letters A through X). 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. Name (search category):** Property name and keywords used when searching the VDHR architectural file database. Properties without a search category term or keyword were not found within the VDHR database.
- B. DHR file #:** VHDR architectural survey file number. These designations combine specific numbers for an architectural property with numbers for individual municipalities (counties and cities) within the State.
- C. Municipality:** City or county where the property (and slave building) is located.
- D. Date:** most often, the date when the property's main house (period owner's dwelling) was built or its estimated date of construction and/or use. If the file specified a date for the slave building, that date was used (see discussion above).
- E. Construction:** material used for the building's main walls (brick, frame, log, mud or pise, stone, stone/brick, unknown).
- F. Dimension 1:** one of the building's overall dimensions (length or width) in feet and inches.
- G. Dimension 2:** the building's other overall dimension.
- H. Square Footage:** Dimension 1 multiplied by Dimension 2, resulting in the amount of square feet for the building's ground floor.
- I. # Stories:** number of stories in the building (1, 1.5, 2, 2.5, etc.).
- J. # Rooms:** number of rooms in the building, either as specified or best determined.
- K. Room #1:** overall dimensions of one of the rooms.
- L. Room #2:** overall dimensions of a second room.
- M. Roof Form:** roof form, such as gable, hipped, shed, conical, etc.
- N. Roof Material:** material of the roof covering, such as wood shingle, asbestos or asphalt shingle, composition, sheet metal, tar paper, etc.
- O. Roof Condition:** if the roof is original or replaced. In most instances slave buildings do not retain their original roof covering. Many have standing seam sheet metal roofs that replaced earlier wooden shingles.
- P. Walls:** material for the exterior walls' composition and/or covering (wood, clapboard or weatherboard, brick, stone, vinyl or aluminum, stucco, etc.).
- Q. Floor:** material for interior floors (wood, earth, brick, etc.).
- R. Foundation:** material for the building's foundation (brick, stone, wooden piers, etc.).

- S. Chimney Location:** chimney(s) location as to interior end or center, exterior end, etc.
- T. Chimney Material:** material for the chimney's composition (brick, stone, brick & stone, etc.).
- U. Log Treatment:** for log structures, the treatment of the corner notching (full or half dovetail, V-notch, saddle, square, etc.).
- V. Overall Conditions:** building's overall condition according to the most recent source (field notes, photographs), using the terms good, fair, and poor. A qualitative judgment concerning the building's overall physical integrity, whether based on supplied information and/or an assessment of photographic evidence. It must be recognized that many photographs are decades old, so most condition assessments are not current. "Good" condition means the building looked well maintained, has no vegetative growth, and has a stable foundation and chimney. "Fair" condition means the building has slight material deterioration, has minimal vegetative growth, its walls and roof materials are intact but need repair or maintenance, and its foundation and chimney look intact and stable, but need repair or maintenance. "Poor" condition means the building has extensive vegetative growth and cover, structural and roof elements appear to be failing or severely damaged, and if the chimney or foundation has suffered collapse.
- W. Sources:** one or more sources of information for this database. DHR = (Virginia) Department of Historic Resources; VHLC = Virginia Historic Landmarks Commission; Recon. = Reconnaissance survey form; CWF = Colonial Williamsburg Foundation; VDHL = Virginia Division of Historic Landmarks; VAF = Vernacular Architecture Forum.
- X. Comments:** further information regarding 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 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.

A future goal of the Virginia Slave Housing project is to conduct survey work in cities or counties that have had a significant number of slave buildings recorded in the past, determining to what extent and in what conditions these previously recorded survive. Such an effort has been initiated for Clarke County in the northern Shenandoah Valley. Of the 391 buildings in this database, 4.5% were surveyed in the 1960s; 29.5% stem from recording work in the 1970s; 28% from the 1980s; 21% from the 1990s; and, 17% were documented in the 2000s. Overall, 62% of the information for these buildings derives from survey efforts over 30 years old. It is likely that many of these buildings have collapsed, been demolished, or become archaeological sites.

Given the dominance of rural based slavery in Virginia, the vast majority of properties 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 current or former farmhouses of a more vernacular architectural orientation and a few have urban associations, contexts that to date have received much less scholarly attention.

Material-wise, frame construction dominates the database at 46% of the buildings. Brick buildings amounted to 23%, while another 11% are of stone construction, representing a total of 34% for masonry structures. Noteworthy is that 11% of the buildings exhibit log construction, especially given the less likelihood of preservation for this building format. A final 3% of the buildings corresponds to those have mud/pise construction or a mixture of stone, brick, or frame. Gable roofs clearly comprised the overwhelming choice for slave buildings' coverings. As noted above, many buildings have sheet metal roofs in the modern era, mostly likely later replacements for original wood shingle or slab board roofs, but effective roofing for allowing greater longevity for these quarters.

Virginia has over 100 counties and cities, while 73 municipalities are represented in this database. In that respect, there are several counties and cities that need survey work to record any surviving slave-related buildings. Finally, different search terms used to query the VDHR architectural property database produced different results and building numbers. In that regard it is probable that we did not find all of the slave-related buildings on file with the DHR. In similar fashion, owners forced 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 surveyors 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 9/20/17, Douglas W. Sanford