The ALABAMA REVIEW

A Quarterly Journal of Alabama History

VOL. 70 **JANUARY 2017** NO. 1

Published by the

ALABAMA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

in cooperation with

THE UNIVERSITY OF WEST ALABAMA

Cabins as Far as the Eyes Can See: An Introduction to the Black Belt Slave Housing Survey

ASHLEY A. DUMAS, NATALIE MOONEY,
VALENCIA MOORE, *and* CORY SLY

COMEMORATIVE AND CELEBRATORY EVENTS OF RECENT YEARS marked two watershed moments in African-American history, namely, the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation and the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights movement. During the last week of his eight-year term in office, President Barack Obama designated downtown Birmingham, Alabama, as a Civil Rights National Monument to recognize the city's historic role as a center for organized, arduous social change. Only months earlier, the president opened the National Museum of African American History and Culture on the National Mall. Wishing to contextualize the experiences of African slaves in the United States, the museum's curators sought to acquire a house in which slaves had lived. On Edisto Island, South Carolina, they found a small, one-room house, the only one remaining of what had been a complex of slave houses on a large cotton plantation. The house had been occupied into the 1980s. It was carefully dismantled, transported to Washington, and re-assembled in the new museum as part of a permanent exhibit on slavery and freedom.[1] The museum's director, Lonnie Bunch, has declared that the cabin is a "jewel in the crown" of their collections.[2]

ASHLEY A. DUMAS is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of West Alabama in Livingston. NATALIE MOONEY, VALENCIA MOORE, and CORY SLY are University of West Alabama undergraduates working under Dr. Dumas's direction.

[1] National Museum of African American History and Culture object number 2013.57.

[2] "Haunting Relic of History, Slave Cabin Gets a Museum Home in Washington," *New York Times*, May 18, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/19/us/slave-cabin-to-get-museum-home-in-washington.html (accessed January 30, 2016).

Interest in studying and preserving slave housing seems to have increased recently, in part due to the efforts of Joseph McGill's Slave Dwelling Project, whose mission is to identify and assist property owners in the preservation of extant slave dwellings.[3] McGill's strategy for raising awareness toward this goal is to spend the night in slave houses, often partnering with local historical societies, student groups, and other preservation-minded organizations. His work has resulted in an annual Slave Dwelling Project Conference, where historians, architects, archaeologists, and others gather to discuss preservation and fundraising ideas. These efforts generally remain centered in South Carolina, where McGill is based, and adjoining Atlantic states. In fact, much of the literature on slave houses and plantation architecture has originated in this region, a trend due possibly to the long tradition of historical preservation and architecture there. The Virginia Slave Housing project is one such expanding archive of slave housing and associated documentation.[4]

In Alabama, nineteenth-century structures, both formal and vernacular, have received uneven scholarly treatment. Robert Gamble's guide to the state's architecture draws from the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS) collection of photographs and records and remains a most useful, comprehensive introduction to the subject, while Eugene M. Wilson's study of Alabama vernacular structures was formative.[5] Other volumes approach Alabama's built history from the perspective of architecture as art or that of the sentimental romantic, without intent of focused study on specific folk forms.[6] With regard to slave houses, the lack of attention is understandable: they have neither grand scale nor grand histories. At a glance, one might say

[3] http://slavedwellingproject.org/about-the-slave-dwelling-project/ (last accessed January 30, 2017).

[4] http://vaslavehousing.org (last accessed January 30, 2017).

[5] Robert Gamble, *The Alabama Catalog: A Guide to the Early Architecture of the State* (Tuscaloosa, 1987); Eugene M. Wilson, *Alabama Folk Houses* (Montgomery, 1975).

[6] See, e.g., Alice Meriwether Bowsher, *Alabama Architecture: Looking at Building and Place* (Tuscaloosa, 2001); Jennifer Hale, *Historic Plantations of Alabama's Black Belt* (Charleston, 2009).

that they all look the same, and, in truth, they simply are not as visible as the white-columned houses in whose shadows they often rest. This apparent bland sameness, however, makes them an ideal form of study for the archaeologist, who is trained to collect data on mounds of seemingly redundant material cultural, often in the form of fragmented pots or rocks. These anthropologists of the past record information about every distinguishing characteristic, or attribute, of an artifact. When data on the attributes of many similar artifacts are compiled and analyzed, what was once mundane or of limited explanatory value by itself exposes broad patterns about culture.

Slave houses are artifacts. Their attributes can be recorded, analyzed, and broad patterns about their historical context, their builders, and inhabitants revealed. The methods of construction, for instance, often indicate climate, economy, and available technology. Ethnographic and archaeological studies demonstrate that houses, yards, and landscapes reflect cultural values and social relationships and changes to these.[7] The organization of labor may be inferred from the placement of houses in relation to one another and to non-domestic buildings. Houses, too, are a literal framework for our daily, intimate lives, wherein we perhaps act our true selves. Although none of these ideas are revolutionary, they must be reconsidered when the houses under consideration were not constructed according to the desires of the occupants, were not owned by the occupants, nor did the occupants themselves possess their own bodies or rights to a private existence. The challenge, then, is to distinguish those attributes created, modified, and negotiated by the enslaved from the attributes of the material culture that were imposed on them.

[7] See, e.g., Nicole Branton, "Landscape Approaches in Historical Archaeology: The Archaeology of Places," in *International Handbook of Historic Archaeology*, eds. Teresita Majewski and David Gaimster, (New York, 2009), 51–65; Suzanne M. Spencer-Wood and Sherene Baugher, "Introduction to the Historical Archaeology of Powered Cultural Landscapes," *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 14 (2010): 463–74; Rebecca Yamin and Karen Bescherer Metheny, eds., *Landscape Archaeology: Reading and Interpreting the American Historical Landscape* (Knoxville, 1996).

Nearly four decades of research by historians and archaeologists have demonstrated that African slaves in the U.S. found many ways to express autonomy and exercise individual agency within the domestic spaces and landscapes of their lives. Maintaining swept yards and a close arrangement of houses, for example, are cited as being driven by a need for "everyday problem solving and simple endurance."[8] While not incorrect, such practical explanations neglect to consider the endurance of culture itself. Modern African-American yardscapes in rural areas retain many characteristics of West African yards, and there is documentary and archaeological evidence of Africans retaining their own house styles, food preferences, and religious beliefs for many generations after being enslaved.[9] As time and acculturation progressed, a unique creolized culture of African and Euro-American elements developed and was enacted beyond the gaze of slaveholders.[10] This happened largely within houses. Thus, the standing houses, these artifacts of slavery, can be more than dramatic reminders of slavery and its condition; with careful study, they can help us understand the very formation of African-American culture.

Recognizing cultural patterns requires a large sample size, and we have that in the Black Belt of Alabama. We define this region as the sixteen counties in the central part of the state that have prairie soils and a history of self-identification as being part of the Black Belt (Figure 1). The rich prairie soils and access to river transportation made the region a center for cotton production in the first half of the nineteenth century, and, by 1860, most of the estimated

[8] Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg, "Introduction," in *Cabin, Quarter, and Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery*, eds. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg (New Haven, 2010), 1–15.

[9] Richard Westmacott, *African-American Gardens and Yards in the Rural South* (Knoxville, 1992); Leland Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology of Early African America, 1650–1800* (Washington, D.C., 1992), provides several case studies of how such African cultural traits survived on the rice and cotton plantations of colonial and antebellum South Carolina, partly as a result of especially strict segregation.

[10] Dell Upton, "White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," in *Cabin, Quarter, and Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery*, eds. Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg (New Haven, 2010 [1985]), 121–39.

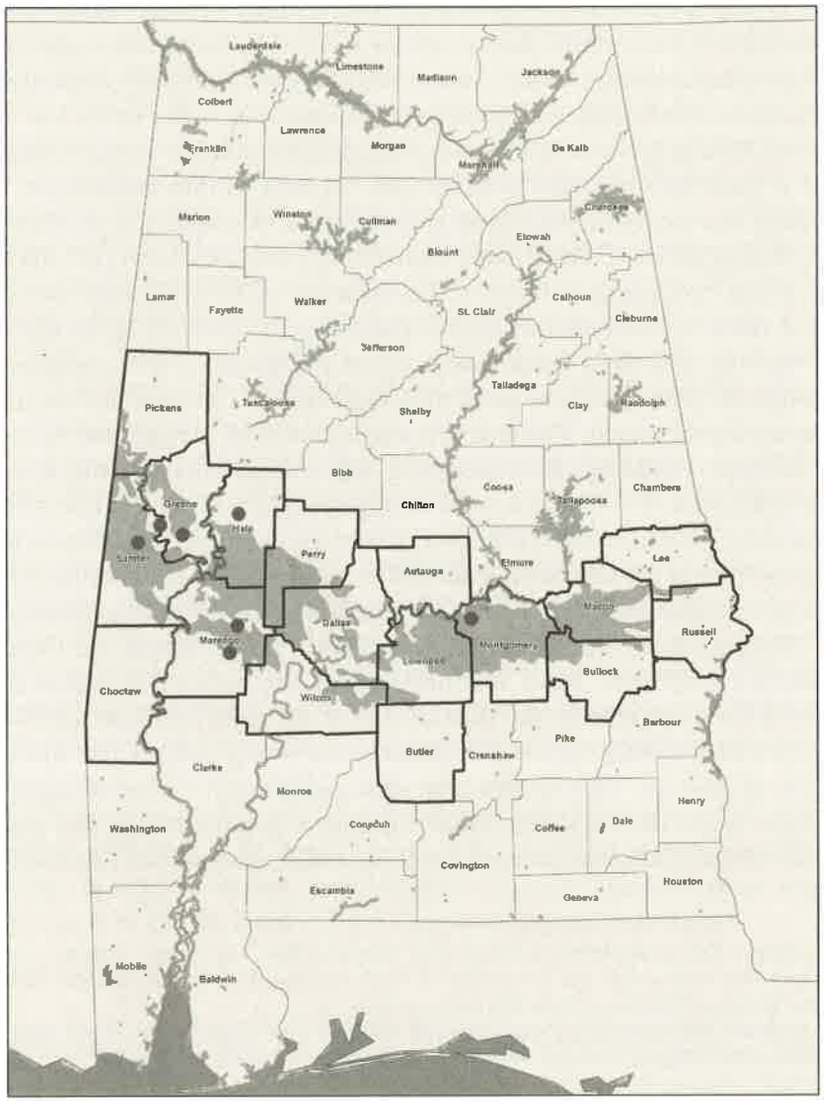


Figure 1. Map of Alabama showing Black Belt physiography and approximate locations of slave houses documented by the Black Belt Slave Housing Survey.

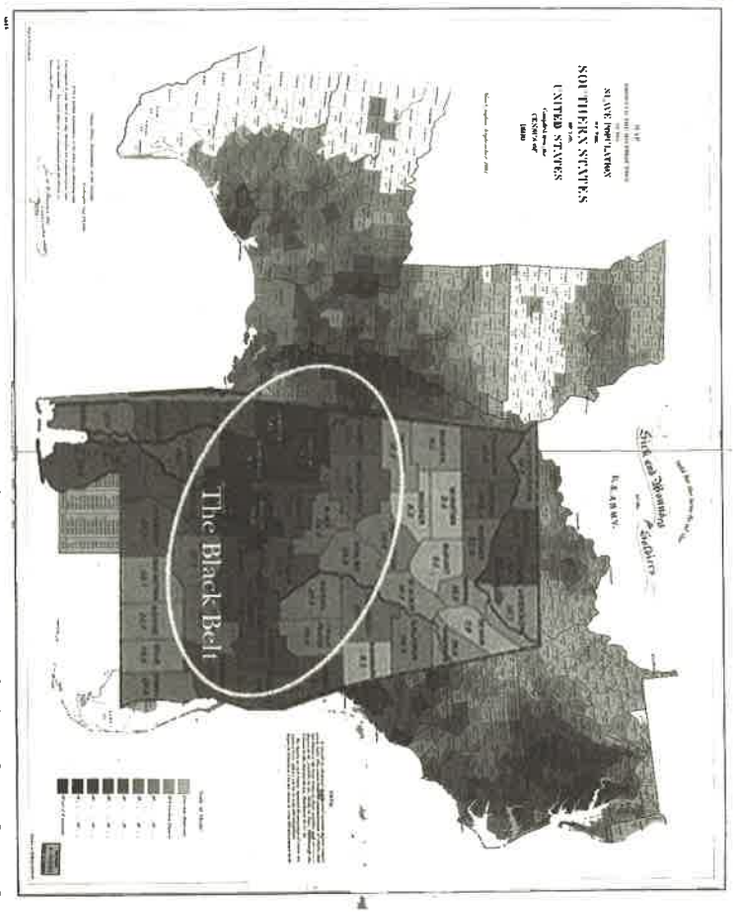


Figure 2.Map showing percentages of slaves by county population, based on the 1860 census, indicating a high concentration of slaves in the Black Belt.

435,080 slaves in Alabama were concentrated on large plantations in the Black Belt (Figure 2). The social and economic legacies of this history are well-documented and can be seen today in multiple, distinct demographic patterns indicative of a region in distress.[11] The historical large number of slaves combined with the persistent lack of economic development has resulted in two situations that serve as inspiration for the Black Belt Slave Housing Survey (BBSHS). The first is that we know the least amount about the histories and families of the largest demographic in the region today. Few slaves were taught to read and write and were unable to record their own stories. Second, the region remains rural and undeveloped, resulting in a sort of cultural and architectural preservation by unintended neglect. Although we do not have a specific number, we estimate that there are 150 to 200 slave houses still standing in the Black Belt and many hundreds of houses existing only as archaeological remains.

Given the concomitant need for better understanding enslaved people's lives, and an abundance of available architectural and archaeological evidence to help us do so, the Black Belt Slave Housing Survey has several goals. First, we are interested in documentation for its own sake. A detailed inventory of slave houses and their attributes is the most cost effective way to preserve information in the face of continual deterioration and loss. As noted by the director of the new national museum, slave houses are relatively rare, and they are disappearing. Second, the resulting database will not only contribute to vernacular architectural history but the information can be transformed into knowledge about the lives of slaves and their descendants. Finally, we hope that the database will be useful for anyone interested in the history of use and comparison to other slave housing surveys, adding to anthropological literature on housing.

There are several challenges involved with the Black Belt Slave Housing Survey, and these challenges have influenced our methodology. The first challenge is to locate candidate structures and to

[11] http://alabamamaps.ua.edu/contemporarymaps/alabama/index.html (last accessed January 30, 2017).

positively identify them as places where slaves were housed. In spite of the stereotype of a small, one-room cabin, the structures used to house slaves varied depending on the use or vocation of the slaves, the wealth and personal preferences of their owners, the number of slaves, and other factors. Most dwellings were certainly of insubstantial construction, but some may have served first as the home of the slaveholder or overseer before their own larger, permanent homes were completed. A few slave dwellings were constructed of brick. Some served primarily as kitchens, stables, or other ancillary structures, and out of convenience, also sheltered the people who worked inside. Thus, labeling any small antebellum structure as a slave dwelling is, at best, a misplaced stereotype and potentially incorrect.

Helpful for our understanding the range and type of slave dwellings in the Black Belt are the records and photographs of the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS).[12] HABS records include photographs of what photographers considered to be representative types of architecture, including the vernacular. Because of this, and because the photographers may not have had time or permission of property owners to photograph all historic structures, the database is in no way a complete survey of what was standing at the time. However, in the 1930s, when HABS photographers were making their way across the Black Belt, there were more extant slave dwellings and related structures than are standing today. The junior authors of this article examined every HABS photograph from the Black Belt and compiled any definite or suspected slave dwellings into a database organized by county. This resource has been useful for identifying or confirming a slave dwelling, for expanding our knowledge of the types of structures used for housing slaves, and for approaching an understanding of what structures have been lost in the last eighty years.

Another resource created as a Depression-era relief project are the oral histories collected from former slaves by the Federal Writer's

[12] The Historic American Building Survey was created in 1933 and was meant to document representative examples of historic American architecture, both formal and vernacular (http://nps.gov/hdp/habs).

Project between 1936 and 1938. This collection of over 2,300 oral histories varies in quality depending on who was recording and transcribing the story and on the former slaves themselves, many of whom were elderly at the time of the interviews and quite young while still enslaved.[13] However, one element of life that is mentioned by nearly every former slave is the kind of house in which they lived. Almost all of the ninety-one narratives recorded in Alabama describe their house while a slave as a log cabin. The narratives are hardly a representative sample, but they provide first-person accounts of houses, most of which are no longer extant, by the people who actually lived within their walls. This is valuable not only for comparing with any similar homes we may document as part of the BBSHS but also for bringing a palpable humanity to the now empty walls.

The second challenge for the BBSHS is to determine the age of the structures that we suspect to have housed slaves. This is as much a philosophical question as a technical one. The Emancipation Proclamation was issued by President Lincoln on January 1, 1863, and the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing most slavery became part of the Constitution in 1865. Nevertheless, the lives of many slaves, or former slaves, changed very little due to continued economic and political disfranchisement and repressive state and local discriminatory codes. Many African-American families lived in dwellings built by or for slaves until the mid-twentieth century. This means that extant houses were lived in for a century after slaves lived there and perhaps three times as many years. As circumstances permitted, the occupants might have made modifications such as additions, repairs, upgrades in materials, and installation of utilities. These changes can often make it difficult to determine the age of a structure. When boards, nails, or windows are replaced over time, there are fewer nineteenth-century elements with which to date the original construction. In fact, while extant slave houses are rare, we posit that extant slaves

[13] The complete collection is available online through the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, at https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/, including guides and related essays.

houses in original condition, particularly those made of wood, are practically non-existent. We want to be clear that structures built by African-Americans post–1865 are of no less interest or historic significance than those constructed a few years earlier. But in order to maintain a clearly defined set of data, we include as part of this survey only those structures that we know or suspect to have been occupied by enslaved African-Americans.

To mitigate the challenges of function and age described above, the BBSHS relies on a suite of evidence to verify if a house was lived in by slaves. A structure's location on a historic property and its proximity to a main house or other structures can be useful but should be verified using historic maps and informants. Old town plats, Sanborn Fire Insurance Company maps, and USDA aerial photographs, among others, can be useful for understanding the relationship between the suspected slave house and structures no longer present. The information provided by property owners and other locals or descendants of former occupants can be critical for understanding modifications to a structure. Occasionally, these people may be able to locate photographs, which is useful for understanding how the condition of a structure has changed. Of course, if the structure is in the HABS, then we can observe how it appears today compared to the 1930s.

Details of architecture and construction offer clues to the quality and date of construction. This requires knowledge of the material culture and mid-nineteenth century technology. The use of wrought nails (prior to ca. 1800), Type A cut nails (ca. 1790–1820), Type B cut nails (ca. 1810–1900) or wire nails (ca. post–1890), for example, provides a range of years for the original construction and can give clues as to which parts of the structure are original, modified, or were later additions.[14] Whether a wooden beam was hand hewn or cut with a pit saw can indicate the general era of construction or at least the types of tools available. Particular techniques of construction, too, such as the presence or absence of a ridge pole or raised plate beams,

[14] Thomas D. Visser, "Nails: Clues to a Building's History," *University of Vermont Historic Preservation Research* 1 (1997).

can be helpful for dating structures relative to others and placing them in a specific quarter of the nineteenth century.

Because houses are the spaces in which lives are enacted and relationships reaffirmed, it is important that we record any evidence of the use and activities that may have affected a house. These sorts of details might include wear patterns on floor boards, the addition of hooks on walls or ceiling joists for hanging personal items, and other elements not considered strictly part of the building's construction. We know, too, that the home life of slaves often included the yard—for cooking, washing, making furniture, socializing, and any number of other domestic activities.[15] To capture potentially significant landscape features, we record as much of it as possible at each site, including plantings, the sizes and distances between buildings, and features such as fences and wells.

The data that we collect regarding the construction, age, and context of structures are recorded several ways. Field books are used on-site to record the location, information about property owners, and information they might provide about the history of the house, any modifications to it, its current use, and its former occupants.[16] Not surprisingly, property owners are most familiar with the history of the families who owned and lived in the "big house," but this chain-of-title information can be helpful for guiding future archival research. Sketches are made of the landscape, including the distance and directional placement of the slave dwelling and other ancillary structures, landscape features, and the big house. Measurements are made of every architectural element of the slave dwelling, beginning with the exterior dimensions and then moving to the interior. These measurements are recorded on a graph paper drawing of the structures, and, as necessary, in the field book. The number and placement of doors, windows, stairs, fireplaces, and other architectural elements are sketched, measured, and described in detail.[17] Notes are made in the field book on the types of materials used in construction, such as wood, bricks, or iron, and we record the types and style of hardware, such as nails or hinges. We try to recognize if any of these elements might have been replaced over the years, but it can be difficult to distinguish the period of time for modifications, especially if older pieces of hardware were reworked or reused for later projects. Thus, the field book functions not only as a place for basic construction data, but also where our observations, informed guesses, and impressions about a structure are recorded.

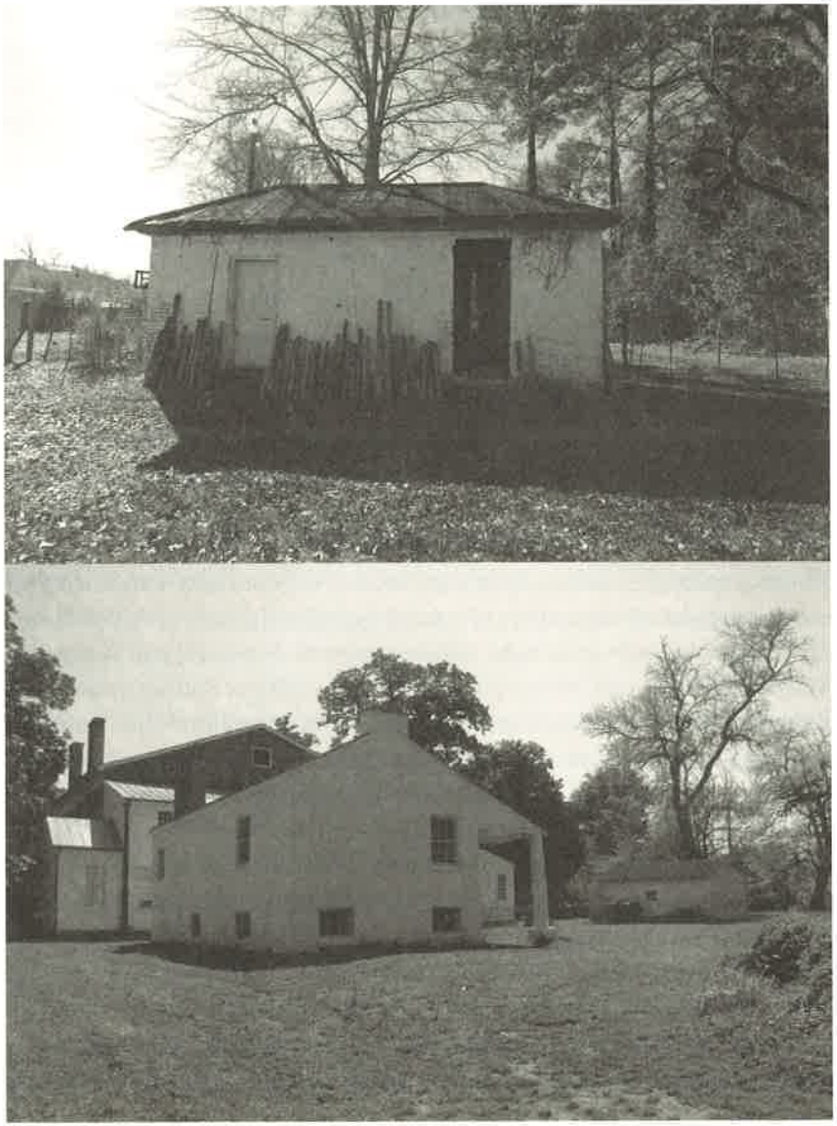
Photographs are an invaluable part of the documentation process. We begin by taking photographs of the landscape around the slave dwelling from multiple directions, being sure to include its relationship to related structures, fences, gardens, or modern buildings. Photographs are made of each elevation, or side, of a structure and close-up shots of construction methods and materials of the exterior and interior. Each structure requires several hundred photographs. Short, narrated videos can be useful for creating a contiguous image of the broader landscape with accompanying explanations. In total, it is not unusual for two to three surveyors to spend between five and six hours documenting a small one-room house.

Finally, the third challenge associated with this project is not technical or logistical but emotional. The histories of slavery and African-American equality remain contested histories, the Black Lives Matter movement being a notable recent example of what happens when two perspectives on history rooted in very different experiences come into public conflict. Regardless of ethnicity, many people are cautious, at best, when the subject is raised. We do not presume to understand all of the reasons for this discomfort, but we know that

[15] Ferguson 1992; Barbara J. Heath and Amber Bennett, "'The Little Spots Allow'd Them': The Archaeological Study of African-American Yards," *Historical Archaeology* 34. 2 (2001): 38–55; John Michael Vlach, *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery* (Chapel Hill, 1993); Richard Westmacott, *African American Gardens and Yards in the Rural South* (Knoxville, 1992).

[16] This information corresponds to what might be found in a HABS Short Format History (https://www.nps.gov/hdp/standards/habsfieldguide.html) (last accessed January 30, 2017).

[17] Drawings are made using the "Historic American Buildings Survey Guide to Field Documentation"(https://www.nps.gov/hdp/standards/HABSGuidFieldDoc.pdf) (last accessed January 30, 2017).



Top: Figure 3(a), a two-room, brick kitchen or laundry in the back yard of an 1840s home in Greene County (BBSHS 1.32.3). Bottom: Figure 3(b), the kitchen and cook's quarters at Magnolia Grove in Greensboro, Hale County (BBSHS 1.33.2).

Table 1. An abbreviated version of the Black Belt Slave Housing Survey catalog. Measurements and information indicative of the properties' locations have been omitted.

BBSHS #	County	Approx. Date Built	Context	Primary function	Type	Loft	Primary material	Foundation	# wind-ows	# doors	Floor type	Fire-place location	Fire-place type	Fireplace/ chimney intact?	Other functions	Condition	HABS record
1.32.1	Greene	1840s	urban	housing	double pen	unk.	wood siding	brick piers	1	2	plank	center	brick	N	storage	stable	N
1.32.2	Greene	1840s	urban	housing	double pen	Y	wood siding	brick piers	5	2	plank	center	brick	N	none noted	poor	N
1.32.3	Greene	1840s	urban	kitchen	double pen	N	brick	none	4	1	plank?	center	brick	N	storage	poor	N
1.32.4	Greene	1850s	rural	housing	double pen	N	wood siding	brick piers	2	2	plank	center	brick	reconstructed	guest house	reconstructed	N
1.33.1	Hale	1840s	urban	housing	single pen	Y	wood siding	brick piers	3	1	plank	end	brick	Y	exhibit	restored	Y
1.33.2 room C	Hale	1840	urban	kitchen	complex	N	brick	none	5	1	earth	end	brick	Y	exhibit	restored	Y
1.33.2 room A	Hale	1840s	urban	kitchen	complex	N	brick	none	2	1	plank	end	brick	Y	exhibit	restored	Y
1.33.3	Hale	unk.	urban	kitchen	single pen	Y	wood	brick piers	4	3	plank	end	brick	Y	storage	stable	N
1.46.1	Marengo	1850s?	rural	housing	single pen	unk.	log (cedar)	cedar	unk.	1	plank	end	brick	N	none noted	collapsed	N
1.46.2	Marengo	1850s?	rural	housing	single pen	unk.	log (cedar)	cedar	1	1	plank	end	brick	Y	none noted	poor	N
1.46.3	Marengo	1860	rural	housing	single pen	Y	wood siding	brick piers	4	2	plank	end	brick	Y	storage/ play house	poor but stable	N
1.46.4	Marengo	1860	rural	housing	single pen	Y	wood siding	brick piers	4	2	plank	end	brick	Y	storage	poor but stable	N
1.51.1	Montgomery	1830s	rural	housing	single pen	Y	wood siding	brick piers	2	1	plank	back	brick	Y	none noted	stable	N
1.51.2	Montgomery	1830s	rural	housing	single pen	Y	wood siding	brick piers	2	1	plank	back	brick	Y	none noted	stable	N
1.51.3	Montgomery	1830s	rural	housing	single pen	Y	wood siding	brick piers	2	1	plank	back	brick	Y	none noted	stable	N
1.51.4	Montgomery	1830s	rural	housing	single pen	Y	wood siding	brick piers	2	1	plank	back	brick	Y	none noted	stable	N
1.60.1	Sumter	1830s-1840s	urban	housing	double pen	unk.	wood siding	brick piers	5	3	plank	center	brick	N	storage	stable	N

they are varied. The Black Belt region may be particularly sensitive to these issues, as racial and ethnic, educational, economic, and political inequalities are pervasive; history is very much a part of the region's psyche. In one town, we were told by property owners that they did not want to draw attention to the slave dwelling in their backyard because "it might bring trouble" from the local African-American community or appear that, by having the structure recorded, they might be seen as endorsing the institution of slavery. In this climate, when granted permission to document a slave dwelling, we respect the land owner's privacy by seeking permission to use any identifying photographs or drawings of the structures in presentations or publications. We assign catalog numbers to all structures and their associated records, and to public audiences we specify site locations only generally by county. In some cases, we have refrained from posting photographs of our work to social media so as to respect land owner privacy and to avoid attracting unwanted visitors or potential vandals. We should point out, however, that most landowners have been welcoming and generous with their time and support. They are interested in local history, preservation, and in helping the project become a tool for better understanding the past. A copy of all records and photographs are provided to each property owner, while the originals are archived at the Black Belt Museum's Archaeology Laboratory on the campus of the University of West Alabama.

Over three semesters and with the help of seven students, the BBSHS has documented sixteen structures in five Black Belt counties (Table 1). Eight dwellings are located within towns behind larger homes; there are two groups of houses making up quarters (four in one group and two in another); and two are isolated field cabins. Most of the extant slave houses and those that are in stable condition are found within towns and close to main houses. The slave houses later serving in these non-domestic roles are no further than about 50 feet from the main house, and one is as close as about fifteen feet from the back door. The proximity to main houses is likely a product of the limited lot sizes within town limits and the desire for house servants and cooks to be close at hand. The consequence is that these

houses remain standing for many decades after their last occupant. They serve as convenient tool sheds, storage sheds, play houses, and even gentrified guest houses. Six of the slave houses we surveyed are currently being used as storage sheds. One is a storage shed but also had been a favorite play house for the property owner's children, and colorful chalk drawings are still visible on the fireplace mantle and on the brick piers under the house. The slave house that now serves as a guest house is located over 100 feet from the main house in a back corner of the lot with low elevation. It is in a rural setting where there was more room for spreading out ancillary structures and segregating the domestic spaces of slaves from their owners. Its distance from the main house and swampy setting may have made it less convenient for re-purposing, and it fell into near complete ruin. Only recently was it reconstructed into a guest house, its distance from the main house appealing to modern ideals of a private retreat.

Three of the slave houses found in towns were kitchens or laundries and also served as the quarters for the cooks (and possibly their families or assistants). The brick slave house seen in Figure 3a has two rooms: we suspect that one or both rooms were for working and one served as the sleeping quarters of the slaves who did the work. The brick kitchen at Magnolia Grove in Greensboro, Hale County, owned today by the Alabama Historical Commission, housed the cook and her family upstairs, but there is another room on the ground floor, with a fireplace, that could have served as a shelter for house slaves working as house servants or in some other capacity (Figure 3b). Another kitchen in the BBSHS catalog is a one and a half-story frame structure with a large internal fireplace (Figure 4). A set of stairs leads to a loft sleeping space.[18]

Houses located closer to main houses tend to be better constructed and may even bear architectural embellishments of the same style of the main house. Archaeology at James Madison's Montepelier, Virginia, estate reveals a stark contrast between the log cabins of field

[18] Although our catalog lists this home as being in stable condition as of 2010, it was recently damaged by visitors and its present condition is unclear.

Figure 4. A kitchen and quarters located in Hale County (BBSHS 1.33.3)

slaves, with clay floor and clay chimneys, and the better-appointed homes of house servants.[19] This pattern is repeated at other sites and is a simple matter of aesthetics for the benefit of the slave owners and should not be mistaken for better living conditions as compared to houses without embellishments.[20] Slave dwellings foremost were meant to provide basic shelter for an owner's investment in human capital. Wealthy slave owners might choose to display their wealth by having those quarters nearest the main house match it in architectural style, creating a pleasing sense of order and control over the visible landscape. The near-house quarters at Waldwic plantation in

[19] Matthew B. Reeves and Matthew Greer, "Within View of the Mansion: Comparing and Contrasting Two Early-Nineteenth Century Slave Households at James Madison's Montpelier," *Journal of Middle Atlantic Archaeology* 28 (2012): 69–80.
[20] e.g., Lucia Stanton, *Slavery at Monticello* (Chapel Hill, 2002).

Hale County are much-lauded examples that were built or remodeled in the 1850s in the same Gothic Revival style as the main house (Figure 5(a)). Other near-house quarters from Marengo County were built around 1860 in Carpenter Gothic style, and a set of four extant quarters documented in Montgomery County also have decorative bargeboards at their gable ends (Figures 5(b) and 5(c), respectively). The Marengo County examples even display decorative trim around their front doors and loft windows (Figure 6). The latter two examples are the extant remains of larger groups of slave quarters once flanking the roads to the owner's houses. Anyone approaching the main house would have to pass through the literal and built physical representations of the owner's source of wealth: slaves and their quarters. The interiors of these outwardly attractive structures are as sparse as any other frame slave house, including frames with no interior sheathing, insulation, or embellishment other than what the occupants might have added over the years.

Similarly, a survey of log cabins in the Alabama HABS records shows that some effort was made to dress the logs used for some slave houses, but most of these were located near the owner's home, where line-of-sight influenced construction.[21] Those near the mansion were more likely to be of hewn logs, white washed, clad with planed boards or frame-built in the first place. The housekeeper's single pen log cabin at Thornhill plantation, Greene County, is closest to the main house, while everyone else lived in multi-family dogtrots situated down a lane (Figure 7).

Field cabins are under-represented in the BBSHS, and so far we have documented only two. Because field cabins are remote from the main house, they were not often maintained for non-domestic purposes and were left to rot after abandoned by the last occupants. They are also just more difficult for us to locate than those sitting in the yards of larger homes. Log cabins are also under-represented, but this apparent rarity is misleading. As noted above, most of the former

[21] Ashley A. Dumas, "Slave-built Log Cabins in the Southeast" (Unpublished conference paper, delivered at the Southeastern Archaeological Conference, Athens, Georgia, October 27, 2016).

Figure 5(a) (top) 1935 HABS photograph of Waldwic slave house (Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C.); Decorative bargeboard on the gable ends of slave houses in Figure 5(b) (bottom) Marengo County, ca. 1860 (BBSHS 1.46.4), and Figure 5(c) (opposite) Montgomery County, ca. 1830s (BBSHS 1.51.2).

Alabama slaves interviewed for the *Slave Narratives* say that they had lived in a log cabin near the main house. This seems to have applied to single or small groups of houses, probably for house servants or craftsmen, as well as large groups, or quarters. The account of Katherine Eppes, born around 1850 in Marengo County, is typical: "dey was log cabins in de quarters jes' as far as your eyes could see."[22] Other accounts describe quarters as large groups of houses in organized rows or streets.[23] The field cabins we have documented were once part of a cotton plantation in Marengo County and were brought to our attention by the current owner. They are each located nearly one-third of a mile from the main house on the margins of agricultural fields. The first is a single pen style, approximately sixteen feet-square, made of unhewn logs with "v"-notched corners (Figure 8). There is one small window opposite the door, and there may have been one next to the chimney. Neither appear to have had glass. The chimney is brick and matches the chimney bricks of other

[22] *Federal Writers' Project: Slave Narrative Projects Vol. 1, Alabama: Aaron – Young* (Washington, D.C., 1936), 119.
[23] *Slave Narrative Projects Vol. 1, Alabama*, 115.

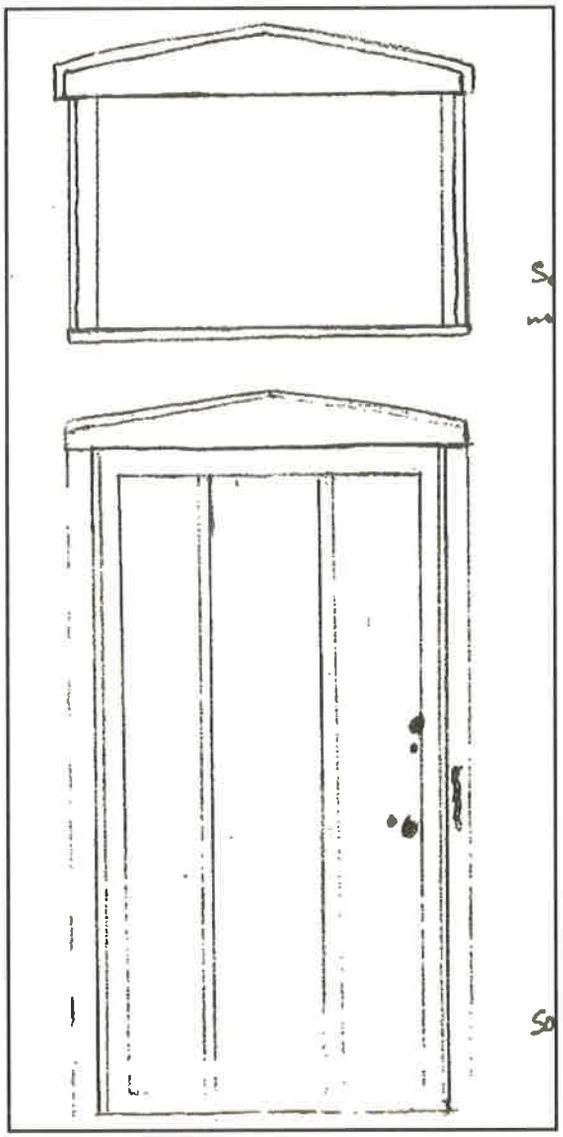


Figure 6. A BBSHS sketch of decorative trim work observed around the front door and loft window of a slave house (BBSHS 1.46.3). The pattern is identical to that around the door of the Waldwic house seen in Figure 5.

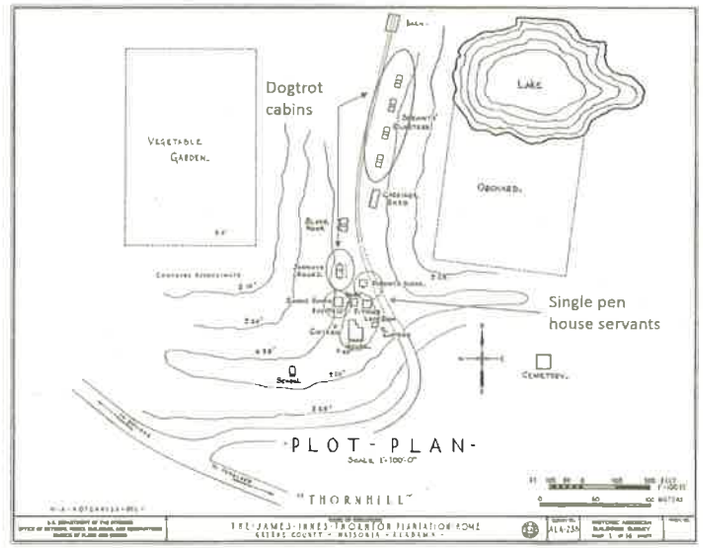


Figure 7. HABS measured drawing of Thornhill plantation, Greene County, 1934, showing the house servant's single pen log house and a row of log dogtrots cabins, all ca. 1835. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

extant structures at the plantation. The second log cabin is also made of unhewn, v-notched logs. It is about fifteen feet-square and has only one small, square window opposite the door. We acknowledge that two log cabins are a tiny sample of what once numbered in the thousands, but we must still account for the existence of two different arrangements: the remote, single field cabin and the groups of cabins within site of the main house.

The demographic and social pressures that led to changes in housing for African slaves from the seventeenth to eighteenth centuries have been well-documented in the Atlantic states.[24] By the early

[24] eg., William Kelso *Kingsmill Plantations, 1619–1800: An Archaeology of Country Life in Colonial Virginia* (Orlando, 1984); Larry McKee, "The Ideals and Realities Behind the Design and Use of 19th Century Virginia Slave Cabins," in *The Art and Mystery of Historical Archaeology: Essays in Honor of James Deetz*, eds. A. E. Yentsch and M. C. Beaudry, (Boca Raton, 1992), 195–213; Dell Upton, "White and Black Landscapes in Eighteenth-Century Virginia," *Places* 2.2 (1985): 59–72.

Figure 8. Remote field cabin in Marengo County, ca. 1850s (BBSHS 1.46.1).

nineteenth century, more orderly, regular, and organized housing was embraced by owners as a means to reinforce their dominance in the plantation system while regulating slaves' health and family life. Nineteenth-century agricultural journals such as *The Southern Planter* and surviving plantation journals recommend that houses be of certain dimensions, well-ventilated, and neat. Nuclear families were to have their own houses to promote stable families and attachment to home, and to discourage disruption to the system.[25] The result is that slave houses became more regular in size, generally twelve or sixteen-square feet, were raised on piers with plank rather than dirt floors, and have fewer if any sub-floor storage pits.[26] Variations

[25] James O. Breeden, ed., *Advice Among Masters: The Ideal in Slave Management in the Old South*, (Westport, Connecticut, 1980), 114–39; Eugene Genovese, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*, (New York, 1974); McKee 1992, 199–204

[26] Barbara J. Heath, "Space and Place within Plantation Quarters in Virginia, 1700–1825," in Clifton Ellis and Rebecca Ginsburg, eds., *Cabin, Quarter, and Plantation: Architecture and Landscapes of North American Slavery*, (New Haven, Conn., 2010), 168.

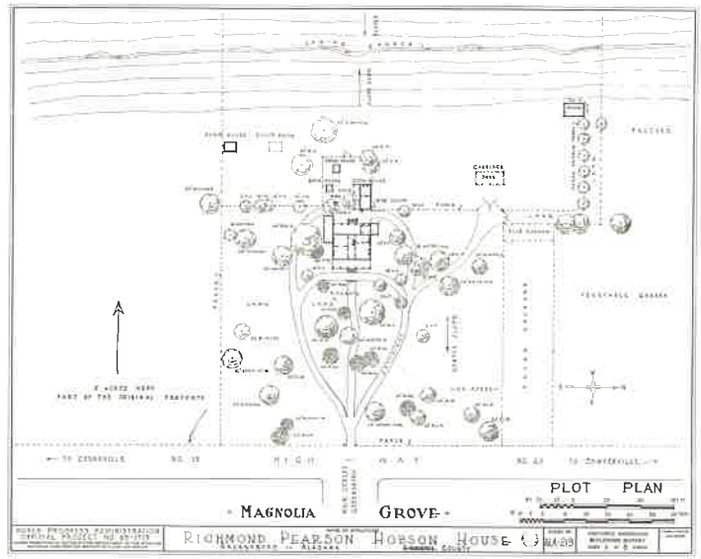


Figure 9. HABS measured drawing of Magnolia Grove in Greensboro, Hale County, around 1933, showing the cook's quarters, and extant slave house, and the remains of another, all ca. 1840s. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

in house construction or arrangement on the landscape could have been affected by slaveholders' or overseers' ideas of management and efficiency, which may change depending on what crops were being grown (rice versus other grains versus cotton, for example), the origins of the slaveholders, and a growing urgency to exert control over the spaces and places in which their chattel existed. For instance, Magnolia Grove in Greensboro was a working farm located at the edge of town. HABS drawings of the property in the 1930s reveal a main house set apart by a fence from the utilitarian spaces of the back yard, which are again separated from the slave houses by another fence (Figure 9). Slaves and later house servants would have had to pass through two physical boundaries before entering the domestic space of the white family.[27] Additionally, the two Carpenter Gothic houses in Marengo County were built as part of a carefully

[27] Vlach, 21.

Figure 10. Typical double pen slave house of frame construction, Greene County (BBSHS 1.32.2).

laid out plan. The corners of the houses are exactly sixty feet apart, and a well is centered exactly thirty feet between them.

With the exception of a kitchen, four of the slave houses in the BBSHS that are located within towns are double pens (Figure 10). A central fireplace served both rooms, and radiant heat from the chimney heated sleeping lofts above. Double pen homes usually have an exterior door leading into each room, a single window opposite the front door, and a window on each end. The space on at least one side of the fireplace was left open so that occupants could pass between the two rooms. One house has a well-used ladder attached to the wall leading to a sleeping loft. The three double pen houses in Greene County and one in Sumter County that we have recorded so far are remarkably uniform in dimension, averaging about fifteen feet wide by thirty feet long. We need more data to determine if this is a regional pattern, but the double pen probably was an efficient way to house multiple families.

Figure 11. A ca. 1830s slave house with mid- to late twentieth-century alterations, Montgomery County (BBSHS 1.51.3).

After the Civil War, many slaves remained with their former owners as servants or sharecroppers and continued to live in slave cabins, improving or enlarging them as resources allowed. Based on information from current owners and materials found in the houses, we have documented several slave houses that continued to be occupied into the 1960s or later. The families who lived there added plaster and paint, layers of newspaper or cardboard insulation, closets and shelves, porches, stove pipes, and electricity. Some houses have been altered so much that they no longer resemble the original form (Figure 11). These changes are reminders that slave houses were sometimes lived in for more than a century after slaves did, again, three times as long as they were ever inhabited by slaves. We must use this fact to temper our interpretations about what attributes are original or authentic, especially those on the interior of the homes, where more personalization may have been possible. Alternatively,

more than 150 years of continual inhabitance of some structures is perhaps their most remarkable attribute. We have no doubt that there are slave houses in the Black Belt and elsewhere still serving as homes for some families. These slave houses, then, are themselves museums of African-American history and culture, each one the site of a story that stretches from slavery through Civil Rights.

The sixteen houses (representing nearly 100 hours of work) documented thus far through the Black Belt Slave Housing Survey are not enough to fill major gaps in our understanding of slavery in the Black Belt, and broad anthropological patterns have yet to appear. Such will require the documentation of more houses and analysis of the expanded database. In the meantime, we are gaining a three-dimensional idea of the starkness of slavery and post-emancipation slavery and the physical realm in which the ancestors of more than sixty percent of our neighbors were born, raised, and died. Recording the settings of extant dwellings as well as attributes such as size, style, and materials, and comparing this data with that produced for slave housing surveys in other regions of the country may reveal changes in houses and landscape that reflect broader economic and social trends.

The future of this project will include collaborative historical research as well as archaeological excavations at certain slave dwellings to learn more about the daily lives of slaves and the generations that continued to live in some of the houses into the twentieth century. Through careful and contextualized recovery of the things left behind by slaves, archaeology is the only way to reveal details of everyday survival and adaptation. Incorporating technology such as 3D laser scanning, photogrammetry, and drone photography will be important for future work as a means to quickly collect a large amount of accurate information. Three-dimensional technology is especially useful for creating digital models of houses and landscapes that can be easily shared and viewed. Our intention is to make all of our information eventually available online.

History is replete with appalling stories of inhumane and brutal treatment of slaves, but if these are the only stories told, then slaves

remain separate in our memories, distinct from the rest of humanity, and defined by the treatment received from their owners. We hope that our work will help to reassert the individuals and families in the narrative, to help us connect with them by describing the places where they lived and the things that they did to endure. Finally, this work is a race against time. In the first days of 2017, the house in Figure 10 began to collapse and will soon be an indistinguishable pile of wood. In one hundred years, the information in our notes, photographs, and the artifacts in the ground will be all that remains of the Black Belt's slave houses.[†]

[†]The authors wish to acknowledge the generous support of Betsy Crosby, Eleanor Cunningham, Robert Gamble, Rodney Granec, Martha King, the McWhirter family, the Sims family, and E. Barden Smedberg, Jr.