African Architectural Transference to the South Carolina Low Country, 1700-1880

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AFRICAN ARCHITECTURAL TRANSFERENCE TO THE
SOUTH CAROLINA LOW COUNTY, 1700-1880

Fritz Hamer and Michael Trinkley

ABSTRACT

There is growing historical and archaeological evidence that African style housing was an
integral part of slave communities on plantations in the South Carolina Lowcountry. Besides
the "shotgun" house, other African house forms were built in North America before descendants
of African slaves became acculturated to western construction techniques. The rarity of
historical and archaeological evidence of these structures can be attributed to the culture bias
of early white observers and the poor preservation of these impermanent structures in the
archaeological record.

Introduction

In 1907 an American ethnographer discovered a group of African-Americans living in
Edgefield County, South Carolina near the Savannah River who convincingly demonstrated that
they were born and raised in Africa. The evidence showed that they were one of the last of the
illegal slave shipments brought into the South on the Wanderer in 1858, forty-nine years earlier.
The six men and women had Euro-American names, but they all remembered their African
identity and the cultures in West Africa from which they were torn. More importantly, at least
for this study, one of them built a house in the traditional style of his forbearers. Of wattle and
daub construction with a thatched roof, this structure was a perfect representation of one
rectangular house style commonly used by many ethnographic groups in West Africa for
centuries (Vlach 1978:136; Montgomery 1908:611-623).

This example of African architectural transference to the American Southeast is unique.
Except for the recollection of one former slave in the 1930s, only one scholar has provided
detailed evidence for African architectural styles in the Southeast. In his examination of the
"shotgun" house still extant in many Southern communities, John Vlach has convincingly
demonstrated that this house type can be traced to New Orleans where many Haitian slaves came
in the early nineteenth century. Many slaves whose homeland was in Yoruba, in what is now
part of Nigeria, brought this house type with them to the New World (Vlach 1978: 125-131).
But the remainder of the scholarly work on slave architecture argues that European styles
overshadowed the built environment of the slave communities throughout the slave era in North
America. The known contemporary accounts and the few visual examples uncovered support this
contention. However, virtually all the in-depth studies to date have focused on Virginia and
Maryland, where the African population never exceeded that of the white (Herman 1984:260,
277; McDaniel 1982; Vlach 1978:133).

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The Guinea Coast
West Africa

Hausa Ethnic Groups
- Slave factories
- Eighteenth Century towns

Information in part from Joseph Holloway, Afriopelons in American Culture, 1990

Figure 1. Tribal groups on the Guinea Coast of West Africa.
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In contrast to the Virginia and Maryland studies, the history of slavery in South Carolina followed a different demographic course. As Peter Wood and other historians have shown, the African population of the Lowcountry had surpassed the European immigrants less than forty years after Charles Town was established in 1670 (Morgan 1977; Terry 1981:144-145; Wood 1974:36, 130). This gave the slave residents a considerable autonomy both on the plantation and beyond throughout the colonial period (Morgan 1982:565-599). Consequently, the opportunity for enslaved Africans to maintain their material culture, including architecture, was greater than it was in Virginia.

It has now become an axiom of plantation history and archaeology than many forms of African material culture were brought over to the Americas despite the degradation and horror of the middle passage. A variety of studies show that African styles of pottery, basket making, music, and religion were adapted to the new life that confronted the forced immigrants (Ferguson 1992; Jones-Jackson 1987; Joyner 1984; Rosengarten 1986; Vlach 1978). However, architectural studies of the slave built environment have argued that unlike these other forms of African material culture, architectural styles from West Africa were heavily influenced and largely replaced by the dominant European styles within the first generation of slavery (Bernard 1984:260-261; Vlach 1993). One study argues, with some justification, that cultural transference by any group is limited no matter how much freedom to choose that group may have (Agorsah 1993:193). Within a small plantation community where slave numbers averaged between twenty and forty Africans, traditional material culture probably was limited as Morgan and Nicholls indirectly suggest in their demographic study of slave population comparisons between the Virginia Tidewater and Piedmont during the colonial era (Morgan and Nicholls 1989:241-247; Sobel 1987:105). But where the slave community outnumbered the whites by ten to one and more, the freedom to carry on many African life ways became more possible. And South Carolina Lowcountry plantations were unique in this regard as far as North American slavery is concerned. Throughout much of the colonial period, where slaves outnumbered whites as much as twenty-eight to one, there was fertile ground for African architectural styles to persist despite their owners' wishes (Joyner 1984: 118;120;123; Terry 1981:145; Wood 1974:145-146).

While the numbers support the likelihood that African architectural styles could survive and persist in Lowcountry South Carolina, the documented records provide only fragmentary evidence. But these sources, combined with archaeological evidence, can demonstrate a greater link between Africa and the Lowcountry than current research to date has admitted. But before examining these data, a look at the African roots of slaves and their architecture provides important background on what slave structures would have been based.

The Origin of South Carolina's Slave Population

Due to scarce records we can never get a reliable estimate of the origins of South Carolina's slave population. However, during the last twenty-five years extensive analysis of port records for Charleston and that of the British slave shipping companies such as the Royal African Company, have helped scholars such as Holloway (1990), Littlefield (1991), and Wood (1975:131-172) provide useful estimates of where many South Carolina slaves originated (see Figures 1 and 2).
Origin of Slave Cargoes Arriving in SC 1732-1774

Figure 2. Origin of slave cargoes in South Carolina.
Littlefield's (1991) comprehensive study demonstrates convincingly that South Carolina planters knew enough about the ethnic origins of their slaves to show preference for those who came from Gambia and Senegambia — the rice growing sections of West Africa. Slave importations from this area apparently peaked in the period from 1749 through 1787 (Holloway 1990:7). When the adjacent regions of Sierra Leone and the Windward coast are included, Littlefield suggests that during the eighteenth century nearly 43% of the slaves documented coming into South Carolina originated in rice growing areas (Littlefield 1991:109-110, 113; Wood 1975:149). An even more important area appears to have been Angola and the Congo, which consistently contributed the majority of African slaves throughout the eighteenth century, apparently because the trip was quick and the number of slaves plentiful (Holloway 1990:6-9; Littlefield 1991:110).

The ethnic preferences and biases of Carolina planters are reflected by the instructions of such merchants as Henry Laurens, who in 1756, remarked that "Few of our planters will touch Calabar [i.e., Ebos] Slaves when others Can be had (Hamer et al. 1970:182). A year earlier, in 1755, he specifically remarked that, "our people like the Gambia and Windward Coast . . . or the Angola Men such as are large" (Hamer et al. 1968:258). Such perceptions are discussed at length by Littlefield (1991:8-32). They were also clear among those trading in Africa. One example of this realization is R.R. Madden's long account of the different coastal groups:

The Mandigoes are said to be superior in intelligence to the other classes . . . . The Coromantees, or Gold Coast negroes, are described in these words by Bryan Edwards: — "they are distinguished from all others by firmness of both body and mind; a ferociousness of disposition; but, withal, activity, courage, and stubbornness . . . ." The Papams, or Whidahs, are accounted the most docile, meek, and tractable race among the African negroes. The Ebos are looked upon as the least valuable of the negro race, — as timid, feeble, desponding creatures, who not infrequently used to commit suicide in their dejection . . . . The negroes from the Gaboon country . . . are said to be invariably "ill disposed." Lastly, the Congoes and Angolas are thought to be [less] robust than the other negroes, but more handy as mechanics, and more trustworthy (Madden 1970 [1835]:98-104).

In spite of these general preferences, it is clear that Carolina planters would purchase a wide variety of Africans, depending probably on availability, need, and experience. The slave sales posted in the South Carolina Gazette in 1732, for example, list five Ebos, with another three listed in 1733. Since the vast majority of the ads didn't specify the origin of the slaves being sold, one wonders why these so openly announced the origin of these slaves if Ebos were, in fact, so poorly received.

Of course these studies of both origins and preferences offer a variety of conflicting data, depending on the statistics used, how the data are interpreted, and how much weight is given to the ability of planters to identify specific "races" or "ethnic groups". Regardless, it is essential to understand the slaving patterns in each area of Africa.
African house types are diverse but they have some general patterns and landscapes that parallel each other over ethnic and regional borders (Figures 3 and 4). Space does not allow an in-depth study of the historical and archaeological accounts of pre-colonial African housing. Documentary sources from European travelers in West and Central Africa described thatch roofs made of grass and/or palm fronds were common, as were earth floors, and no windows. Construction techniques often included either the use of vegetable material, such as canes or matting, for the siding or else employed some variation of mud or clay walls, either wattle and daub or swish (see Cruichshank 1966 [1853]: 287; Philips 1746:232; Barbot 1746: 253; Agorsah 1993:191).

In addition to these specific structural features there are other landscape features surrounding African structures that should be noted. It was common that African structures noted by seventeenth, eighteenth and even nineteenth century travelers show that structures were characteristically small by European standards — usually 300 square feet or less. However, this did not necessarily denote low status or poverty. Most activities occurred outside the house in a compound. Everything from food preparation, eating, and socializing was carried on in the open air. The dwelling was a place reserved essentially for sleeping or protection from bad weather.

African housing and landscaping are repeated in the slave settlements that appeared in the Caribbean. Its importance in understanding African heritage and tranferences is nowhere better stated than by Merrick Posnansky, who in 1984 wrote:

The African element has existed continuously in the Caribbean since at least 1501 . . . Altogether, in the 370 years of the Atlantic slave trade, some 43% of the 12 to 20 million slaves who were shipped to the New World came to the Caribbean, compared to less than 5% to the area currently occupied by the United States and Canada. . . . This makes the Caribbean the most important area for Afro-American culture in the New World, particularly when it is remembered that in many of the islands, such as Jamaica and Barbados, people of African descent constitute at least 95% of the population (Posnansky 1984).

The importance of Jamaica and the Caribbean for our discussions becomes even greater when we consider that this area was the origin of many planters immigrating to Carolina, as well as the source of at least some of the slaves eventually finding their way to South Carolina.

Even a brief sampling of the numerous historical accounts from eighteenth and early nineteenth century Jamaica will reveal extraordinary detail concerning house construction and village life. Both Matthew Gregory Lewis and William Beckford mention the "picturesque appearance" of Jamaican slave villages, noting that they tended to be clustered together, secluded among fruit trees (Lewis 1969 [1834]:107-108; Beckford 1740:1:229, 277). This seclusion bred a significant degree of privacy, which the slaves carefully guarded. R.R. Madden explains this, noting:
Figure 3. Sierra Leone houses, 1744. Credit: John Barbot, *A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea* (1745).
Figure 4. Dahomey fences, ca. 1890. Credit: Jean-Baptiste Blanchard, *Au Dahomey: Journal de la Campagne par un Marsouin* (1895)
"But it is not only on these occasions the negroes are jealous of white persons visiting their villages,—I will not say their houses, for they take good care to give no white man admittance, if they can possibly help it,—but at all times (Madden 1970 [1835]:371)."

Barry Higman, in his survey of eighteenth and nineteenth century Jamaican plats, found that 78% of the plantations evidenced dispersed or irregular slave housing arrangements, with only 22% indicative of regular, linear arrangements (Higman 1988:244).

Beckford described their houses as consisting:

of a hall in the middle, to which there are generally two doors, one opposite the other: and in this hall they cook their victuals, sit, chat, and smoke; nor do they hardly every leave it without a fire. The sleeping-rooms have a communication with this general apartment... (Beckford 1740:1:229).

Lewis briefly comments on their construction, noting that virtually all of the slave houses, "are composed of wattles on the outside, with rafters of sweet-wood, and are well plastered within and whitewashed" (Lewis 1969 [1834]:110). In a 1797 account the use of wattle and daub is extensively described with variability in the size of posts and sticks based on local materials. The roof is described as usually being thatched and the floors were typically dirt, although sometimes marl was used because it was more durable and could be washed (Armstrong 1990:93-94, 290-292).

This brief overview provides a glimpse of the ample evidence that Africans transported to the Caribbean took with them their architectural heritage and were able to craft villages similar to those in West Africa. House construction, village arrangement, the use of fences, the clustering of structures on the basis of kinship, the importance of yards and yard activities, and even the winding, narrow pathways through the villages can all be traced back to West Africa. Not surprisingly, similar observations have been offered for other slave communities. One example is Mary Karasch's work on slave life in Rio de Janeiro, where "slave shanties were made with thatched roofs and walls of mud and wattle construction" called pau-à-pisque, were common (Karasch 1986:128). Higman (1984:219) also reports that in British Honduras there is evidence that slave housing varied by the tribes represented.

Carolina Slave Houses

The Historical Evidence

As common as historical accounts are in both Africa and the Caribbean, it is perhaps strange that so few have been uncovered for Carolina. Those which do exist have been collected by Leland Ferguson (1992). They leave little doubt that clay, wattle, or mat structures were common among most eighteenth century slave settlements.
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Figure 5. Historic archaeological sites on the South Carolina coast.
The ability of African architectural traditions to be remembered is perhaps nowhere more clearly revealed than in the WPA slave narratives, where two ex-slaves recalled their grandparents' living in wattle and daub houses (see Ferguson 1992:74-75). One ex-slave, Ben Sullivan, even recounts the construction of an "African house" at a coastal Georgia plantation:

Old man Okra said he wanted a place like he had in Africa, so he built himself a hut. I remember it well. It was about 12 by 14 feet, it had a dirt floor, and he built the sides like a woven basket with clay plaster on it. It had a flat roof made from brush and palmetto, and it had one door and no windows. But Master made him pull it down. He said he didn't want an African hut on his place (Work ProjectsAdministration 1986: 179).

Another early reference, from the pen of Martin Bolzius, a Calvinist clergyman from Switzerland who settled outside of Savannah in the 1730s, gives a tantalizingly vague description of slave structures. He wrote in 1749 that the slaves lived in huts about 600 feet from the master's house. Each slave family was assigned to one hut and those slaves who were single lived two to a hut. He added that few nails were used so that each structure's construction costs were "very minor" (Loewald et al. 1957:257).

One of the only eighteenth century accounts concerning wattle and daub or clay-walled structures is found in a Revolutionary War account, where the British were "posted in houses with Clay Walls which was very Difficult to penetrate without a field piece" (quoted in Ferguson 1992:77). The famous painting of the Mulberry Plantation slave row (Thomas Coram, "View of Mulberry," The Gibbes Museum of Art, Charleston South Carolina) is one of the earliest visual examples of African housing (Figure 6). The peaked, thatched roofs and mud walls resemble house types common to Africa (Hamer and Trinkley 1988:4). Ferguson himself has recently also admitted that the painting may actually represent "clay-walled, thatched houses" (Ferguson 1992:79). At least by the third quarter of the eighteenth century wattle and daub chimneys were apparently common. Henry Laurens, in 1766, wrote to his Wambaw Plantation overseer that:

I do not think it practicable to send up Bricks for the Negro Chimneys. Therefore Wooden ones as usual must serve & Sam will be with you very soon & assist about the management of Clay to serve instead of Bricks (Rogers et al. 1976:62).
Figure 6. Painting of a slave house row at Mulberry Plantation (1769-1811), West Branch of the Cooper River, South Carolina by Thomas Corum, View of Mulberry [House and Street], oil on paper, 10 x 17.6 cm. Credit: Original work at The Gibbes Museum of Art/Carolina Art Association, Charleston, SC.
Negative evidence comes from the number of plantation sale announcements in the *South Carolina Gazette* during the first half of the eighteenth century where almost none mention the construction of the slave quarters. Those which do specify such structures talk only of the quarters being of frame or wood construction (John H. Wilson, personal communication 1996). This may suggest that wattle and daub or other forms of African housing were so common that only different (better?) housing was worthy of comment.

In Philip Morgan’s brief historical synthesis on eighteenth century slave housing in South Carolina he selected plats and newspaper ads. From these he found a combination of European and African layouts and construction methods (1977: 47-66). In particular he found ads describing “double Negro Houses” in which a kind of duplex arrangement emerged in some slave communities. Morgan estimated that two families lived in each “double” house with about 224 square feet per family. The construction materials, when mentioned, described “framed” or “boarded” dwellings. The layout found in the seventeen plats illustrated show two basic patterns. The first is a ribbon-like form with a path running between two rows of structures. The other pattern is the rectangular version with three or four lines of slave houses, each with a yard backing on to one another.

While Morgan’s research indicated that European influence was strong he also hints at aspects within the general configurations which show African inspiration. The close, cramped quarters that each slave structure provided its inhabitants gave little room for any indoor activity except for sleep. Some large slave families indicate that there was often 45 square feet or less per person in these small dwellings. This suggests that most activities, ranging from cooking to entertainment, like in Africa, would have occurred outside in the yard or compound (Morgan 1977: 47-51).

Even into the nineteenth century there are still a few tantalizing suggestions that clay or mud huts were still present on the Carolina landscape. For example, in 1819 Abiel Abbott, an English traveler, described a “servant building a house for himself in the style of an English cottage. The walls are formed with mud filled with straw” (quoted in Ferguson 1992:77). While this may be a reference to English cob architecture (see, for a discussion, Mercer 1975:133-136), it may just as easily have been Abbott’s effort to find some way of describing wattle and daub. In 1822 Robert J. Turnbull explained that Lowcountry slaves lived in “good clay cabins, with clay chimneys” (quoted in Ferguson 1992:79). A narrative by ex-slave Jake McLeod recalls that toward the end of the antebellum era his owner, in the Lynches River area of South Carolina, had four slave houses, sheltering about 25 slaves. One was a log cabin with a brick chimney, while the “other two were clay houses” (Hurmence 1989:30). He went on to also mention that slaves with small pox were quarantined in the swamp, where “dirt houses” were built, perhaps a reference to wattle and daub structures.

As late as first quarter of the twentieth century some aspects of earlier building techniques were still quite alive among Lowcountry blacks (Figure 7). One example, beyond the previously discussed examples of thatched roofs, are the wood fences found all along the Carolina coast, from the Beaufort area northward to Sandy Island in Georgetown County (Figure 8). Another
Figure 7. African-style house built in Edgefield County, SC ca. 1905. Credit: Reproduced by permission of the American Anthropologist, Vol. 10, 1908. Not for further reproduction.
Figure 8. Fence line in background, Sandy Island, South Carolina, ca. 1930. Credit: Photographic collection, Brookgreen Gardens, Murrells Inlet, South Carolina.
example is the construction of wattle and daub chimneys, found in many of the Depression Era photographs. Ambrose Gonzales provides what appears to be an accurate description of the construction of a frame cabin and wattle and daub chimney by the freed slave Cassius in the Pon Pon area of the Charleston Lowcountry:

He had already prepared the material for his wooden framework, and again he called on his helpful friends to join him in putting together and building up the pen — broad and square at the bottom to enclose the wide, deep fireplace, then sloping from the shoulders to the throat that narrowed gradually to the top. The more primitive clay-chimney-builders construct their framework with no more regard for symmetry than an osprey shows in putting together its nest; but Cassius was building a chimney to match his cabin, and his cabin was already a model, so his uprights were set with precision and on their four sides the crosspieces were nailed as closely and evenly as a plasterer’s laths. The stiff clay was then mixed with water and kneaded to the right consistency, and his friends helped him plaster it heavily over the framework of the chimney, inside and out. Then, when the clay hearth, built up two feet above the ground, had been carefully leveled, Cassius gathered chips and kindled a little blaze (Gonzales 1924:228-229).

The Archaeological Evidence

Both Ferguson (1992) and his student, Natalie Adams (1990), have reviewed the archaeological evidence of eighteenth century slave housing in South Carolina. Quite legitimately they have focused on the evidence from Berkeley County sites such as Curriboo, dating from the mid-1700s (Wheaton et al. 1983; see also Wheaton and Garrow 1985) (Figure 9); Lesesne, dating from the mid- to late-eighteenth century, (Zierden et al. 1986) (Figure 10); and Spiers Landing, dating to the late eighteenth century (Drucker and Anthony 1979) (Figure 11).

Taken together, the archaeological record from the early eighteenth century on presents what appears to be an interesting evolution of house types. The earliest thus far encountered appear to be single and double bay buildings without chimneys, measuring about 10 to 14 feet by 13 to 22 feet. These houses are evidenced by trench outlines, dug into the subsoil at the site, with some also containing evidence of posts, placed several feet apart, in the trench. These features have been interpreted as representing either a variation of cob architecture reinforced by the upright posts or as the remnants of wattle and daub structures (see Adams 1990:41-48). These earliest houses lack evidence of internal chimneys, and hearths were apparently found in the yard areas.

By the late eighteenth century there is evidence that house forms, at least at Yaughan, had shifted away from what are being called "wall trench" houses to structures defined by individual posts. Ferguson, building on the work at Yaughan and Curriboo, suggests that the "narrowly spaced wall plates presumably supported steep roofs with either gabled or hipped ends, covered by bark, split planks or, more likely, thatching" (Ferguson 1992:66). Ferguson also suggests that some of these later houses incorporated wattle and daub chimneys at the gable ends.
Figure 9. Slave houses, Yaughan and Carribo site.
Figure 10. Slave house, Lesesne site.
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1992:67). Such archaeological evidence is clearly supported by the previous historical accounts of wattle and daub chimneys, especially the account describing the building of such features by Ambrose Gonzales. Ferguson also suggests that the Yaughan structures with stick chimneys may be similar to the Spier's Landing structure, although the latter is thought to have had a raised floor as well as a root cellar (Ferguson 1992:67). What has not been explained about the Spier's Landing house is the presence of a posted dripline from a roof overhang which is asymmetric to the foundation and which, in fact, cuts under the foundation in one location before disappearing. With posts intrusive into the so-called dripline it is tempting to suggest that perhaps the dripline actually represents an earlier wall trench structure. Regardless, the Spier's Landing structure appears to represent a more "European-style" house, or at least reflects the efforts by planters to "improve" the condition of slaves.

More recent archaeological investigations reveal extraordinary variation in the slave dwellings found in the Lowcountry. Mid-eighteenth century evidence for log structures chinked with lime mortar were found on Daufuskie Island. No data to suggest internal hearths were identified, although one external hearth was recovered. The floors of the structures were apparently originally made of a poured lime mortar. Although no intact floors were identified, the distribution of artifacts and flooring suggests small structures, perhaps only 10 by 12 feet (Trinkley 1989:8). No evidence of a linear arrangement could be identified and the structures appeared to have no logical arrangement. The use of log structures on Daufuskie, while originating with these early slave houses built during the tenure of George Haig Ill, continued to be a style used by Hiram Blodgett during the 1830s and 1840s, and later by William Pope during the 1850s and 1860s. Although clearly not an African-style of housing, log structures are perhaps more common at slave settlements than originally anticipated. At least the early examples reflect a mixture of potentially African elements — the small house size, the dispersed arrangement, and absence of a clearly demarcated internal hearth.

Excavations undertaken at Craw Plantation, in Berkeley County, South Carolina, during 1995 revealed a slave settlement which likely contained a series of structures loosely oriented east-west. The site produced a wide assortment of features, including what appear to be exterior hearths, trash pits (perhaps representing filled-in clay extraction pits), a cob pit (perhaps used to drive away insects), a dog burial, and the remains of a number of seemingly unrelated posts. The only architectural feature identified was a single wall, measuring 11 feet in length, probably from a wattle structure (Adams 1995:30). The artifact assemblage is dominated by Colono ware pottery, which accounts for nearly 72% of all artifacts found and architectural remains, consisting of only 356 nails, 22 fragments of window glass, and a single item of construction hardware, accounted for less than 10% of the total archaeological collection. This site reveals that many early Carolina slave settlements may be difficult to identify and even more difficult to interpret.

A somewhat better preserved site was encountered at the Berkeley County Crowfield Plantation on the edge of Huckhole Swamp (Trinkley 1996). Here the slave village appears to have followed the orientation of a sandy ridge. Thus, while not really dispersed, the somewhat linear arrangement was likely a reflection of topography rather than white planning or
Figure 11. Slave house, Spiers Landing site.
enforcement. More curiously, the settlement, from the mid- to late eighteenth century, includes a variety of house types. Identified was a wall trench structure, without evidence of an internal hearth, measuring 20 by 32 feet. Also present was a portion of another wall trench structure, with a different orientation. A third structure, adjacent to these two, measured about 17 by 24 feet. This structure contained a gable end hearth, formed of brick bats “mortared” together using a very sticky natural clay. Portions of a wall trench were found associated with this hearth, suggesting that the building was perhaps wattle and daub, with the addition of a chimney at one end. Two additional wall trench sections were found in another portion of the site. What is perhaps most interesting is that of these five wall trench structures, no two have the same orientation. It is as if each successive building generation re-arranged orientations to suit other, perhaps internal factors, while maintaining only the general orientation of the sand ridge.

At another location in the Crowfield slave settlement is what appears to be one, perhaps two, possible wall trenches for oval features. Although the excavations were not able to totally uncover these features, they appear to be fence lines, somewhat similar to those known historically from both Africa and the Carolina coast. It is therefore no surprise to see them at an eighteenth century Lowcountry plantation.

The Crowfield site produced another structure variant — this one marked by distinct posts, spaced about 10 feet apart and appearing to represent foundation posts for a raised structure. The building measured about 18 by 34 feet, but no evidence was found of a chimney or hearth. While this structure might represent a storage building, the quantity of domestic remains strongly supports a domestic function. Perhaps the chimney footing is simply not visible, although we must consider the possibility that exterior hearths were still being used, even once the housing had been affected by European tastes.

These few examples reveal that the archaeological record, when carefully explored and cautiously interpreted, offers a wide range of potential architectural forms. Some have shifted away from architectural styles to an analysis of floor space. For example, Charles Joyner has suggested that while some styles may suggest English influence, the floor plans reveal a clear "African proxemic environment" (Joyner 1984:117-126). He contends that the double-pen or two-bay layout of many slave houses follows the Yoruba two-room house plan and that the limited floor space represents that typical of African houses. Ferguson and his colleagues, while finding the interpretations appealing, point out that the reasoning is weak — his arguments are based on:

uneven oral accounts, a few photographs and one extant village. In these data he finds African similarities only in floorplan and room size, the most abstract qualities. . . . Beyond these potential detractions, comparisons of floorplans with those of the Yoruba totally disregard questions of historical connections. Others have shown strong demographic ties to Angola and the Windward Coast, not the homeland of the Yoruba in modern-day Nigeria and Benin. Furthermore, discussions of African room-size in both Joyner and Vlach are purely impressionistic (Ferguson et al. 1990:10-11).
Figure 12. A portion of the ca. 1860 map of Hilton Head, showing Michelville
(National Archives, RG 77, Map 152)
In spite of these concerns, they suggest that Joyner does offer an interesting hypothesis which should be tested by examination of additional data. Certainly there is some data that the early Colonial slave structures tended to be relatively small, averaging about 143 square feet (Adams 1990:89) although an argument could be made that some incorporated upwards of 260 square feet. Ferguson (1992:145) suggests an average room size of 209 square feet, which he claims to be closer to the 10 by 10 foot size "commonly considered by American folklorists to be the West African norm" (Ferguson 1992:73). Regardless, both of these are smaller than the average of about 324 square feet attributed to whites (Kelso 1984:56-102, Vlach 1978:124). Richard Affleck and Natalie Adams suggest that this difference is "a reflection of the slave's concept of appropriate living space during a period when planters were not concerned as much about the quality of slave housing as they were with making their plantations profitable" (Affleck and Adams n.d.:11). They note that by the end of the antebellum period, slave housing frequently exceeded the theoretical ideal of 288 square feet, with houses on rice plantations averaging about 441 square feet (Affleck and Adams n.d.: 12). John Otto, for example, reports houses varying from about 14 to 16 feet by 20 feet, with a floor area ranging from about 277 to 320 square feet (Otto 1975:103). From an archaeological perspective there is evidence that African slaves were being acculturated, probably by force, into the accepted system of Euro-American architecture (Hamer and Trinkley 1988; Adams 1990:70-104).

**Into the Postbellum**

Archaeological and historical studies at the freedmen site of Mitchelville, on Hilton Head Island in Beaufort County, South Carolina (Trinkley 1986), suggest that African cultural influences continued to impact the choice and design of housing by the freed blacks. Mitchelville is an exceptional laboratory for this study (Figure 12). While established and guided by the Union army, all construction in the town was performed by the freedmen themselves. The military, however, provided free materials, allowing the housing to take just about whatever form the freed slaves might choose.

By 1865 Mitchelville had a population of 1,500 and its architecture was recorded in a series of photographs. They show square and rectangular shapes (Figure 13). The shotgun house, which Vlach suggests "may represent the continuation of an African lifestyle . . . and be . . . the most significant expression of Afro-American material culture" appears in a clearer form than in any slave era photographs (Vlach 1978:123). Generally two to three rooms long, (as described at the opening of this paper) this house form is distinctly linked to African cultures along the continent's west coast. Yet the people who made them at Mitchelville could only have known about the style through their fathers and grandfathers who had come from Africa as slaves.

While the photographs show the use of tar paper, iron stovepipes, glassed windows — all conveniences of Euro-American style houses — there were other aspects that the freedmen seemed to ignore, particularly in terms of the sizes of the houses they built and the spacing of their houses. None of the Mitchelville houses appear to be more than 220 square feet in total area — making them upwards of 100 square feet smaller than typical late antebellum slave houses (Hamer and Trinkley 1988:12-133, Appendix I). In addition, the houses are situated
Figure 13. Michelville structures, Hilton Head, South Carolina, 1864. Credit: Photographic Division, National Archives, 165-C-362.
much closer together than the slave row houses built only a few years earlier. While this may be the result of the town space running short, it seems equally possible that it represents a return to a kin-based organization, with lineage arrangement — a scenario which is, in fact, supported by the later history of Mitchelville.

Mitchelville also reveals some unexpected construction styles. Not only did blacks continue to be familiar with the techniques of tabby architecture, at least a decade after it was abandoned by whites, but it was used both for the construction of fireplaces and wattle and daub walls. This latter technique recalls both plantation and African antecedents. One Mitchelville structure appears to be of tabby wall trench construction. This suggests the adaptation of tabby or mortar materials to wattle and daub technology (Hamer and Trinkley 1988:13).

**Conclusion**

Although this examination shows that much work remains before a clear understanding of African American architectural styles is demonstrated, the historical and archaeological evidence is building that African style housing was an integral part of slave communities on many plantations. The African evidence, combined with the work done in the West Indies in the last twenty years, makes it almost inconceivable that South Carolina slaves did not continue to use the building methods of their homelands across the ocean. Only when the descendants of the African slaves had been acculturated and white slaveholders took a more direct interest in their bondsmen's living conditions by the early nineteenth century did modes of construction probably grow more westernized. If the "shotgun" house has obvious links to the Yoruba peoples of Nigeria, as Vlach contends, then other house forms must have made their way to North America, particularly Lowcountry South Carolina, where large slave populations vastly outnumbered their masters.

The vague or meager historical and archaeological evidence, to date, seems attributable to two things. First, that slave houses in the eighteenth century were so small and poorly constructed and common, in the eyes of white observers, that they were rarely mentioned. The second reason is based on the impermanent nature of the early generations of slaves’ houses. Mud walls and wooden posts do not preserve well in the soil. In the sub-tropical climate of coastal South Carolina their remains do not remain distinct for very long. Further hindering the recovery of such fragile archaeological remains may also be the earth stripping techniques often used in current archaeological projects. In trying to speed up the recovery and location of undisturbed features below plow zones archaeologists may be destroying the evidence before they recognize what it is.

Even as scholars consider the architecture of slavery and its many evolutions, it is interesting to note the persistence of African behaviors and layouts that remain in some parts of the sea islands. As Mitchelville demonstrates, even after generations of living in South Carolina, ex-slaves of this unique community incorporated an African style layout and house design for their town that seemingly had been eradicated by generations of Euro-American influence.
In the 1980s the African persistence could still be found in sea island communities such as Edisto Island. In Patricia Jones-Jackson's fascinating study of disappearing Gullah culture, she found "two roomed Houses... called shanties" by the local residents, where up to ten people lived (1987: 8). Even those younger members of these island communities that have gone to more modern forms of housing, including mobile homes, incorporate African spacing, with several grouped together with a common yard area that is cleared and swept regularly.

As research grows on slave communities the evidence mounts. One short article last year even argued that, "Among the most recognizable African influences on slaves' lives were the design and building techniques expressed in the slave quarters" (Fountain 1995: 67-71). While this is merited, the author's documented sources excluded much of the recent, published archaeological work. Perhaps as the growing body of literature becomes more familiar to scholars we may finally combine all the evidence on African building styles to show its persistence beyond current interpretations.

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