Field Slave Quarters Discovered at Historic Brattonsville

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Historic Brattonsville (38YK21) is a significant Piedmont “Frontier” Antebellum Plantation, Revolutionary War site, Postbellum Scots-Irish and African-American Piedmont community that has been on the National Register of Historic Places since 1971, and today functions as a popular living history destination near the city of Rock Hill in York County, South Carolina. Plans to return to Historic Brattonsville this fall 2020 and to continue fieldwork with Winthrop University students have unfortunately been thwarted by the current COVID-19 health crisis. However, in the fall of 2017, SCIAA Research Affiliate/Winthrop University faculty (Gillam) and students (Lamb and others; first identified the location of previously unknown quarters of enslaved field workers at Historic Brattonsville (Figure 1).

The significance of Historic Brattonsville cannot be overstated at the national, state, and local levels. The initial purchase of 200-acres in the Rainey-Bratton deed transaction and subsequent records indicate that Col. William Bratton was living on the property after 1766 and that between 1774 and 1780, Col. Bratton and his family were living in what is now known as the Colonel Bratton House (Beck 1995; Wilkins et al. 1975). Located on a major crossroad, the intersecting roads were a primary north-south road, known historically as the Armour’s Ford, Armstrong Ford, or Lincoln Road (today, Brattonsville Road), and another road, Rocky Mount or Rocky Marsh Road that branched to the southeast (near Percival Road today). Historic Brattonsville also contains the significant Revolutionary War site of the Williamson’s Plantation/Battle of Huck’s Defeat (Smith 2010).

The location of the original house and greater plantation was strategically placed at the intersection of these two significant colonial roads to enable trade and economic growth for the Bratton family, and grow it did at the cost of the ever-increasing slave population. In 1790, Col. Bratton owned 12 enslaved people and 200 acres of land. By 1815, he increased his slave ownership to 23 slaves. In 1827, his son, Dr. John S. Bratton, owned 40 slaves and 3,540 acres of land. By the 1830 census, Dr. Bratton held 49 slaves, with that number expanding rapidly to 112 slaves in the 1840 census. In 1843, Dr. Bratton had increased his slave count to 140 slaves. In 1861, Dr. Bratton’s son, John Simpson Bratton Jr., along with his widow, Harriet Bratton, owned 152 slaves and 8,000 acres of land until the end of the Civil War. Where the recently discovered field slave quarters fit into this timeline is revealed by the ceramics recovered and highlighted below.

The fieldwork was originally designed to test a peripheral wooded area of the plantation for possible antebellum brick production activities, one of many industries at Bratton Plantation. The area of interest was identified by Brattonsville staff due to the presence of a glazed brick scatter associated with possible footing stones (Figure 2) and a nearby brick pile along the adjacent woods edge (Figure 3). However, the recovery of household wares in shovel test pits soon revealed the actual function of the site as domestic quarters for field slaves.

Along the forested edge of the ridge top, the surface of the landform appeared irregular and partially disturbed. However, a few footing stones of at least one structure appear to be in or very near their original positions. Elsewhere, footing stones and brick scatter appeared more disturbed and randomly distributed, likely...
by 20th century agricultural or timber harvesting activities. Burnt cedar trees and fire-hardened soils also evidenced a late 20th century forest fire. Bioturbation was most related to tree roots within the forest canopy. Erosion appears to have damaged the center of the wooded portion of the site, perhaps due to the relatively recent fire, and the adjacent agricultural field. In the plowed field, continued agricultural plowing and erosion have eliminated the organic soil horizon and no artifacts, bricks or footing stones were apparent on the surface (Figure 4). The slightly lower elevation of the field is likely related to erosion from historic and/or recent agricultural production.

Forty-eight 50 X 50-centimeter shovel test pits at 5-meter intervals along 5 transects were excavated using shovels, trowels and ¼” screens (Figure 5). Ceramics were the most diagnostic artifacts recovered (Figure 6) ranging from late-18th century pearlware to late-19th century whiteware and ironstone, with analysis by Costa and Gillam indicating a mean ceramic date of 1842 and Mean Ceramic Date Range of 1830 to 1870, providing the most likely years of site occupation. These date estimates correlate well with increasing slave ownership by the Bratton family, discussed above, from 12 slaves in 1790, then 49 slaves in 1830, to 152 slaves by 1861. The ceramics assemblage (n=71) was dominated by undecorated wares including pearlware (n=24), whiteware (n=11), ironstone (n=5) and stoneware (n=15), all utilitarian wares typical of slave dwellings where decorated wares are expected to occur in limited numbers. Personal items were minimal and included a pipe bowl fragment, spoon fragment and a bone button. Additional footing stones and low-density brick scatters occur along the wooded ridge top. Artifacts recovered there, included in the domestic wares discussed above, suggests a row of slave quarters once stood a few hundred meters northwest of the main plantation above a now dry, intermittent stream feeding Williams Creek/South Fork Fishing Creek.

Without remains of brick production activities, the location is interpreted as domestic living quarters for slaves as evidenced by domestic ceramics in the wooded area throughout the site. Wrought nails, metal fragments, footing stones, and vitrified brick alone could result from many activities, but domestic wares are primarily associated with domestic sites. No evidence of a kiln or possible quarry were found during the excavations. The brick stack and piles are thus interpreted as modern occurrences likely related to early clean-up of other areas of Historic Brattonsville for public use. There was evidence of fired clay, but it was clearly associated with more recent forest fires. Chinking between the wall logs of structures and wood/clay chimneys was the likely source of the glazed brick fragments scattered throughout the site. Likewise, the modern field likely corresponds to historic agricultural use, possibly small slave gardens, between the slave quarters and adjacent field road.

It can also be inferred from the Mean Ceramic Date of 1842 that the slaves living in this area likely belonged to Dr. John S. Bratton, who expanded the plantation in the early 19th century, and then his son, John Simpson Bratton Jr. and widow, Harriet Bratton, inherited the slaves and land upon Dr. Bratton’s death in 1843. This site location would have been typical for
the time, having been distant enough from Dr. Bratton’s home to allow slaves a sense of autonomy and also next to a stream or spring that would have provided water for drinking, cooking, and other domestic activities.

Future directions at the site will include continued shovel testing using a 5-meter grid to better understand the number of structures and integrity of the site, larger excavation units of intact deposits, and also a transect extending eastward along the stream edge toward Col. Bratton’s house to look for addition slave quarters. With the increasing emphasis on slave culture at this and other popular South Carolina historic destinations, we hope that the location of the field slave quarters at Historic Brattonsville will play an important role in public education and outreach in the future.

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References

