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Lives Long Lost in the Land

Archeologist Finds Elusive Clues About Loudoun Slaves

By Tara Bahrapour

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The development boom in Loudoun County over the past decade has had obvious advantages for those in the real estate business, but it has also been a boon for a less obvious sector: archaeologists.

For large developments, federal and county laws require builders to pay for archaeological surveys before construction. The laws have helped archaeologists learn more about areas they might not have been able to explore before.

Tammy Bryant, a senior archaeologist at Thunderbird Archeology, a division of [Wetlands Studies and Solutions](#) in Gainesville, has had an opportunity to pursue her specialty: the dwelling places of 18th- and 19th-century field slaves at the edges of plantations.

Using metal detectors and digging holes to sift through soil, she and her colleagues have found evidence of the field slaves' lives in several areas of Loudoun: the nails that held their houses together and shards of colon ware, an unglazed, reddish ceramic they ate and drank from. Older ceramic has shown up, too, most likely secondhand pieces that were passed on to the slaves.

Bryant, who will talk about her findings tomorrow at the [Loudoun Museum](#) in Leesburg, said the field slaves tended to be pushed into the least desirable areas of a property.

"We'll find them at the end of land forms, places that are not prime agricultural land," she said. "The places that were rocky, that tended to be poorly drained, places where [plantation owners] didn't want to farm."

Finding the slaves' dwellings can be hard because they were not exactly built for posterity. "These structures are not sturdy," Bryant said. "They're more ephemeral."

Nor did the inhabitants have much to leave behind. Their possessions were paltry, so archaeologists must rely on tiny clues to decipher their lives.

One indicator is the records of plantations that once dotted the land. "If we knew there was a plantation and they had 100 slaves, there would have been house slaves, skilled slaves and field slaves," Bryant said.

Although the existence of the sites doesn't usually change developers' plans, mapping out the presence of the slave quarters has helped archaeologists form a more comprehensive idea of how large plantations were tied together.

Bryant said she is drawn to the field slaves' quarters despite the scarcity of artifacts, in part because they were so marginalized.

"They were the most underprivileged," she said. "A lot of the big plantations have been studied," as have slave quarters that were more centrally located.

But evidence of field slaves, tucked away in hardscrabble areas of the land, is more elusive. "I used to feel bad about the setting they were in," Bryant said. But as she studied them, she said she learned that obscurity had certain advantages.

"They had a little more freedom than the house slaves," she said. "They had their own little paths, and some of them had their own little gardens, and they might have been making a little money for themselves, and it's nice to think about that."

Some artifacts offer evidence of leisure activities. Smooth, worn, fingernail-size white objects in the soil might be ceramic pieces from mancala, a game that originated in Africa.

And on a site near Lansdowne, Bryant and her colleagues found an upside-down iron pan and some fragments of pipe stems, a particular kind of escape from the pressures of daily life. The pan was connected to a superstitious belief, Bryant said.

"They used to turn the pan upside down and sit around the upside-down shallow bowl, or sometimes put it outside the door," she said. If the bowl was upside down and the master came by, she said, "they thought that what they said couldn't be heard."

Karen Quanbeck, executive director of the museum, said Bryant's talk, part of Black History Month, is an opportunity for the public to learn about the county's lesser-known history.

"Often, we focus too much on the important people, places and events," such as generals and statesmen, she said. "But Loudoun County is not just the people recorded in the history books. We try and tell a story of all the folks who lived in Loudoun in the past."

Tammy Bryant will give her lecture, "Archeology of 19th Century African American Sites," at 7 p.m. tomorrow at the Loudoun Museum, 16 Loudoun St. SW, Leesburg. General admission is \$5. The museum recommends registering in advance by calling 703-777-7427.

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