

Fresh Advices

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Slave Housing

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Justly and none too soon, American museums are becoming concerned with the interpretation of slave life. Colonial Williamsburg and other institutions are recognizing that if what we teach is to be good history, it has to deal with a varied range of past experience rather than reinforce traditional, homogenic images of what life was like in the old days. Because of its substantial, complex architectural resources, the Foundation has abundant capabilities for teaching about different lifestyles. Doing so is important if blacks, women, and ordinary white men are to take their places with the minority of successful white craftsmen, merchants, and gentry represented by the buildings and artifacts here.

The question of what slave housing was like is made difficult by uneven and biased evidence. Contemporary commentators on the subject were usually apologists, romantics, or—less often—people with strong negative feelings about the system. However, we can find answers through careful fieldwork and critical analysis of the records that do exist.

The shortage of detailed descriptions is indicated by the regularity with which a few references are quoted. Probably the best known are the record of a Georgia Sea Island slave, Okra, who angered his owner by building a house that was recognizably African in character and Frederick Law Olmstead's description of slave houses on a Virginia farm in the 1850s. Okra's story is significant because it is rare evidence for the survival of African culture in American building. Similar buildings were seldom recorded, and the only physical evidence may be archaeological.

Olmstead's description, on the other hand, fits the majority of distinguishable slave houses that survive in Virginia. These, mostly nineteenth-century, contain two separate family units under one roof. Such houses provided each family with a heated room on the first floor, an independent exterior entrance, and sometimes an unheated attic for sleeping. The duplexes are essentially doubled Anglo-Chesapeake single-room houses where the principle space was used for cooking, sleeping, and all other domestic activities. Most have walls of only framing and exterior sheathing, a few windows usually fitted with solid shutters rather than glass, and a ladder stair to the unfinished attic space. Their size and finish are probably comparable to most houses occupied by eighteenth-century whites below the middling class.

It is important to realize that these well-built duplexes existed in the later years of the slavery system and at the top of a housing hierarchy. Key to understanding slave housing is recognition of its diversity. Some variety involves historical change, because the *range* of housing may have improved considerably between 1775 and 1861. Fieldwork shows that building in general grew in specialization and quality in the early nineteenth-century Chesapeake, and as slaveholders' commitment to a controlled and efficient work force grew, slave housing received particular attention. This is illustrated by surviving buildings as well as the relatively repetitive specifications in nineteenth-century publications like *Southern Planter* and *Soil of the South*. But the biases
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of both sources are revealed by slave narratives and by George McDaniel's recent book, *Hearth and Home*. Working primarily in eastern Maryland, McDaniel has been especially successful in tracking down details about the use in nineteenth-century black housing of less expensive building alternatives, such as wooden chimneys, thatched roofs, and earth floors. So it seems that well-built slave housing was largely a nineteenth-century phenomenon, experienced by a minority of slaves.

In 1774 Joseph Ball wrote to his nephew in Virginia with specific instructions for the care and housing of certain slaves. He was particularly concerned about a man named Soss, whose house seems to have approached the best nineteenth-century standards.

The Quarter . . . must be fill'd between the studs with the worst of the bricks laid tight In with Ordinary Mortar: but it must be Underpinn'd first. And I will have a Chimny made up in Soss End against the brick wall that is to be between him and the other Negroes; and his Chimney must be well Plaistered . . .

Soss shared the duplex with a group of unnamed slaves, and their side was to receive similar attention.

And I will have a Chimny made up in the middle of the other part; and well plaster'd also; and the Loft lay'd with the old plank. And the South side must be double cover'd, and there must be Good plank Doors, and well hung with Iron hinges . . . there must be locks to the Doors. . . . And the floors must be rais'd higher than the Ground without.

Favored or otherwise, most slaves fared far worse. In the 1750s, blacks on David Curle's plantation in Elizabeth City County lived "in a pen made of Poles and covered with Pine-Brush, and in bad weather retire to the Neighbors for Shelter." George Washington wrote that his slaves occupied two types of houses, "the largest kind" and "the smaller one or cabbins." The latter seem to have been small indeed, because they could be moved about with minimal assistance from his carts. In 1784 J. F. D. Smyth recorded his experience in a

house that six slaves and an overseer shared. The house "was not lathed or plaistered, neither ceiled nor lofted above . . . one window, but no glass in it, not even a brick chimney, and as it stood on blocks, about a foot above the ground, the hogs lay constantly under the floor, which made it swarm with flies." The house was probably typical, although it was clearly superior to the one Curle's slaves occupied.

Except on the largest plantations, a majority of eighteenth-century slaves may have lived in parts of buildings that were principally built either for work or white housing. *Virginia Gazette* advertisements listing dwellings and outbuildings in Williamsburg and other towns virtually never mention separate quarters. The 1730 inventory of Henry Bowcock included "1 Servants bed and furniture [at &] 1.10.-" on the second floor of his York County house. Forty years later Landon Carter wrote about two slaves who lived "in their loft" at Sabine Hall. The Robert Carter House on Palace Green contains remnants of a plaster and
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Recommended Reading

Related to Slave Housing

- James O. Breedan, ed. *Advice Among Masters*. Westport, Conn., 1980.
- Eugene D. Genovese. *Roll, Jordan, Roll*. New York, 1976.
- Herbert G. Gutman. *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925*. New York, 1976.
- George W. McDaniel. *Hearth and Home*. Philadelphia, 1982.
- Gerald W. Mullin. *Flight and Rebellion*. London, 1972.
- Charles L. Perdue, Jr., Thomas E. Barden, and Robert K. Phillips, eds. *Weevils in the Wheat*. Charlottesville, 1976.
- Dell Upton. "Early Vernacular Architecture in Southeastern Virginia." Ph.D. dissertation, Brown University, 1979.
- Peter H. Wood. *Black Majority*. New York, 1975.

Robert Carter III: Transformation of a Patriarch

The daily existence of the Carters of Nomini Hall has been examined many times; after all, Philip Fithian's diary is one of the colonial historian's main sources of information on family life. Shomer Zwelling took a longer view. He studied Fithian's journal in conjunction with Robert Carter's extensive writings, including his little used papers in the Swedenborgian archives in Newton, Massachusetts. The combination gives us greater depth and detail.

Zwelling sees the Carters as a family with severely strained relationships, partly because of the father and partly because of the times they lived in. During the last thirty years of his life Robert Carter was forced to deal with three critical situations. The Revolutionary War, a series of illnesses in the family, and his own religious experiences changed him in important ways, and each affected the family dramatically.

The Revolution. Carter, living at Nomini Hall in remote Westmoreland County after leaving Williamsburg in 1772, remained politically uncommitted. He sought in the intimacies of family life a refuge from a combative, competitive, and heartless world. Instead of finding peace and tranquility on the plantation, the Carter family lived in a state of stress. Tension was especially strong between the father and his second son Robert Bladen Carter. Zwelling sees Bob as the "symptomatic member" of the household, his behavioral problems indicating unsettling relationships within the family.

Other Virginians of the time felt anxiety and expressed their rage toward the British. Robert Carter directed those feelings inward on himself and his kin.

Illnesses. Both parents were gravely affected by their oldest son's poor health and early death. Mr. and Mrs. Carter had their own ailments too. He was given to fainting spells. She suffered many phobias and, in her own words, was "always supposing the worst."

Religious Experiences. In June 1777 Robert Carter received a "most gracious Illumination" from God and converted to the Baptist faith. Being a Baptist in late eighteenth-

century Virginia entailed risk and social abuse. It was a major change for a member of the gentry and a former councillor. Furthermore, Mrs. Carter didn't share her husband's religious sentiments; consequently, life inside Nomini Hall became even more strained.

Carter grew ill in early 1780 and withdrew to take stock of himself and his life. When he emerged from his seclusion, he was a believer in Swedenborgianism.

This Christian sect, based on the writings of Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, called for profound self-examination and individualism. In his new faith Carter attained a feeling of innocence, a sense of affirmation and usefulness, and a way to be assertive but not domineering.

By the late 1780s Robert Carter was, voluntarily, a patriarch without a family. He had shipped off two sons to Rhode Island for schooling and didn't allow them to return for over four years—even when their mother died in 1787. Shortly after Mrs. Carter's death, he sent three daughters to live in Baltimore. The oldest son was dead. For the rest of his short life, Bob, the troubled child, alternated between trying to behave and running off to England.

As a Swedenborgian, Robert Carter III became a democratic man and freed nearly 500 slaves. In 1793 he moved to Baltimore, and until his death ten years later, served as a leader in the New Jerusalem Church, as Swedenborgianism was formally called.

Robert Carter's life spanned the old order and the new, the death of the colonial era and the republic's infancy. Zwelling concludes that Robert Carter III experienced—in the affairs of his country, as well as in his personal life—the difficulties of transforming patriarchy into democracy.

—LP

Shomer Zwelling's paper on Robert Carter III and all the recommended readings on slave housing are available through the Research Center.

Housing, *continued*

clapboard partition that likely marked the presence of domestic servants' sleeping area in the unventilated attic. That this remained a common condition in Williamsburg into the following century is implied by a 1823 letter to Dr. A. D. Galt complaining that available houses lacked separate quarters, with the result that servants "have to stay in the basement or the garret rooms," a condition that "you know cannot be very agreeable to Virginians."

Because some slaves shared a roof with their owners did not mean that the two groups lived together as a family. White concern for privacy from slaves was an increasing force, as indicated by architectural systems in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century houses. In western Virginia and Kentucky, for example, a common system involved placing a kitchen or laundry at the end of a rear ell, with sleeping space above. Although the slaves' work and domestic rooms were attached to the house, there was no internal circulation between the two social realms. Often the dependency had only an exterior entrance, and the bedroom was reached by a stair from a second outside doorway. Robert Beverley in a 1787 newspaper advertisement described a similar Middlesex County arrangement. The two-story house had a wing that contained four rooms: "two very commodious rooms and closets neatly finished, and a laundry and servants room over it."

The assemblage of detached work buildings that accompanied slave owners' houses provided secondary spaces that ranged from private domestic quarters to an open corner where a person could fall asleep. At best, a building was especially planned to accommodate slave groups or individuals in relative privacy and comfort. For example, an early nineteenth-century loom house at Prestwold in Mecklenburg County contained two work rooms on the first floor and a pair of domestic rooms in the attic, both equipped with cooking fireplaces. Although the attic was unfinished and treated as inferior to the rooms below, considerable thought was given to insuring the privacy of its occupants. This was done through the innovative use of a small lobby placed in front of the central chimney. While the work rooms were entered directly from the outside, the lobby gave access to separate stairs for each domestic unit. A re-

lated system of segregation existed in the brick work building behind the Archibald Blair House. Occupants of an attic room used an independent stairway that rose from an outside doorway discreetly located at the rear of the building.

More common in the eighteenth century was the use of unspecialized secondary space in dairies, kitchens, and the like. Slaves' rooms are difficult to locate in inventories despite occasional indications of domestic furnishings, as in the 1750 inventory of Daniel Hornby's Richmond County estate that lists "In the Kitchen Loft. 1 Bedstead, 1 old Bed and 1 Bolster. 1 old Cattail Bed." The fact that many such rooms were unheated illustrates their weakly defined role as domestic space. A revealing reference comes from a 1770 *Virginia Gazette* advertisement for the sale of Market Square Tavern. In it Thomas Craig lists a variety of buildings associated with the tavern, including "a large and strong smokehouse, at one end of it a place for people to sleep in." The wording is especially useful because it describes the *function* of the space. Craig viewed the place solely as an area for sleeping, where one might collapse at the end of the work day, not as a private domain in which cooking, eating, talking, and other social activities could take place.

In interpreting slave life at Williamsburg, then, a variety of settings is appropriate. Throughout the era of slavery, blacks experienced conditions that varied according to marital status, position in the work force, and owners' inclinations. While the buildings of most whites as well as blacks were poor by modern American standards, slaves consistently occupied the lower reaches of the range. Moreover, unlike their white contemporaries, slaves had little choice in determining the quality of their housing.

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