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Slave Landscapes of the Carolina Low Country: What the Documents Reveal

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Abstract

Although much has been written about slave life in the antebellum south, comparatively little is understood about the physical setting of slave communities and their day-to-day life. Due to the lack of written documentation and few sketches, paintings or other images, the documentation of the physical setting of slave life is more difficult to compile than that of the plantation owners or even indentured servants. By completing a structured analysis of existing documentary evidence for a specific region of the South, the low country of South Carolina, the myths and realities of slave life in this region can be clarified. This paper reviews the methodological approach to analyzing the documentary evidence and presents a representative sample of the results.

Key Words

historic landscape documentation, plantation landscapes, slave landscape, research methods

Introduction

Although much has been written about slave life in the antebellum south, comparatively little is understood about the physical setting of slave communities and the structures and spaces that alternately constrained and supported day-to-day life. This is due to two primary factors: first, until relatively recently, the focus of southern history and historical landscapes remained on the plantation house, and second, the documentation of the physical setting of slave life is much more difficult to compile than that of plantation owners or even indentured servants. Common historical documents such as diaries, letters, sketches, drawings and paintings that focused on the slave community are relatively rare. Those existing documents that do provide written and visual descriptions were produced primarily by the planter class or white visitors to the region, and must be interpreted through the lens of the cultural and social biases of the observer rather than the participant. As Vlach (2002) has noted in his recent book on the meaning and documentary value of southern paintings, slaves and the settings of their lives were almost entirely ignored in the sketches and paintings of both visitors and the planter class. Where they do appear, slaves are often marginalized in the depiction of plantation life.

Many discussions of plantation landscapes have identified a pan-Southern tradition, and although there are commonalities between plantation landscapes of the south in general, regional differences in landscape form and spatial organization are significant. The existence of these regional differences have had only preliminary exploration in a number of writings, including Conzen (1990), Morgan (1998), Joyner (1985) and Vlach (1993, 2002). In fact Brown (1996) cites the lack of comprehensive regional analyses as a major flaw in southern plantation research. Regional differences result largely from the type of crop grown and the production system designed to manage it, but also on the topography, climate and cultural background of the original settlers - white or African - and the practices they incorporated in the emerging society. To examine the physical landscape of the slave community without the muddying effects of regional differences, this paper will focus on a specific region that can provide a common base of comparison - the rice plantations of the low country of South Carolina. The discussion focuses on the development of the methodological approach to analyzing the documentary evidence as a way of clearly identifying the common trends of landscape settings. Using this approach, a representative sample of the results is presented and applied to the development of a broader view of the landscape of slavery.

Approach

Historical analysis is generally concerned with making sense of an array of historical documentation, fashioning a narrative from documents describing the aspect of history under concern and its placing it in the larger context of the period. Landscape history is part of that tradition. However, the identification and understanding of spatial form and landscape organization is more closely aligned with the history of material culture since it deals with the physical dimensions and features that support and constrain people's everyday lives (Leone 1988). As a type of material culture, the goal in historical analysis of landscape form is to identify the character defining features of a landscape, comparing it with others in the same genre to clarify regional, temporal or cultural trends.

In many studies of landscapes, including slave landscapes of the plantation south, the most pervasive problem in identifying these trends has been the lack of a focus on the importance of sample size and its impact on the validity of conclusions. While valid conclusions can be drawn from a single case or a small number of comparative cases (Rueschemeyer 2003), statements of societal and temporal trends must also be supported by systematic analyses of larger sample sizes to minimize the potential for bias produced by atypical cases.

This historical analysis was designed to test the impact of a larger sample size on the validity of existing hypotheses and widely repeated “facts” in the literature about plantation form in the lowcountry of South Carolina. These currently held beliefs about plantation form are drawn from a single or small number of case studies of existing planation landscapes.

In order to assess the impact of a wide range of traditional sources, several types of historic resources and documentation were consulted: plantation plats; extant plantation sites, their historic fabric and archaeological findings; period writings by plantation owners, including diaries and plantation record books; travel accounts; slave narratives; census records; and visual representations including paintings, sketches, and Civil War era photographs. Each resource presented both strengths and weaknesses in creating a clear image of the physical reality of the slave community. However, an overriding reality affecting the available documentation in the Carolina lowcountry was the substantial loss of documents and extant historic fabric incurred during the Civil War.

Plantation plats:

Land records form the basis of the historical documentation available for the purposes of this study. Land records can typically be found for all land holdings in a region, and as such provide the opportunity to, at least in theory, select an unbiased sample. The plantation plats that form the basis for this study were obtained from an exhaustive review of extant records in the Charleston Historical Society, Charleston County Register of Mesne Conveyance (McCrary Collection), the South Carolina Department of Archives and History, the Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina and several plats from private collections. While there are undoubtedly additional records that were not included in this analysis, the largest public collections of plats were thoroughly reviewed. Over 10,000 land records were observed, yielding a total of 343 records that included information beyond the typical boundary lines of land plats, to show details of the structures, field patterns, vegetation and spatial development of the plantation lands.

The 343 records documented 306 individual plantation sites (the remaining 37 provided multiple dates for several sites) spanning the period between 1764 and 1860. These 306 plantation sites were analyzed and categorized according to a series of 42 characteristics including date; ownership; regional location; size; type of crops; characteristics of the main house, if present; characteristics of the slave communities; existence and size of features such as gardens, orchards and cemeteries; distances between the main house and slave communities; and landscape relationships. Original plats were scaled in order to derive the distance and areal results. The data was analyzed to identify spatial patterns and correlated by date (decade beginning in 1760) and sub-region (parish and district) to detect sub-regional and temporal variation.

Extant Sites and Archaeological Findings:

Several sites with extant historic fabric (Boone Hall, Drayton Hall, Friendfield, Middleton Place, Middleburg, McLeod Plantation) and 22 archaeological reports were reviewed. Many existing sites have not retained their slave quarters, and those that have (e.g. Boone Hall) have retained only those quarters in close proximity to the main house. Eight of the archaeological reports did some level of archaeological analysis on the slave settlements of the site. Archaeology was helpful in confirming locations of slave communities, and some features of their landscape, particularly middens and cellar pits. Archaeological finds were most important in identifying architectural practices, types of food eaten and crops grown.

Plantation Writings and Travel Accounts:

Although 306 plantation were identified and included in the research, it is rare to find corroborating writings or accounts for any given plantation, particularly writings which describe the slave settlements.

This lack of congruence makes it difficult to confirm features identified on plats. In this study, historical writings were used to expand the results obtained from the broad analysis of the plats, providing a level of detail unavailable on drawings with a typical scale of 10 chains per inch (660 feet per inch). Writings were broken down into their component features, and correlated with features identified in slave narratives and photographs.

Slave Narratives:

There are a large number of slave narratives and 1930's era Works Process Administration interviews (Rawick 1972) recorded for South Carolina. However, few indicated any landscape forms or features. Slave narratives, written by freed or escaped slaves, were often edited by abolitionist editors, leading some researchers to call into question their authenticity (Blassingame 1975). Although these are narratives of first hand experiences in slavery, as a group they contain few descriptions of life on the plantations. On the other hand, the weakness of the WPA interviews are that they were recorded approximately 60 years after slavery was abolished: the individuals giving accounts were children during the time of slavery (Woodward 1974). In addition, the interviews were biased by the intent, reactions and questions (none of which focused on physical setting) of the interviewers, and the answers they solicited. As a group, they also record few physical features of slave communities and the spaces of plantation life.

Visual Representations:

Collections of paintings - watercolors and oils - principally by Thomas Coram and Charles Fraser, provide the most comprehensive images of plantation landscapes in the Carolina lowcountry circa 1800. These depictions, in addition to Civil War era photographs archived at the Library of Congress and the New York Historical Society, among others, provide the largest collections of visual representations of two eras of plantation form. Paintings and photographs were also systematically analyzed according to visible features and correlated with findings from the other documentary sources.

Findings

A wealth of information is available from plantation plats in the lowcountry particularly those completed by the surveyors Joseph Purcell and Goddard and Sturgess. Although landscape features are identified, particularly on plats of more detailed scales, their greatest contribution is in defining the spatial organization of the plantation and the distances between features. Features commonly identified on plats include the size and location of slave communities, and the existence and location of graveyards, gardens, fencing and overseer's quarters. While some researchers have commented that the slave quarters may have been identified using symbols, and do not represent actual placement or dimensions (Lesser 2001), the notations and level of detail and accuracy exhibited by both the in-office sketch plats and the final display plats argue against this.

The spatial organization and dimensions gleaned from the plantation plats are augmented by the ground level details available in narratives and images of slave life. Selected highlights of the findings follow, with an emphasis on divergence in results from other published research.

Spatial Organization:

Low Country plantations were designed primarily on the English model of early Georgian architecture and landscape. This plantation form endured, even through the changing fashions of the 19th century, primarily because it was a form that explicitly communicated the mastery and dominance of the plantation owner. While dominance was key, there was also a subtle dance of power that was enacted in the landscape, between frequently absent owners and the slave population that vastly outnumbered them.

During the period of this analysis, 1770 to 1860, slaves were housed in two ways: either in outbuildings

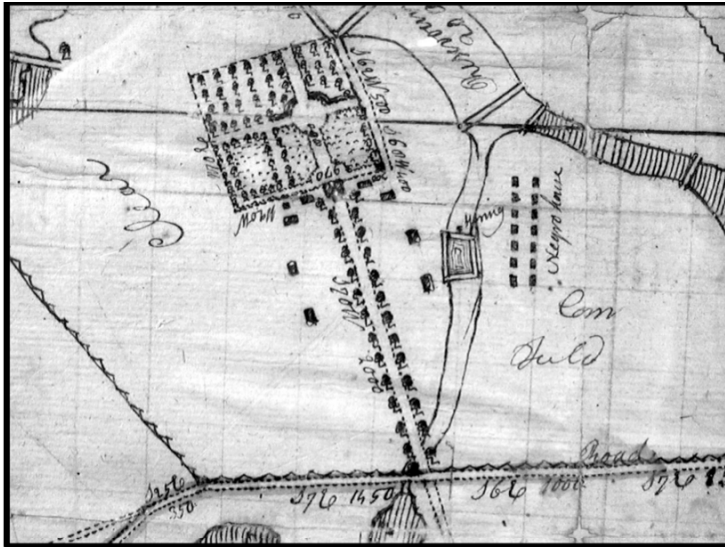


Figure 1: A plantation plat indicating a main house in the center of the composition, with bilaterally symmetrical flankers positioned on either side of the house and extending along the avenue. A large formal garden is located opposite the avenue (McCrady Collection, 1329, Register of Mesne Conveyance, Charleston).

or main house flankers (characteristic of house slaves) or in groupings of cabins termed slave settlements or communities. One of the most pervasive theories of the location of slave communities in the literature, is the hypothesis that slave quarters were kept within sight of the main house to provide control over the slaves (Adams 1987 in Affleck 1983, 12; Prunty 1955). Slave narratives recorded during the 1930's Writer's Project cited this perception: "...Our house had one window jest big enough to stick you head out of, and one door, and this one door faced the Big House which was your master's house. This was so you couldn't git out 'less somebody seen you" (Joyner 1991, 87).

While some slave quarters were located close enough to the main house for surveillance, the average distance of 429 feet to the closest slave community indicated by the plats was too distant for the type of close monitoring indicated by the former slave's description. In addition, intervening vegetation, outbuildings and topography created effective barriers to surveillance. In 60% of the plats that exhibited sufficient detail to identify landscape features, physical barriers were located in the view between the quarters and the main house. These included stands of trees, gardens, fences, and topography. Of the remaining 40% of the plats, the fields and roads that intervened between the main house and the quarters could also provide visual barriers with tall crops or trees located along the field and road edges.

While placement of the quarters in close proximity to the plantation house would tend to suggest a watchful presence on the part of the plantation owner, this potential for overt control was tempered by the fact that the owner was not in residence for long periods of time. Health reasons dictated that white plantation owners vacate their plantations between March and November to escape the mosquito-borne diseases. While slave laws required at least the presence of a white overseer, an analysis of census records between 1790 and 1850 indicate that between 15 and 25% of plantations were left without a white presence (owner or overseer).

While some researchers have suggested that both owner absence and distance from the plantation house led to a more "African" expression of community form (Vlach 1993; Babson 1987; Twining and Baird 1991), this is not strongly supported by the existing plantation plats. Slave communities exhibiting an irregular form were extremely rare in the plantation plats of the low country, even on those plantations without a main house or overseers house. This finding indicates that plantation owners maintained strict control over plantation layout and community design, rarely allowing the slave communities a level of expression in the physical layout of their community.

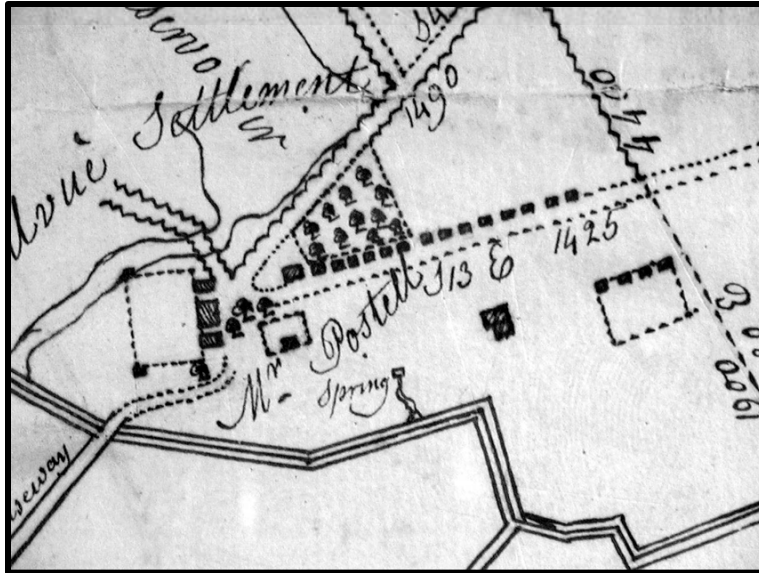


Figure 2: In this plat the plantation house and two flankers are located to the center left of the image. The slave quarters are located along one side of the avenue in the center of the image, prominently displayed for visitors. (McCrary Collection, 2252, Register of Mesne Conveyance, Charleston)



Figure 3: The slave quarters, located in the two rows of buildings in the upper portion of the composition, have the spatial form of a village. The plantation house lies at the physical and power center. (McCrary Collection, 2423, Register of Mesne Conveyance, Charleston)

Location of the plantation quarters took a number of forms that can be grouped and ranked into four general approaches, from the most to least common:

1. located at a distance from the plantation house (figure 1);
2. located in close proximity to the main house creating the form of a community centered on the plantation main house;
 - i. in a row situated on either side of the avenue to showcase the quarters (figure 2); and
 - ii. in a few cases at the center of an active village, with the plantation house dominating the physical center (figure 3).

These various approaches to physical design had significant effects on the hierarchy of space available to the slave communities. In most cases, the slave communities, the majority of which were in a street or grid pattern, did not have a plantation road leading through them. Thus the settlement could function as a community with defensible space and a hierarchy of private, semi-private and community space in the “streets” between the rows of houses. It is in this space that most of the photographic records of the



Figure 4: The slave street was where the social life of the community took place, and also where much of the community work was accomplished. Note the piles of corn husks in the foreground of the cabins, and also the fencing defining personal space for the community. The cabins are devoid of ornamental plantings and show indications of swept yards. (Library of Congress Civil War Photograph Collection, LC-USZ62-67818, Timothy H. O'Sullivan, 1862)

quarters reflect an active community life (figure 4). Conversely, the result of the placement of the slave quarters on either side of the avenue was a loss of community space. Instead of creating defensible space, with a perceptual community boundary, the street became public space, frequented by visitors to the plantation. Thus the sense of community, coherence and the freedom of the inhabitants to engage in social interaction was curtailed.

Landscape Details:

Plantation plats can provide information about the volumes and spatial relationships the slave lived within - the physical setting of slave life - however they contain few details about the view at eye level. These details can be gleaned from various sources such as traveler's accounts, slave narratives, the infrequent visual representations of slave quarters in paintings and sketches and views of slave quarters taken at the beginning of the civil war by photographers in the northern army. Olmsted (1854) provides the clearest word picture of the slave quarters available in travel narratives:

"After a ride of several miles through the woods, in the rear of the plantations we came to his largest negro-settlement. There was a street, or common, two hundred feet wide, on which the cabins of the negroes fronted. Each cabin was a framed building, the walls boarded and whitewashed on the outside, lathed and plastered within, the roof shingled; forty-two feet long, twenty-one feet wide, divided into two family tenements,.Each tenement is occupied, on an average, by five persons.... Each cabin stood two hundred feet from the next, and the street in front of them being two hundred feet wide, they were just that distance apart each way.....Between each tenement and the next house, is a small piece of ground, inclosed with palings, in which are coops of fowl with chickens, hovels for nests, and for sows with pig. There were a great many fowl in the street. The negroes' swine are allowed to run in the woods, each owner having his own distinguished by a particular mark. In the rear of the yards were gardens - a half-acre to each family." (49-50)

Private and semi-private space was in some instances reinforced by the use of fencing between and

behind the quarters. While this reference appears commonly in written accounts (Bremer 1853; Olmsted 1856) and Civil War era images (for example those made by Timothy O’Sullivan and housed in the Library of Congress), it is not commonly depicted in the plantation plats, appearing in only 15 of the reviewed documents. However, the insubstantial paling fences visible in the photographs were likely deemed a marginal asset for the plantation and too ephemeral to record on plantation plats.

Judging from the available Civil War era photographs and written accounts, the immediate landscape around the slave quarters was largely functional and austere to white sensibilities (figure 4). The yards surrounding the quarters were swept, hard packed soil, a continuing contemporary practice documented by Westmacott (1998) in many rural communities in Georgia. As stated previously, slave narratives reveal very few details of the landscape, and when they do, focus on descriptions of field and crop practices. The ornamental use of plants appears to have been rare: they do not appear in any of the visual images, while a single WPA interviewee mentioned a recollection of morning glory vines climbing up porch posts

“Us live in a log house wid a little porch in front and de mornin' glory vines use to climb 'bout it. When they bloom, de bees would come a hummin' 'round and suck de honey out de blue blees on de vines.” (Rawick 1972, 173-174)

In many ways the slave communities took ownership of the larger plantation landscape. Although illegal and subject to severe penalties, it is well documented in the literature that slaves ranged far and wide even off their home plantations (Vlach 1993; Morgan 1998; Joyner 1985). The few archaeological reports that contain faunal analyses support the hypothesis that the slaves gleaned food and medicine from the natural landscape, foraging in the rivers, swamps, and forests (Trinkley 1993; Joyner, 1985; Blassingame 1972). The most significant claim to ownership of the plantation landscape on the part of the slaves were the plots of land allocated to each family for their own cultivation. Identified by other researchers through plantation accounts and other writings (Morgan 1983), their location, form, and to some extent size are largely undocumented. This study found one plantation plat that identified the size and location of slave fields. These plots were not a part of the larger landscape of rectangular fields, but were located on marginal sites, on the edges of larger fields and swamps. The produce from these plots were widely sold in local markets, and led to an accumulation of physical property and wealth by some slaves. Although written documents indicate that slave land allocations were institutionalized in the low country task system of agriculture, the general lack of plat recording emphasizes the ultimate control of the plantation owner over the use and allocation of the land.

Conclusion

Although rather limited, the available documentation of the landscape of slavery does provide an intimate view into the life of the low country slave community. By comparing attributes of the landscapes across documentary sources in a structured, analytical method, both commonalities and unusual organization and features can be identified. This type of quantitative analysis of landscape variables provides a sound basis for proving or disproving hypotheses of the development and functioning of slave communities, and allow for the testing of hypotheses regarding their social and cultural development.

As the plantation plats demonstrate, much of slave community life took place far from the plantation house. This has been a drawback in the adequate interpretation of archaeological reports, which have focused largely on the main house complex and slave quarters in close proximity. In addition, due to the ephemeral nature of much of the slave landscape, and the inferior building materials used in their construction, most of the above ground physical landscape features have been lost. By delving into the existing documentary and archaeological evidence, a more complete image of these communities as active living spaces can be formed.

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