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Spring April 7, 2010

Sweepin' Spirits: Power and Transformation on the Plantation Landscape

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Chapter 4

Sweepin' Spirits: Power and Transformation on the Plantation Landscape

Whitney Battle-Baptiste

Introduction

When one thinks of power, a number of thoughts come to mind. Is power the ability to influence something or someone? Does power have anything to do with authority or control? Is power given by others or earned by the individual? I begin this article with the word and idea of power because some of the chapters in this book focus on power dynamics and all of the authors in this volume discuss how landscapes are perceived in the past or in the present. In this chapter, I will explore landscapes as more than just places affected by people, but made of living species – plants, trees, birds, animals, fish, and so forth, while recognizing that it is people who bring social and symbolic meaning to these places. Therefore, I see power in who transformed the plantation from a “natural landscape” to “cultural landscape” as the central component in understanding black cultural production in the 19th century.

Taking my lead from the work of cultural geographers, landscape historians, and landscape architects, I wanted to examine the transformative process in cultural landscapes and perhaps tease out who ultimately shapes these cultural locations. According to the cultural landscape historian, Paul Groth, “Cultural landscape studies focuses most on the history of how people have used *everyday* space – buildings, rooms, streets, fields, or yards – to establish their identity, articulate their social relations, and derive social meaning” (Groth 1997:1). Landscape architects Arnold Alanen and Robert Melnick (2000:21) note, “the cultural landscape provides considerable evidence as to how humans have *used* nature over time.”

Another aspect of the creation of cultural landscapes is the preservation of these spaces to reflect a historical time or important person. For this chapter, we will be focusing on the Hermitage, a plantation museum just outside of Nashville, Tennessee. The Hermitage is often discussed from the perspective of the great power

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and legacy of Andrew Jackson – lawyer, general, and the seventh president of the United States. However, much of the path to transforming the decaying plantation into a Tennessee historical landmark was through the efforts of a memorial association started by a small group of wealthy Nashville women, the Ladies' Hermitage Association (LHA). These women were members of the city's elite and used their own "influence and power" to push for legislation marking the Hermitage as a place of Tennessee pride (Fig. 4.1).

Fig. 4.1 The Hermitage. Engraving (property of the Ladies' Hermitage Association, Nashville, Tennessee)

In 1915, a founding member, Mrs. Mary C. Doris, described the historic home-
stead in these words: "It was a conscientious principle with Andrew Jackson that
caused him to build the log house at the Hermitage, a spot destined to become
historic and where he spent forty-one years of his eventful life" (Doris 1915:7).
Mrs. Doris felt the necessity to write the first history of the plantation in her
book, *Preservation of the Hermitage 1889–1915: Annals, History and Stories: The
Acquisition, Restoration and Care of the Home of General Andrew Jackson by the
Ladies' Hermitage Association for over a Quarter Century*. She wanted to solidify
the role of the LHA in the memory of the property as well as the importance of the
founding of the organization.

The role of the LHA was historically significant in a number of ways. The pres-
ence of these women has always been at the forefront and an active influence in how
the property would be remembered. This commitment to understanding the past has
played a major role in how the Hermitage incorporates gendered discussions in con-
temporary interpretive exhibits. This chapter will focus on a case study from my
own research and how I used a gendered approach and methodology to interpret life
at one area of the plantation, the First Hermitage site.

The First Hermitage

The First Hermitage site is located at the highest point of the Hermitage plantation and was what Doris was referring to earlier when she described Jackson as building a log cabin (Fig. 4.2). Mary Doris (1915:8) described the site, “Nothing daunted, he built the log house and in the year 1804, moved once again into the wilderness. The log house was a two-story building, one large room below and two above, with several other log houses surrounding it, making a comfortable, if not a very pretentious, home.”

Fig. 4.2 The First Hermitage site with Alfred posing. (Property of the Ladies' Hermitage Association, Nashville, Tennessee)

When the Jacksons and 10–12 captive Africans first moved to the Hermitage in 1804, the property resembled a small farm more than a working plantation (Battle-Baptiste 2007:237). In the first few years the Hermitage was modest by Tennessee standards. However, this would not be the case for very long. Although the First Hermitage has always symbolized Jackson's humble beginnings and his rise to social and political prominence, the myth of Jackson's cabin in the woods has always been slightly exaggerated. The projection of Jackson as a common man, a man of the people, the humble son orphaned at an early age to become president of the United States, has always neglected to mention his role as one of the largest plantation owners in the Middle Tennessee region.

In 1819, Andrew Jackson began overseeing construction of a new brick structure about 250 feet south of the First Hermitage site. The new brick structure

allowed Jackson to perform a symbolic dominance through architecture (Epperson 1999:169). The First Hermitage was therefore transformed from the center of the property and Jackson's home to a quarter occupied exclusively by captive African families. With Jackson's removal to the Mansion, there was an increase in distance between master and captive workers. The year 1821 also marked a profound restructuring of the entire plantation (McKee and Galle 2000; Jones 2002). In 1820 Jackson sold his Alabama plantation and was in the process of moving a majority of the captive workers to the Hermitage, increasing the population from approximately 40 to 80 people (Battle 2004).

Cotton was a rare choice in the Middle Tennessee region, a majority of "planters" did not have the land, resources, or labor to sustain such an intense crop. Jackson, however, made the decision and made it work, eventually opening up several fields dedicated to the crop and building a cotton gin and press on the property. To accommodate his growing labor force, in the 1820s Jackson began planning the

Fig. 4.3 First Hermitage excavations. (Image compiled by Jamie Brandon, 2004)

construction of several additional structures. Excavations revealed evidence of at least two additional structures at the First Hermitage site (making the total number of structures four) and four double pen structures (known as the Field Quarters) about 250 feet south.

Excavations at the First Hermitage site spanned a three-year period from 1997 to 1999. During this period researchers investigated several areas around and between the two standing cabins. The archaeological findings ranged from the Jackson Period (1804–1820), the Middle Quarter Period (1821–1850), and the pre-Museum

Fig. 4.4 Map of archaeological sites/quarter neighborhoods. (Compiled by Larry McKee)

period (1850–1888). The areas of the site that were most significant to my research questions were divided into five archaeological zones. These included Zone I (the Kitchen Courtyard), Zone II (the Kitchen Quarter backyard), Zone III (the outdoor hearth and cooking area), Zone IV (the Central Courtyard), and Zone V (The Farmhouse West) (Fig. 4.3).

After 1821 the First Hermitage became a very central location on the expanding plantation and the site served as a bridge between the Jacksons' private space and the labor and living areas occupied by the captive population (Fig. 4.4). This chapter will focus on the First Hermitage site after 1821, a time I have named the Middle Quarter period. This time period was when the Hermitage was transformed from a small adequate farm to a burgeoning plantation. Therefore to analyze this moment through the archaeological record was a chance to explore how the captive African community was able to permanently fix their cultural footprint on the plantation environment. The meaning of the space for the captive families was different than it was for the Jacksons. It is this line of questioning that makes a gendered approach all the more rich. The methods I was able to employ yielded quite new and exciting interpretations of the captive landscape in ways that I did not foresee. It also, in some ways allowed me to address the challenges of interpreting a complicated past to a contemporary audience.

The Shaping of a Landscape

In the early years (1804–1820) The Hermitage was a simple, small farm, where land was being cleared, settled, and planted and there was little separation between the Jackson family and the captive population (Remini 1977). The Jackson Farmhouse and the Kitchen Quarter were only 40 feet apart. This community found methods of creating social boundaries between their work life and private lives in subtle and subversive ways. It is important to point out that initially the role of captive women were essential (but not confined to) the domestic spaces of the plantation, forcing what Deborah Gray White refers to as serving a “double duty” (Gray White 1999). Some of these domestic duties included food preparation, laundry, raising chickens, sewing and repairing clothes, cleaning their houses, or tending to small gardens (Gray White 1999). Yet there was another important responsibility, the transforming of plantation domestic spaces.

For a growing farm at this stage (pre-1820s) the need for able-bodied men to be working in the fields and building was most likely a primary concern. The absence of men in the initial shaping of the First Hermitage site may have been a direct reflection of how these spaces were constructed. It was not that captive men were not agents on this transforming landscape, they simply may have had much less physical time and therefore less influence on *how* the landscape was initially configured. This fact has, in my opinion, been neglected in the traditional history of the Hermitage site and plantation landscapes in general. However, I must stress that simultaneously, captive men were essential in the shaping and development of the

agricultural landscape. It was the clearing of fields, the building of housing quarters, and the understanding of environmental nuances – the hidden spaces that were also shaped by captive men. Although they may seem like separate spheres (domestic and field) by contemporary standards, they operated in comparative ways in the daily lives of captive Africans.

In some of my oral interviews with elders from areas around the Hermitage museum, I learned that yards were the spaces dominated by women and children among black communities (Minerva Washington 1999, personal communication). When combing through secondary sources to see why this was a part of the reality of captive life, and a stereotype that has remained a part of dominant views of the black family in the United States today, I recognized that there were scholars who were seeing how these organizational principles came into existence. Angela Davis (1981) describes how we can only assume that in a very real sense, it was in domestic life – away from the eyes and whip of the overseer – that captive Africans could attempt to assert the modicum of freedom they still retained, it was only there that they might be inspired to project techniques of expanding it further by leveling what few weapons they had against the planter class whose unmitigated drive for profit was the source of their misery (Davis 1981:118). So in several ways it was the captive woman who became the “custodian of a house of resistance,” a space that transformed the oppressed into active agents in the pedestrian actions that shape lives (Davis 1981:118).

There were several reasons why I concentrated on the exterior areas of the First Hermitage site. First, I began to recognize how the confining dimensions of each cabin forced most activities outdoors. Second, I believe that the yard functioned as more than empty space between two structures, it served as a bridge connecting several individual families living in close proximity. As a second generation apartment dweller, I had to learn these details of how to visualize these spaces from my grandmother. She recalled that during her childhood growing up in rural southern Virginia, the yard was an extension of the house, what I might understand as a “living room” (H. Lawrence Jones 1997, Chesapeake, Virginia, personal communication). This area is where the family greeted visitors, young girls “courted,” food was prepared, and other social activities took place. Ywone Edwards-Ingram further explains how “African American houses and yards also embodied complex and simple rhythms of time, space, energy, and change during slavery, as they do today” (Edwards 1998:249). So the courtyard at the First Hermitage site was not only socially significant and meaningful to the inhabitants, but also served as the site for black cultural production.

Here I would like to briefly visit how I am defining the term household for this site and emphasize the distinct relationship between the cultural landscape and the lives of captive Africans. The role of material culture used in activities associated with these symbolic spaces enhances the study of captive domestic organization and the related social practices taking place at these locations. This cultural landscape made it possible for the captive African household to operate as a complex social unit that could pool resources in order to complete daily tasks and domestic chores. As captive individuals were inextricably tied to all plantation affairs through forced

labor, they were simultaneously members of multiple “households.” First, they were members of the larger “plantation household” (as “property” of Andrew Jackson); next they were also members of the “complex household” of the First Hermitage; and lastly, they were members of their own simple family units or the “intimate household.” Thus, the captive or complex household of the Hermitage plantation “was a domestic network which served to mediate the social relations that revolved around production, distribution, and reproduction,” whereby members “. . . variously contributed their efforts and resources to the sub-household as circumstances and needs varied” (Franklin 1997:53–54). Here is where the concept of community differed between master and captive. Survival (mentally, emotionally, and physically) for captive Africans were inextricably tied to their quarter neighborhood where the landscape could become a place of solace and recovery, not tied to forced labor.

The title of this chapter is *Sweepin’ Spirits*. For me, this term has a multiplicity of meanings. For my grandmother, it was a task or chore given to her by her grandmother that she never really understood. There was never any grass in her yard and bare feet being the norm meant that keeping the area clear was the logical thing to do. For captive Africans it meant more than just keeping an area free of debris and trash. It was both a social and spiritual ritual that united the community in ways that would be overlooked by non-African observers.

As stated earlier, captive Africans were tied to the land in a variety of ways. From tilling, to planting, to picking, and building, the hands and bodies of captives also defined the places they lived. For this reason, the landscape must take on a unique importance to our understanding of these communities. It was this spiritual connection that remained beneath the radars of Eurocentric modes of behavior and understanding. Archaeologists Barbara Heath and Amber Bennett (2000:43) contextualize this spiritual connection with the earth, “Among the Bakongo of Central Africa, ‘sweeping is an ordinary ritual gesture for ridding a place of undesirable spirits’ in a landscape populated by day with ghosts of witches and others who have not been accepted into the villages of the dead, and by night with the ancestors.” Although these ghosts and spirits took on different forms in the New World, the need for spiritual cleaning remained constant.

It is accepted by traditional scholars of the African-American past that the quarters held a distinct significance in the shaping of the captive world; yet, to look specifically at how a yard is maintained or how physical boundaries are created within the captive community continues to be an obscure aspect left to art historians, folklorists, and a few anthropologists. In the early days of the First Hermitage site, owner and laborer were less than 40 feet from each other, however, the captive community had to find alternative ways, if not physically, then spiritually, to separate work space from private space. Here I argue that it was the sweeping of the yard that became the means to create a cultural boundary understood by the captive families living at the site. Therefore, the sweeping of the yard in many ways was both a social and political act, even an act of resistance. How they ordered distinct functional areas was entirely in the hands of the communities at each Hermitage quarter neighborhood, and at the First Hermitage site, privacy was in the eyes of the beholder and usually at the hands of elder captive women.

For the sake of my argument, the act of sweeping was also to protect against master and the undesirable spirits of the plantation. The very purposeful strokes of an elder woman's broom has power, it separated and protected the area from all that is evil. So as a broom is pushed back and forth, there are purposeful strokes, strokes that move different energies to different locations. As an elder woman moves her broom back and forth, she may sing a song to invoke whatever feeling or work she needs to do. She is protecting her home, her family, her community by creating a spiritual boundary that is recognized by her people. These actions were performed by women, the methods passed down from woman to woman, generation to generation.

Transforming the Middle Quarter

As time passed the captive community began to change their environment to suit their needs, most likely very different from how Jackson originally intended. For example, the location of the First Hermitage quarter was about 250 yards from the brick mansion. The four cabins that now made up the First Hermitage site during the Middle Quarter period formed an enclosed space, visually inaccessible to the Jackson family. The mansion was at a lower elevation and the South cabin blocked the Fire Pit/cooking area. Here, again is the example of how the sweeping of a yard and the clearing of space between the various structures were important. The Central Courtyard Area defines how the organization of space and the symbolic parameters of the area resembled more of a houselot rather than a "standard" quartering area, with houses placed neatly in rows. Individuals participated in a number of activities that helped each member of the First Hermitage community, creating a different configuration than the Mansion Backyard Quarters, closer to the main house (Fig. 4.3).

As I began to understand the active nature of the cultural landscape I began to think differently about the everyday activities and how these are connected to the larger transformative process. For example, one way children were taught to survive under the brutal system of slavery was through daily tasks. Before a young captive child was considered an adult, they often worked by helping elders in the house and field. Chores included, fetching water from the spring, giving water to field hands, participating in "trash gangs," pulling weeds, and helping to take care of the sick (King 1998). The land is what would later define them as adults, but was also the space that was used to shape how they learned to survive the rigors of slavery. So, this land served as the place where life is literally and figuratively grounded. These children would not only learn where things were, they would understand what spaces meant, how to move through these areas, and what they meant to the community. Seeing it this way, the plantation becomes the site of community building, social interaction, political struggles, and everyday resistance.

The swept yard serves as a metaphor of how captive African women not only shaped the domestic landscape, but created spaces for black cultural production to

survive. As bell hooks described, the swept yard is the place where one's humanity is never questioned, a site of completion (hooks 1990). Communication of ideas and meaning is also directly connected to the notion of identity formation. It was also slavery that informed each generation of the details and rules needed for survival. Without the ability and social space to communicate these details and rules, the social reproduction of African-American identity would have been impossible. It is not only that the collective memory of the older generations nurtured the succeeding generations, but the social meaning of landscapes that made the articulation and the "passing-on" of these memories possible.

Preservation

In this last section I will address how some of these ideas have made an impact on how the First Hermitage site appears today (Fig. 4.5). There remain challenges, and as with any museum, there are faults and shortcomings, however, I can honestly say that I am proud that I was a part of the conversation that created the standing exhibit. How does one convey all of this information to the public in an honest and meaningful way? This is a question that has not one, but multiple answers. Reflecting back to the early history of preservation at the Hermitage plantation, the role of women in the conservation efforts have made the site serve as an important

Fig. 4.5 First Hermitage reconstruction (2005 photo by author)

space to tell a complex history of life in Middle Tennessee during the 19th century. The women (and now men) who make up the Executive Board of the LHA are a complex group of individuals, all with agendas, opinions, and ideas. However, one of the only things that kept me coming back year after year was their ability to engage in the uncomfortable conversations, from debating on the wording of signage, the way in which slavery is discussed along the various tours, to suggestions of literature for tour guides to read. The ideas and approaches I had were never dismissed, shocking to some, but never dismissed. I can return to the museum and see the fruits of those discussions, something that was overwhelming when I first visited the reconstructed First Hermitage site.

Today, the First Hermitage site is presented as the Middle Quarter period, which was extremely exciting and gratifying for me as an archaeologist. This time frame allows the visitor to see the site as a quarter neighborhood, but also learn of the transitional history of the landscape. All too often plantation sites are fixated on the role of the main house. However, the First Hermitage exhibit provides the visitor with an incredible opportunity to see artifacts found at the site, artifacts associated with different occupants, and ways that the captive community structured their private lives (Fig. 4.6).

At times there can be a positive or negative relationship between the archaeologist's interpretation and the museum's ideas of preservation. Many times when the

Fig. 4.6 Farmhouse exhibit. (2005 photo by author)

archaeologist leaves a site and moves on, their voice may be lost when the research is transformed into the museum exhibit. Trying to re-create certain features, such as the swept yard, a cooking pit, or the concept of an outdoor living space is a difficult task, to say the least. For example, the challenge of re-creating a swept yard. The only way to re-create a swept yard is to sweep it everyday, dance, walk, and trample on its surface. However, the strength in this line of interpretation is not that the swept yard is perfect, but that it is a part of the exhibit at all. It is information that most visitors have never thought about or been exposed to in the discussion of slavery.

During my brief tenure at the site I began an oral history project of sorts. My connection with the local African-American community stemmed partially from feeling a bit lonely and separated from my own African-American communities of Austin, Texas, and New York City. I met and talked with many families in the local area and learned a great deal about how the Hermitage is perceived in the past and in the present. I discovered a rich history of relations with the site; how access changed over time; and how African-Americans, local or transplants, have never really felt comfortable at the museum. In recent years the communication between the African-American community has become much more fluid and the Hermitage has committed to maintaining this important relationship. I hope in some small way, it was through my outreach to local churches and community elders that made some of these connections possible.

Conclusion

A gendered archaeology of the Hermitage includes a different set of questions that ultimately adds a layer of complexity to the understanding of the plantation landscape as a whole. It emphasizes the significance of all the agents involved in the shaping of a particular place and provides a more nuanced analysis of everything from the shaping of domestic spaces to the planning out of agricultural environs. In the case of the Hermitage plantation, it is clear that the connection between land and people was extremely important in the shaping of captive African identities. Once we begin to see how these communities, and especially women, were active agents in the shaping of their landscapes, we may begin to recognize the possibility of different forms of agency and control of cultural production that remain invisible through a traditional (read masculine) perspective.

For me the most successful aspect of the current exhibit is the landscape. To see the outdoor cooking area in full view, the brick “porch” feature visible, and an attempt at re-creating a swept yard, for me is power, the power to influence and alter the way we present the past to the public, the power of being able to show the transformation of historic (and sometimes painful) places into symbolic (and meaningful) spaces.

Acknowledgments I would like to thank Suzanne Spencer-Wood and Sherene Baugher for their patience, tireless commitment to this volume, and all their comments and suggestions for this

chapter. I would also like to thank the Ladies Hermitage Association, Robbie Jones, Marsha Mullin, Larry McKee, Elizabeth Keller-DeCourse, Jillian Galle, and Jennifer Woody, for their help during my time at the Hermitage. In addition I would like to thank Tanya Mears, Maria Franklin, Michele Wallace, N'Dri Assie-Lumumba, Warren Perry, and Bob Paynter for reading early drafts of this paper and helping me to develop my ideas since leaving the Hermitage. My thanks to members of the local Hermitage community including the members of Stateland Baptist Church and Scott's Hallow AME Church. I hope to have a lifetime to learn from descendants I have met along the way, especially Mrs. Constance Bradley (and sister Kathye). I would also like to acknowledge those elders who have passed on to the other side, Mrs. Minerva Washington and my grandmother, Mrs. H. Lawrence Jones. My husband, Trevor Baptiste supplied encouragement and support. Any shortcomings in this article are solely my responsibility.

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