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The University of Southern Mississippi

Ceramic Diversity and Its Relation to Access to Market for Slaves on a Plantation

by

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Abstract

A study of the diversity of ceramics found on a plantation at a slave house in relation to the access to market that slave had could lead to a better understanding of the life and culture of slaves. A high diversity of ceramics at sites might indicate slaves purchased their own ceramics. At a number of sites located in the Natchez District in Mississippi, a study was conducted to identify samples of ceramic sherds to determine if slaves were able to purchase their own dish ware. The results of the study indicated that slaves at Mount Locust Plantation likely had the means to buy or trade for ceramics while the slaves from Courtland Plantation did not. A high diversity of ceramics generally indicated that slaves had the ability to leave the plantation and had access to market.

Keywords: Natchez, Mississippi, ceramics, slavery, plantations, market

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Introduction

Mount Locust Plantation is located on the Natchez Trace in Jefferson County, Mississippi. Mount Locust was originally started as an inn in the late eighteenth century for travelers on the Natchez Trace. But with the mastering of the Mississippi River through steamboats, transportation on the Trace dwindled and Mount Locust was transformed into a thriving cotton plantation. Excavations performed at the site have yielded artifacts that promise a good future for study at the site.

Mount Locust was originally erected as a one room cabin by William Ferguson and his wife Paulina Burch in the late 1700s. William Ferguson died around 1800 and a few years later Pauline married James Chamberlain. The property did not transform into a cotton plantation until after Ferguson's death. Mount Locust stayed in the possession of the Chamberlain family for generations until it was acquired by the National Park Service in 1937. The National Park Service performed restorations on the house to return it to its historical appearance.

The property was home to many slaves, though sadly the slave houses are no longer standing, but evidence of their life can still be found on the property. During the excavation performed by Dr. Amy Young on what was believed to be the area where the slave houses stood, they discovered a high diversity of ceramic sherds. What information can these artifacts give us about the slaves that lived at Mount Locust or slaves at other plantations? A study might inform us that a high diversity of ceramics might be caused by a source outside the plantation property.

For archaeologists the ability of the slaves to access the market could be discovered by examining the ceramics found at the areas where slave dwellings once stood on plantations. On some plantations the master would provide plain ceramics or damaged decorated ones from the main house and so archaeologists would find a low diversity of ceramics. Some sites though have a high diversity of ceramics and this might indicate that slaves purchased their own ceramics with a variety of decorations from nearby markets. When looking at Mount Locust Plantation in Natchez, Mississippi there is a high diversity in the sherds of ceramics found there. As it is located on the Natchez Trace, a well-traveled road, there were likely a number of markets located in and around the area (Oberneufemann, Kelly, and Lynnell 1999). Courtland Plantation located in Adams County, Mississippi is used as a comparison as it is also located in the Natchez District and like Mount Locust Plantation it was owned by a single family and dates to around the same time but the diversity of the ceramics found there are low. A study of the diversity of ceramics found on a plantation site in relation to the access to market that the slaves had could lead to a better understanding of the life and culture of slaves who lived and worked on plantations.

Literature Review

Slave Life

Slave life in the United States was varied and not as homogenous as a majority of the population thinks it was. There is no all-encompassing generalized set of facts about slavery in the United States because every plantation had its own set of rules (Sansing, Callon, and Carolyn 1992). Knowledge on this subject is not as well-known as some people think, which is why it is so important to have research performed in this topic area (Young 1998). Of all the regions of the United States the southern states probably contained the most slaves (Singleton 1995). Plantation owners worked hard to establish and maintain a relationship with their slave population that was kind enough to hopefully avoid rebellion and harsh enough to maintain their authority over slaves (Libby 2004). Work on plantations usually started before sunup and ended at sundown, especially if the slaves were working on the crops in the fields.

Plantation owners used two common methods to organize the division of labor: the gang system and the task system (Durant, Thomas, and Knottnerus 1994). Often considered the more brutal of the two labor systems, the gang system required the slaves to work in large groups at the same pace throughout the day and only stopping when they were told to. This style of labor is often associated with cotton production more than any other type of crop. During the antebellum cotton kingdom most of the slaves in Mississippi worked under conditions dictated by the gang system (Moore 1988). When working the fields they would move at the pace of the slowest worker, at times they likely conspired together to lower the pace as much as they could without risking

punishment. The task system is considered the less brutal regime of labor. In the task system, each slave was given a task to complete for the day. After they finished their task, they could usually spend the day as they pleased (Phillips 1922). With the task system of labor, if their owners let them, slaves could produce their own goods for themselves or for sale. According to Moore (1988) a different system emerged during the last two decades of the antebellum period, with the increased use of machinery on cotton plantations a revised version of the task system gradually replaced the gang system, though it had long been used on rice plantations.

Another common aspect of slave life was a reward and punishment system (Owens 1976). These systems varied among plantation owners and were argued about between them. James O. Breeden (1980) compiled a book of correspondences between masters where they talked about their own rules and beliefs on the subject. They discussed their reward systems, some would pay their slaves a little money at the end of the year if they did their work right for the whole year but money would be taken away for any infractions. Some would give half days, usually on Saturdays, to some of their slaves as a reward. Some masters would give passes into town for good behavior. Others might let them grow crops and the masters would buy it from the slaves, others would let the slaves do with the crop as they pleased. Still it was up to the master to determine what the slaves produced and when they worked on it (Kaye 1999). Some believed that letting them have any free time or being allowed to leave the plantation was asking for disaster. Punishments for slaves could be severe and often for small infractions. The most common form of punishment was whipping. The problem with punishing slaves too severely was that in the end it would be the owner who would end up with losses. Whip

a slave excessively and they would not be able to work for a few days and the owner would lose money, imprison a slave for miss behaving was equally detrimental because the slave could rest and would not have to work (Moore 1988).

Natchez District

The district of Natchez was a large area, reaching east of the Mississippi River from Bayou Sara in Louisiana in the south all the way up north to Bayou Pierre in Mississippi. The Natchez District has a long history of slavery and therefore is a useful area to perform research on slave life in order to expand on current knowledge. The early settlers to the Natchez District produced tobacco. When the district came under Spanish rule, the production of tobacco grew rapidly with the population; it was not until the late 1700s that cotton became a major commodity for the Natchez District (Moore 1988). It was also not until the nineteenth century that slavery became a large business for the area (Davis 1997). During the cotton boom, when planters were flocking to the area, the slave population in the Natchez District grew significantly.

African Americans have made up the majority of the population of Mississippi for most of its history (Singleton 1991). The earliest plantations in Mississippi were established in the Natchez District. The Natchez District is found along the Mississippi River and had many boats with goods and slaves come through. The Natchez District had vast amount of slave holdings, where the majority of planters had 50 or more slaves rather than the minority as was the average (Young 1999a). While there were many plantations few owners lived regularly on them, they often preferring to live in a town center (Young 1999b). In the Natchez District most plantation owners owned a house in

the city of Natchez (Van Court 1950). Before the Civil war Natchez was said to have more millionaires than any other city in the United States (Boler 2005).

Mount Locust Plantation, located in the Natchez District near the Mississippi River, is one of the oldest structures still standing in the state of Mississippi (Obernuefemann, Kelly, and Lynnell 1999). The plantation was started by William Ferguson around 1783 as a one room cabin that functioned as an inn for travelers on the Natchez Trace; since it was located right next to the trace it most probably saw a great number of travelers. It was transformed into a cotton plantation in the 1800s with a large slaveholding. There were 16 slave houses at its peak (Young 1999a). The plantation



Figure 1: Picture of the refurbished main house of Mount Locust plantation.

stayed in the family's hands until the 1930s when it was given to the National Park Service (Phelps 1941). As a cotton plantation the gang system of labor was usually used, but according to Susan Olin's (2008)

research of Mount Locust Plantation she says that they likely used the task system of labor. There seems to be little surviving information about the slaves who lived at Mount Locust.

Courtland Plantation also resided in the Natchez District. The plantation was about 2,300 acres and was located in what is currently Adams County, Mississippi, specifically the Sandy Creek area. The first building erected for the plantation was done

in 1816 by Courtland Smith and it only consisted of four rooms (Van Court 1950). He was a veteran of the Civil War; according to Catherine Van Court's book *The Old House* (1950), Courtland Smith decided to move into the wilderness because his face was disfigured with a scar from a wound he received from a saber. According to family tradition he built his house on an Indian burial mound and because of this the house was reputed to have been haunted. He died in 1817, only a year after the house was built and his body was found by his slaves. The plantation passed to Mrs. Adaline Baker, a relative, and she named the plantation after Courtland Smith though it is unknown when she moved onto the property. During her tenure she added amenities to the property: expanded the main house by adding seven rooms, built a cottage, servants' quarters, smoke house, dairy, two outside kitchens, and stables (Van Court 1950). According to Van Court, "the brick quarters for field-hands was among the most commodious and comfortable in that part of Mississippi" (1950). Van Court herself is a descendant of Courtland Smith and grew up on the plantation though her mother did not like staying there because it was so far from civilization, preferring to live in their house in the city of Natchez. The drive by coach from Natchez to Courtland Plantation was a tiresome journey over irregular terrain that took about four to five hours. They would also have to cross Sandy Creek River, which did not have a bridge at the time, the river was often prone to flooding making instances where no one could come or leave the plantation.

The city of Natchez had a good market place; its retail businesses included anything from general market stores to small specialty shops (Sansing, Callon, and Carolyn 1992). Slaves could trade or sell some of the goods they made in the

markets. Enough slaves in the outlying areas beyond the city of Natchez would buy off

**W. WALSH---Has just received, per Steam
Boat Feliciano, a very general assortment of
Groceries, Glass, China, and Crockery-ware; which
offers for sale at the most reasonable cash prices, and
warrants each article to be of the best quality.
His store is opposite Mr. John N. Helm's, in Main
street. May 12. 43---3t**

Figure 2: Clipping of advertisement from the *Ariel*, 1826.

their plantations, so many of them that they would crowd the streets of Natchez from time to time (Kaye 1999). Various newspapers from the area, such as the *Mississippi Free Trader* (1846,1849), *The Ariel* (1826), and the *Statesman and Gazette* (1830), reveal that there were numerous shops in town that sold ceramics. They were usually listed as china or crockery in the advertisements.

**CROCKERY.—A full assortment of Crockery on
hand and for sale by
oct. 6 WM. K. HENRY.**

Figure 3: Clipping of advertisement from the *Mississippi Free Trader*, 1846.

Ceramic Analysis

The ceramic assemblage excavated at the slave house sites on Mount Locust Plantation and Courtland Plantation provides information about the life of slaves living on these plantations. Among the most common objects uncovered at excavation sites are ceramics, essential for analyzing societies. Ceramics are defined as: of or relating to the

manufacture of any product (as earthenware, porcelain, or brick) made essentially from a nonmetallic mineral (as clay) by firing at a high temperature (*Merriam-Webster*).

Ceramics not only can be used to help date an archaeological site, but they can also be used as a source of information for interpreting historical lifeways (Majewski, Teresita, and O'Brien 1978). Ceramics have also been used to identify potential socioeconomic hierarchies in a community.

The analysis of ceramics involves identifying the ware type, decoration, and the amount of each found at an excavation site. The proper identification and correct terminology is important because many people, especially lay people, use terms interchangeably when they are in fact different things (Majewski, Teresita, and O'Brien 1978). To better make it universally understandable the proper use of terms is needed. Ceramics sherds can be dishes, saucers, cups, and other such dishware that was used by the people who lived there. Ceramics can sometimes be identified based on regions; some were commonly found in a specific area and this can help with identification (Ketchum 1971).

Ware type can be distinguished through subtle differences when observing the sherds. Pearlware can be identified by the slight blue tint found in the ceramic's coloring (Ward 1997). Pearlware without exception is almost always decorated in some form (Hunter 2004). Creamware, as its name suggests, is cream in color and was in wide use before whiteware came along. Whiteware came about in the early 1800s (Hicks and Beaudry 2006) and is readily identified as it is completely white unless decorated. Of the sample of ceramics identified for this research the majority of it was whiteware.

The decorations found on ceramics are highly diverse and can be used for dating purposes. Shell-edged ceramics are usually flatware, normally with an embossed decoration around their rim, though some do not have the embossing. From there they can be subdivided into four main rim types: scalloped, octagon, unscalloped, and unscalloped painted (Ward 1997). Octagon was not found at the slave house sites on Mount Locust Plantation. Transfer print was found in a variety of colors at Mount Locust slave house sites. Transfer print is the technique of taking a printed design and transferring it under the glaze of a ceramic, it allowed fast and uniformed manufacturing of a design (Hicks and Beaudry 2006; Samford 1997). Printed decoration dominated the ceramic scene in the nineteenth century (Hicks and Beaudry 2006). There are also various painted wares that were hand painted commonly in blue until other colors were created to survive the firing process the ceramics went through (Miller 1991). Dipped ware is easily identified by its horizontal bands usually present on hollow vessel forms such as bowls and cups (Majewski and O'Brien 1978).

Methodology

For my research project, I conducted research in both a laboratory and library setting. To begin my research I studied a random sample of ceramic sherds from Mount Locust plantation slave house site at Dr. Amy Young's historical archaeology laboratory at the University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg campus. The random sample was chosen by looking at the mapping of the excavation and choosing at random what units to look at and then pulling those bags from their box. Dr. Young supervised my training in ceramic identification throughout my study of the ceramics. I went through each bag of ceramic sherds recording the ware type, decoration, and color, and the frequency of each found as well as recording the location (unit, level) where the sherds were found during the original excavation process. I noted my findings in a notebook and then transferred the information to an Excel sheet to easily view the findings for analysis of diversity and frequency of the ceramic sherds found.

In addition, I have conducted research through both the Cook Library and the Mississippiana Collection at the McCain Library on the University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg campus. Book sources on the life, culture, and practices of slaves in the United States as well as the history about the Natchez District and the city of Natchez have been very helpful in providing me with background information to reconstruct the historical setting for the artifacts studied. They also provide insight into what the slaves did in their everyday life, from work to rest. Journal publications of archaeological research done at other plantation sites have provided a comparison of what was found at Mount Locust Plantation and Courtland Plantation. Reports I have found on

excavations and surveys conducted at Mount Locust have also provided me with valuable information I am not able to study myself as I will not be performing excavations at the Mount Locust site. However there are not similar publications and reports for Courtland Plantation. Advertisements for shops that sold ceramics were discovered by looking through microfilm of newspapers that were in circulation in the Natchez District during that period.

Courtland Plantation in Adams County, Mississippi where Dr. Young has also worked and conducted an excavation has provided comparative data. Like Mount Locust, Courtland was owned by a single family and dates to the same time period of the Mount Locust slave houses. Most of the historical information I can find on Courtland comes from the book *The Old House* published in 1950 and written by a descendant of the family, Catherine Van Court who grew up on the plantation.

From the data analysis that I performed on the ceramic assemblage studied from the slave house sites, I analyzed what amount of diversity there was in the ceramics found at both sites. I went through the Excel sheet on the Mount Locust Plantation data and first sorted through the information to find the amount of each ceramic ware type present and recorded the number for each. I then sorted through the data to find what decorations were present in each ware type identified and recorded the type and number for each decoration found. For Courtland Plantation Dr. Young gave me the results of the ceramic assemblage from the original excavation. I then went through the data to analyze the diversity of the ware type and decorations found.

Distance from the plantations to Natchez, the nearest town, was difficult to determine. I inquired at the McCain Library if they possessed any historical maps of the

Natchez District, the Natchez Trace, Jefferson County, or Adams County but they only had maps of the state of Mississippi as a whole from the time period and not any specialized maps. Distance from Natchez to Mount Locust Plantation was determined by looking at the map of the current Natchez Trace since the plantation is still standing there, which has the distance between the two places at approximately 15 miles. Discovering the distance between Natchez and Courtland Plantation was more difficult as the plantation is no longer standing so it is not readily determined by looking at a current map. Van Court (1950) has the distance in time at 4-5 hours by coach but rides by coach were slow, especially over uneven terrain, so walking time could have been faster or around the same if accounting for any rest time needed. I know the approximate area where the land for Courtland Plantation used to be but not the exact spot where the house stood and according to the maps the approximate walking time is six hours.

Results

240 total ceramic sherds were analyzed from Mount Locust Plantation. Of the total ceramic sherds that were analyzed they were identified by ware type as follows: 195 were identified as whiteware, 13 as pearlware, 1 as porcelain, and 31 as refined. Ceramic sherds were identified by decoration type as follows: 47 transfer print, 6 green shell edge scalloped, 8 blue shell edge scalloped, 8 blue painted, 26 polychrome painted, 5 dipped, 2 cat's eye, 1 green sponge, 1 blue under glazed, 1 black banded rim, 1 brown banded, 1 blue edge painted, 15 undetermined decorations, and 118 that had no visible decorations. The whiteware was the most common ware type identified in the sample and also possessed the most diversity of the ware types in decoration. The decorations on the whiteware consisted of: 39 transfer print in various colors, 5 dipped, 2 cat's eyes dipped, 1 black banded rim, 1 brown banded, 1 blue edge painted, 1 green sponge, 5 blue painted, 8 blue shell edge, 5 green shell edge, 25 polychrome painted, 7 undetermined decorations, and 95 sherds that had no visible decorations. Refined had the next largest number identified with 31 sherds, their decorations included: 1 polychrome painted, 2 blue painted, 2 transfer print in blue, 6 undetermined decorations, and 20 with no visible decorations. There were 13 ceramic sherds that were identified as pearlware, their decorations consisted of: 6 transfer print, 1 green shell edge, 1 blue painted, 2 undetermined decorations in blue, and 3 with no visible decorations. There was one piece of porcelain that was blue under glazed. Out of the total ceramic sherds identified 122 had some form of decoration and 118 had no decorations.

The ceramic sherds from Courtland Plantation consisted of 162 sherds. 88 were identified as whiteware, 30 as ironstone, 6 as pearlware, 10 porcelain, 1 yellow ware, 4 undetermined, and 23 as stoneware. Of the whiteware their decorations were identified as follows: 78 no decorations, 2 blue transfer print, 2 blue painted, 3 dipped, 1 blue shell edge, 1 polychrome painted, and 1 embossed. Of the ironstone their decorations were identified as: 28 no decorations, 1 dipped, and 1 flow blue. The decorations of the pearlware were identified as: 5 no decorations and 1 blue transfer print. All the porcelain, yellow ware, stoneware, and undetermined ware were plain. Out of the total ceramic sherds that were identified 149 had no decorations and 13 had some form of decoration.

The access to market was observed by measuring the distance from the plantations to Natchez (the closest city) and determining if the slaves on either plantation would have had the opportunity to leave their respective plantations. According to Van Court (1950) the drive to Natchez from the Courtland Plantation by coach was 4-5 hours over “tiresome and irregular terrain.” According to the Natchez Trace Mount Locust is at the 15 mile marker, therefore about 15 miles from Natchez. Slaves were known to go into town to buy and sell goods from time to time. There are recorded instances of masters allowing slaves to produce and sell their own crops allowing them to make money off of it and therefore had the means to buy ceramics. Slaves who were teamsters went into town and had ample opportunity to sell their own goods as well as do it for their fellows (Kaye 1999) and they likely could buy things on behalf of others. Stands did exist on the Natchez Trace though during the course of this research little definitive evidence was found if there were any near to Mount Locust.

Conclusions

The results of my literary research concluded that the slaves in the area had access to nearby markets and likely had the means to buy or trade for the ceramics when they did go to market. Slaves at Mount Locust Plantation were closer to Natchez and they lived on the Natchez Trace which was known to have stands along it so they had easy access to markets. Slaves at Courtland Plantation lived farther away and had to contend with the Sandy Creek River which was prone to overflowing and had no bridge, blocking any passage for long periods. This access to market can be seen as a reflection of the diversity in the ceramics found at either site. The results from Mount Locust Plantation showed a high number of ceramic sherds that were decorated and a broad range in the diversity of the decorations present in the ceramic assemblage. Since there is a broad range in the diversity of the ceramics it is unlikely that they were handed out from the owners and more likely that the slaves acquired most of their ceramics by themselves. The results from Courtland Plantation reflected their access to market; there was a low number of ceramic sherds that were decorated and a small range in the diversity of the ceramics that were decorated likely meaning most of their ceramics were given to them by their owners from the plantation.

This research will contribute to the probability that access to market had an effect on the ceramic diversity found at slave house sites on plantations. The results of this research could lead to other information about slave life. For example since there is a high diversity in the ceramics it could mean the slaves had the ability to leave their plantation and access a market and therefore had the means to buy goods when they did.

This could then possibly mean that the slaves were on the task labor system, meaning they probably grew their own set of crops to sell. These results will help researchers discover more about slave life and when archaeologists perform excavations at plantation slave houses and find a high diversity of ceramics they will have a potential cause for the diversity in the ceramics.

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