

Preserving History Through Archaeology



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The Southwest Blockhouse Root Cellar Background Research: Final Note

In recent issues of the *Gwinnett Archaeology Bulletin* (GAB; Vol. IX Issues 8 and 10) I presented information on the blockhouse cold cellar found at the Apple River Fort in Iowa. Besides the Fort Daniel Southwest Blockhouse cold cellar (*pictured right*; as it transitioned from “hearth feature” to “cold cellar feature” in the fall of 2014), this is the only other one that I have seen reported for a stockade fort blockhouse—though I don’t doubt there could have been others. We first identified the Fort Daniel feature as a cold cellar in 2014 (see GAB Vol. III, Issue 10) and featured in the GAB a subsequent article on cold cellars excavated in settler and slave cabin sites to give “our”

cold cellar an historical and cultural context.

In a article by a former colleague at TRC, Larry McKee, who with my former boss at TRC-Norcross, Brian Thomas, had excavated at President Jackson’s plantation near Nashville in the 1970s, Larry discusses, “Root Cellars in Housing for Enslaved African Americans at The Hermitage.” What follows are portions of that article that appeared in a Tennessee Archaeology Awareness Month Blog Post, 9/15/2017:



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EDITOR:

Delana M. Gilmore, MA

Email: gwinnettarchaeology@gmail.com

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR:

Jim D’Angelo, PhD RPA

Email: 4drdee@bellsouth.net

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The Hermitage near Nashville was owned and operated as a cotton plantation by Andrew Jackson and his family through much of the nineteenth century. Opened as a museum in the late 1890s, the site remains a popular tourist attraction. Extensive archaeological research took place at the site from the 1970s through the early 2000s with a focus on the community of enslaved African Americans who lived and worked on the plantation.

Excavation at the site has found evidence of slave residences in three clusters: near the mansion, at an area known as the First Hermitage, and at an area known as the field quarter. Twenty-two separate slave dwellings have been identified at the Hermitage. These residences were a mix of brick, log, and wood-framed structures built and rebuilt over the course of fifty years. Archaeological investigation of sixteen of the residences found that eleven have interior sub-floor pits—generally referred to as root cellars.

Finding root cellars at the Hermitage connects the experiences of the site's enslaved community to many other plantations across southeastern North America. Starting in the 1970s, archaeological research on Colonial-era sites in the Mid-Atlantic states consistently found root cellars associated with the remains of slave dwellings. Archaeologists began to expect to find these features at plantation site dwellings, and so it was no surprise to discover root cellars associated with residences for the enslaved at the Hermitage.

The size of sub-floor pits associated with slave housing is variable with examples at the Hermitage and other sites ranging from as small as two to three feet square up to seven to eight feet on a side. Cellar depths rarely exceed more than three feet. Residents would have accessed the cellars by trap doors in the wooden floors of the associated structures, while in houses with dirt floors the pits were likely simply covered by planks. These cellars would have been primarily intended for long-term storage of raw produce such as turnips and potatoes.

The Hermitage root cellars show general consistent placement near to and aligned with fireplaces within the dwellings, a pattern seen at many other plantation sites. At the same time, the Hermitage pits are notably variable, with some cellars consisting of single chambers, and others with two or three separate but adjacent chambers. Some of the pits had brick linings and floors, some were lined with wooden planks, and some were simply squared-off holes dug into the site's stiff clay subsoil. This variation among the Hermitage root cellars sharply contrasts with the otherwise very standardized size and configuration of the encompassing structures. From this, it is clear that root cellars were not part of the original design and construction of the dwellings but were added later by residents following a loosely defined template for how to build a small cellar.

Researchers interested in root cellars have focused on three interpretations of their functions: as simple food storage pits; as "hidey holes" for personal items owned by the enslaved; and, at least in some cases, as "shrines" containing bundles of items related to African religious practices. There is also interest in whether root cellars can be linked to African architectural traditions and how the presence of these added dwelling features relate to plantation management practices. As usual with archaeological research and interpretation, there is no clear accepted understanding of the role of these features within the complex social setting of plantation slavery.

Artifacts recovered from the soil filling the Hermitage root cellars yielded no direct clues about the original use of the features, and the work found no caches of spiritualized items within the pits. It is also of note that the Hermitage mansion kitchen has a large root cellar, and these features are present beneath the original Jackson family dwelling at the First Hermitage. The presence of root cellars in a

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wide variety of Hermitage residences and buildings points to the general utility of these storage pits, rather than as expressions of a specific cultural tradition. Curiously, the apparent last slave dwelling constructed on the property does not have root cellars. This is the still-standing structure known as Alfred's Cabin, erected in the 1850s. The lack of subfloor pits here may reflect tightening restrictions on the activity of plantation slave communities—seen throughout the South in the twilight years of the institution in the U.S.

Finding a root cellar during excavations at the Hermitage was always an exciting event for those of us lucky enough to work as archaeologists at the site. Importantly, the pits serve to show how the enslaved African Americans at the site worked to define their lives and homes in big and small ways independently from what was intended by their purported “masters.” Public interpretation at the Hermitage now showcases the root cellars as one of many important results of research on the enslaved plantation community, assuring that site visitors get a thorough introduction to the presence of slavery at The Hermitage.

Published studies of root cellars and slave dwellings:

McKee, Larry

- 1992 The Ideals and Realities Behind the Design and Use of Nineteenth-Century Virginia Slave Cabins. In: The Art and Mystery of Historical Archaeology: Essays in Honor of James Deetz. , Mary C. Beaudry and Anne Yentsch, eds. CRC Press, Boca Raton, FL.
- 2002 The Archaeological Study of Slavery and Plantation Life in Tennessee. In: Trial and Triumph: Essays in Tennessee’s African American History. Carroll Van West, ed. University of Tennessee Press, Knoxville.

Samford, Patricia M.

- 2007 Subfloor Pits and the Archaeology of Slavery in Colonial Virginia. The University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa.

If all goes well in 2021, we should be able to close out excavations in the Southwest Blockhouse root cellar as we explore the best way to preserve and exhibit it. ■ JJD

Fort Daniel News

A word from Fort Daniel Foundation Vice President, Leslie Perry:

As the year 2020 has come to a close, the Fort Daniel Foundation (FDF) looks forward to 2021 with optimism spurred by progress! We have made great progress in our historical venue this year—improving the grounds in so many ways: new step access to the fort site with railings, new door awning, a great new sidewalk for the front-to-basement access, trees trimmed, grounds prepared, ongoing work by Karen Medina-Lomba on the artifacts, and a most successful educational Frontier Faire in October—despite the restrictions caused by COVID-19. The Fort Daniel Foundation has much to be proud of and hopes you all will renew your FDF memberships to ensure that FDF programs continue with the same quality and vigor.

The FDF Officers and Board of Directors will conduct the FDF Annual Meeting virtually. Members will receive reports and nominations for Board vacancies by email this year. FDF thanks all members for your dedication, service, and time. We cannot accomplish our goals in historical preservation and education without you! ■ LP

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FORT DANIEL
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Archaeologists Uncover Ancient Street Food Shop in Pompeii

Excerpt from an article featured on [Reuters Web site](#) on December 26, 2020.

Archaeologists in Pompeii, the city buried in a volcanic eruption in 79 AD, have made the extraordinary find of a frescoed hot food and drinks shop that served up the ancient equivalent of street food to Roman passersby.

Known as a *termopolium* (Latin for hot drinks counter), the shop was discovered in the archaeological park's Regio V site, which is not yet open to the public. Traces of nearly 2,000-year-old food were found in some of the deep terra cotta jars containing hot food which the shop keeper lowered into a counter with circular holes. The front of the counter (*pictured right*) was decorated with brightly colored frescoes, some depicting animals that were part of the ingredients in the food sold, such as a chicken and two ducks hanging upside down. Archaeologists also found a decorated bronze drinking bowl known as a *patera*, ceramic jars used for cooking



stews and soups, wine flasks, and amphora.

"Our preliminary analyses shows that the figures drawn on the front of the counter represent, at least in part, the food and drink that were sold there," said Valeria Amoretti, a site anthropologist.

Amoretti said traces of pork, fish, snails, and beef had been found in the containers—a discovery she called a "testimony to the great variety of animal products used to prepare dishes".

About two-thirds of the 66-hectare (165-acre) ancient town has been uncovered. The ruins were not discovered until the 16th century and organized excavations began about

1750. A rare documentation of Greco-Roman life, Pompeii is one of Italy's most popular attractions and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. ■ **Reuters**

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