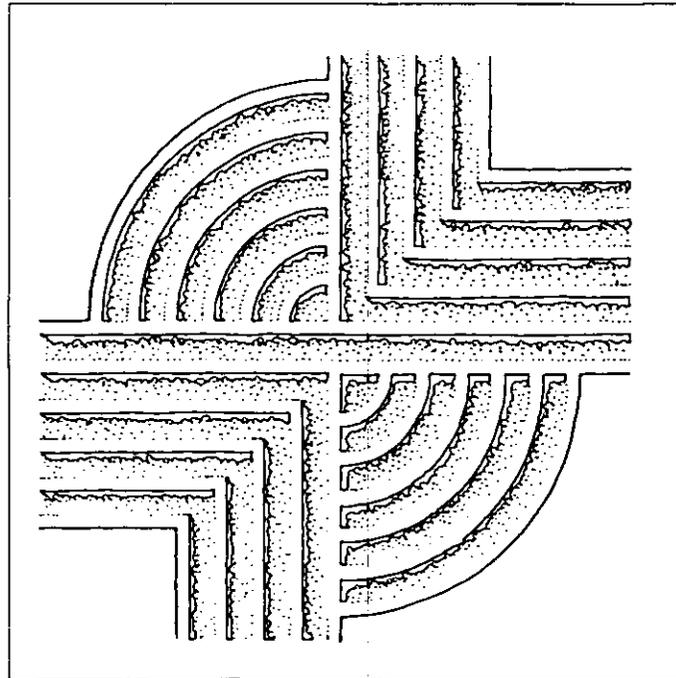


"WITH CREDIT AND HONOUR":  
ARCHAEOLOGY AT JOHN WHITESIDES'  
PLANTATION



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ARCHAEOLOGY AT JOHN WHITESIDES' PLANTATION**

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It was James Baldwin who, in a 1963 interview with *Saturday Review*, said, "What passes for identity in America is a series of myths about one's heroic ancestors." Over a decade later Warren Beck and Myles Clowers were to write, "More Americans have learned the story of the South during the years of the Civil War and Reconstruction from Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* than from all of the learned volumes on this period." The point is that our understanding of the past is often fragmented, distorted, or perhaps even delusional.

An example is our understanding of South Carolina's planter class. Ask just about any school child to describe plantations and you will likely get an account of big white columns, huge acreage — almost always full of cotton or perhaps rice — and hundreds of slaves. Archaeology has contributed to this view of our past by focusing on larger (rather than smaller) plantations. This is certainly understandable — bigger plantations have left more of a mark, on both the landscape and on the historic documents. As a result, they are easier to find, easier to study, and, I'd wager, easier (or at least more satisfying) to interpret.

A recent study just outside of Mount Pleasant, at a place called Seaside, has allowed us to explore what we believe is typical of the smaller planters in the Christ Church Parish area. John Darby and The Beach Company generously funded archaeological excavations at the main settlement of John Whitesides, south of U.S. 17 and Rifle Range Road, just northeast of the Town of Mount Pleasant.

We know that portions of Christ Church Parish, especially those along the "Seashore" were low and historically unproductive. Less than 9% of the Whitesides tract, for example, was even moderately well drained. The rest was low and wet, requiring extensive ditching for any sustainable crop yields. In spite of the poor drainage, the topography was not especially good for rice. While some was grown along the Wando River, efforts to grow "Carolina Gold" on "Seashore" plantations were apparently limited to small impoundments. Cotton never seems to have been profitable for most the planters in Christ Church. The only saving grace, it seems, is that the area was in close proximity to Charleston.

The historical documentation reveals the relative poverty of Christ Church throughout its history. Not only were the assemblymen from Christ Church less wealthy in the colonial period than their colleagues from other parishes, but they owned fewer slaves. Many of the "Seashore" tracts were relatively small, further limiting their profitability. Christ Church, even into the late antebellum, offered only limited potential for planters. Christ Church contained about 10% of the improved acreage of Charleston County, but produced only 1% of the county's rice and less than 2% of its cotton. Instead, the parish had focused on orchard products (contributing 20.7% of those

produced in Charleston County), oats (again contributing over 20%), and wool (accounting for 18% of all the wool production in Charleston). In other words, a strange mix of cattle ranching, subsistence farming, and cash cropping had developed and matured in Christ Church.

The bits and pieces of the Whitesides history we were able to piece together support this "bigger picture." Acquiring a relatively small tract of 220 acres from his father's estate in 1762, John Whitesides apparently focused on quickly establishing his settlement with his small family and slave holding. All we know historically about his agricultural activities is that he was planting rice and corn — again representing a mixture of subsistence farming and cash cropping. Into the 1820s his wealth was limited. He apparently attained no political office and his service to Christ Church was marred by a dispute with the rector, who described John Whitesides as more fit to be a tavern keeper than a member of a church committee. His physical settlement consisted of a main house and four outbuildings — all within a single acre. A barn was situated midway between his settlement and his four slave houses. John Whitesides died in 1834 and although his widow attempted to operate the plantation, there's evidence of its swift decline. In the next decade or so the settlement was abandoned, fell into ruin, and was no longer shown on plats.

The archaeological evidence concerning Whitesides' house is ambiguous. The only architectural remain we found at the site is the chimney footing — a mass of mortar and brick rubble. The scatter of artifacts does suggest the structure's orientation and even provides some vague indication of size, suggesting something small, perhaps no larger than 20 or so by 30 or 40 feet.

While we don't know much concerning the size of the structure, and absolutely nothing concerning internal arrangement, we can suggest that it was built using good eighteenth century craft traditions, including mortise and tendon construction. There are very few nails — certainly not enough to account for framing, attachment of weather boarding, and shingling. There is also relatively little flat glass, meaning that windows were either uncommon or were not glassed. We do, however, know that at least some rooms in the house were plastered, based on large quantities of plaster debris around the chimney area.

The collection of artifacts from this settlement is consistent with the historic dates, ranging from the last half of the eighteenth century into the first or second decade of the nineteenth century. When this collection of artifacts is examined, one might make the mistake of suggesting that they came from a slave site — there are a number of kitchen artifacts, such as ceramics, and a rather meager collection of architectural remains.

Yet this is certainly not a slave house and the collection we found at the site, along with a few similar examples from plantations such as Elfe and Magnolia (the former on Daniels Island and the latter here at Dunes West) provide clear evidence of a

pattern of poverty, not slavery.

When the ceramics are examined most are undecorated; those which are decorated are inexpensive painted and annular wares. In addition, the assemblage contains, albeit in small quantities, some very high status items such as teaware, overglazed enamelled wares, and transfer printed wares.

The ceramics include large proportions of utilitarian wares and the tablewares are dominated by bowl forms. While these features have been associated with slavery, it seems equally reasonable to associate them with the foodways of "country folk" which focus on "spoon meals" of soups, gruels, and porridges. Meat, well into the nineteenth century, was a luxury food used sparingly by all but the wealthiest. The simple fare of country farmers requires few plates, but many bowls coupled with storage containers for a variety of goods.

Unexpectedly pork is more common than beef in the faunal collection from the site. The best explanation is that since the plantation may have been engaged in ranching, Whitesides may have chosen not to eat what could be more profitably sold. When cow is present it is confined to jaw and jowl cuts. These less meaty cuts are considered lower status and suggest that the Whitesides were selling the prime cuts, retaining for themselves only those which would not bring much return. Also present, in surprising numbers, are fish bones, suggesting that fish were a relatively inexpensive and readily accessible dietary supplement.

Historians clearly recognize the diversity in the planter class — in fact one need only look at the writings of any economic historian to realize this truism. Yet archaeologists have tended to focus on the wealthier planters. As previously suggested, this is probably a result of both the cultural resource management process, which sometimes forces research justification into social prominence, and our emphasis on nineteenth century plantations, by which time many divisions based on material goods had become obscured.

The Whitesides Plantation forces us to recognize the diversity in the archaeological record already seen by historians. David Hackett Fischer begins his discussion of planter wealth in Virginia:

"Praised be to God," wrote a gentleman of Virginia in 1686, " I neither live in poverty nor pomp, but in very good indifference and to a full content." This ideal of material moderation was widely shared by Virginians. The reality, however, was very different. From the outset, the distribution of wealth was profoundly unequal. During the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century it became even more so.

He moves on to discuss these divisions, noting that in Surry County, Virginia, a low

swamp filled county directly across the James River from Jamestown, landowners with 350 or more acres accounted for only 30% of the free landowners. The remaining 60% owned fewer than 350 acres. In Charleston County on the eve of the Civil War, those owning over 500 or more acres accounted for less than 7% of the free landowners. The remaining 93% owned fewer than 500 acres.

John Whitesides, in this sense, was a common planter. He was not rich, he did not possess a grand mansion, he did not circulate among the social or political elite of Charleston. The Whitesides name is not listed in the index of historical tomes as a significant contributor to the colony. In fact, he lived his life in relative obscurity. Whitesides, however, maintained his family, as the title of this paper suggests, "with credit and honour."

Whitesides was only a partial participant in the movement toward gentility which characterizes the latter half of the eighteenth century. He picked up odd bits and pieces, adopting what he could, probably ignoring much that seemed either pompous or simply unobtainable. Nevertheless, he *was* a planter — he owned land, he owned slaves. Perhaps more than anything else, slavery tied all planters together politically, socially, and economically.

What we see in the archaeological record at John Whitesides plantation, therefore, is likely a reflection of many small planters throughout the South Carolina low country. The assemblage is spartan, appearing poor by the standards we have developed to look at plantation society. But "poverty" is a relative term and must be used with as much caution as "status."

Hopefully the investigations at the Whitesides settlement have done more than simply document the archaeological signature of this one family. Ideally this research has demonstrated the need to expand on our views of planters and plantation society. Sites need to be better explored before being characterized. Sites from a much broader range of social, political, and economic "classes" need to be explored, compared, and contrasted. Most particularly we need to understand that a very large segment of society lived with "credit and honour" leaving little more than archaeological remains to document their lives and contributions. The challenge is to help provide these planters with a more compelling, and accurate, voice.

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