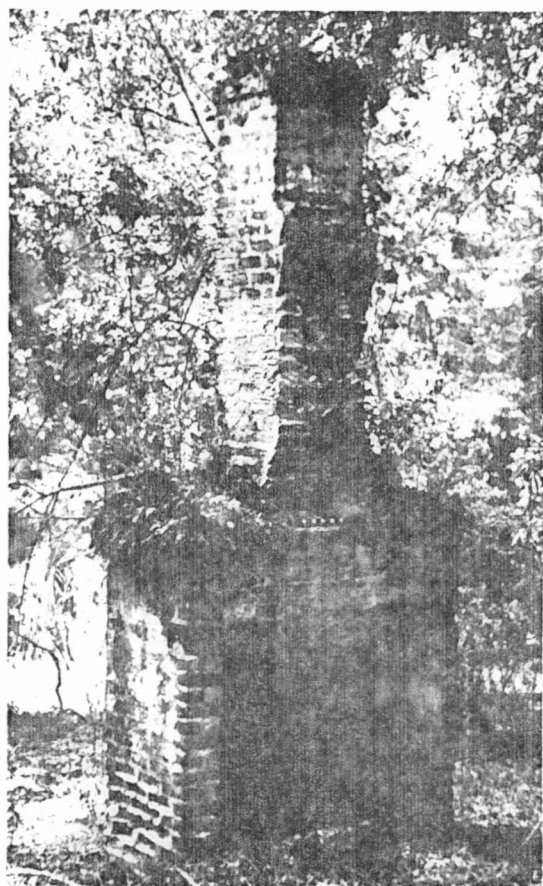


EXCAVATION OF A SLAVE CABIN: GEORGIA, U.S.A.

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Soundtrack

If I could do it, I'd do no writing at all here. It would be photographs: the rest would be fragments of cloth, bits of cotton, lumps of earth, records of speech, pieces of wood and iron, phials of odors, plates of food and excrement. (Agee and Evans 1969:12)

Here is an interpretation of what was found in the ruins of a slave cabin. The ruins are on Cumberland Island, Georgia. The cabin was lived in between circa 1834 and 1865. We seek to discover and convey a sense of daily life as it might have been experienced by the people who lived in the cabin.

Until now, what slavery was like anywhere has been largely constructed from the writings of slave owning groups (Davis 1966:30). In the case of plantation slavery in Georgia, records and accounts of slave owning farmers often provide information (Flanders 1933). Another general source of information are the writings of men and women who once had

been slaves (Osofsky 1969). Third are materials from excavation. These differ from all writing in the matter of intent. We take it for granted that no one expected us to see or touch the things we unearthed.

Why excavate at a place lived in at a time for which written documents are abundant? With reference to earlier periods and other circumstances in American history, archaeologists have answered this question by saying that their endeavors were meant to supplement history (Deetz 1968:123; Harrington 1955:1122). This answer presumes that what happened is already known. Perhaps this presumption applies elsewhere; it does not fit here. For one thing, slaves broke the law when they read or wrote, and anyone who taught slaves to read or write also broke the law (for the law in Georgia, see King 1966:182). Anyway, we reject the notion that writing is inherently superior to other objects as evidence for human activity.

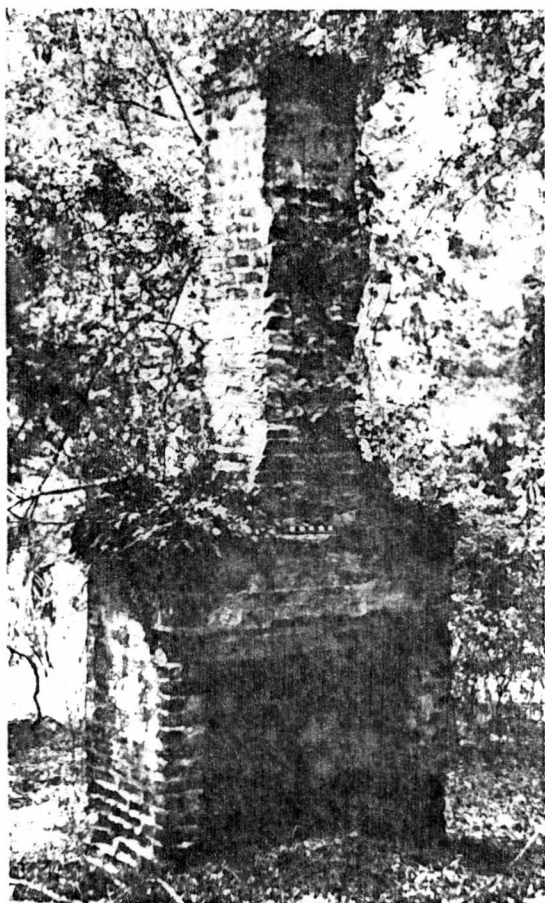


FIGURE 5. Leaning chimney at one of the cabins. The firebox is about 3 ft. wide.

fallen chimney we excavated. It is therefore reasonable to use the leaning chimney to fill in our picture of the excavated cabin. Most importantly, plaster ridges toward the top of the leaning chimney give a clue about the cabin's dimensions. If we use the angle of the ridge as a guide, and extend a line from the midpoint of the chimney until it intersects a second line drawn six feet from the side wall of the fireplace and parallel to it, we reconstruct a cabin that is six feet high at the eaves and eighteen feet across. Lacking evidence to the contrary, we suggest that the excavated cabin was a square 18 x 18 feet (Figure 6). These dimensions are well within the range of other Georgian slave quarter cabins (Flanders 1933:152).

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He may have been twenty years old when stolen from Africa: left a wife and one child

there. Used to say he went home to Africa in the night and came back again in the morning: that is, he dreamed of home. (Thoreau 1949:285)

A bead is the smallest whole artifact recovered in the course of excavation (Figure 7). It measures only one-quarter of an inch in both length and diameter. If you hold it so as to look through the perforation, you can count six sides along the outer edge. With the exception of a white rim surrounding the perforation, the bead is blue, and is faceted. The manufacturing sequence, in part, went like this: a bulb of glass was rolled over marble; the result was rolled over half-molten blue glass; the glass was pressed into a mold to form facets (Sleen 1967:25). The nomenclature for beads requires that we describe this one as standard, hexagonal, blue, and drawn (Beck 1927).

We think it possible that this bead was carried from Africa to America by someone sold into slavery. The evidence is as follows. Slaves arrived in South Carolina as late as 1808 and the slave markets of this state often supplied slaves for Georgia (Stamp 1956:25; Curtin 1969:158). At about the same time, hundreds of thousands of beads were being produced in European glass factories. Wherever Europeans went, a variety of beads went with them as trade media. A bead meeting the specifications given above is frequently and specifically singled out in studies of African trade beads. It appears in Africa around the turn of the nineteenth century. In fact, the white rim, blue color, and hexagonal shape combination describe the "ambassador bead." The name comes from the belief that it was used as a "passport for bearers of messages between tribal chiefs" (Sleen 1969:40, Fig. 5, No. 12). A similar notion appears independently; this time the blue hexagonal is said to have played a role in native alliances that stretched from the west to the east coast of Africa (Laidler 1937:35-36). In still a third source, the blue hexagonal is connected with the purchase of slaves in the period beginning 1800 (Schofield 1938:353).

There are other ways to account for the presence of a bead in the slave cabin. For example, a European may have traded with an American Indian; the Indian, in turn, could have passed on the bead to a slave. Possibilities can be multiplied; more complex trade networks can be introduced. The first possibility is intriguing, direct, and simple.

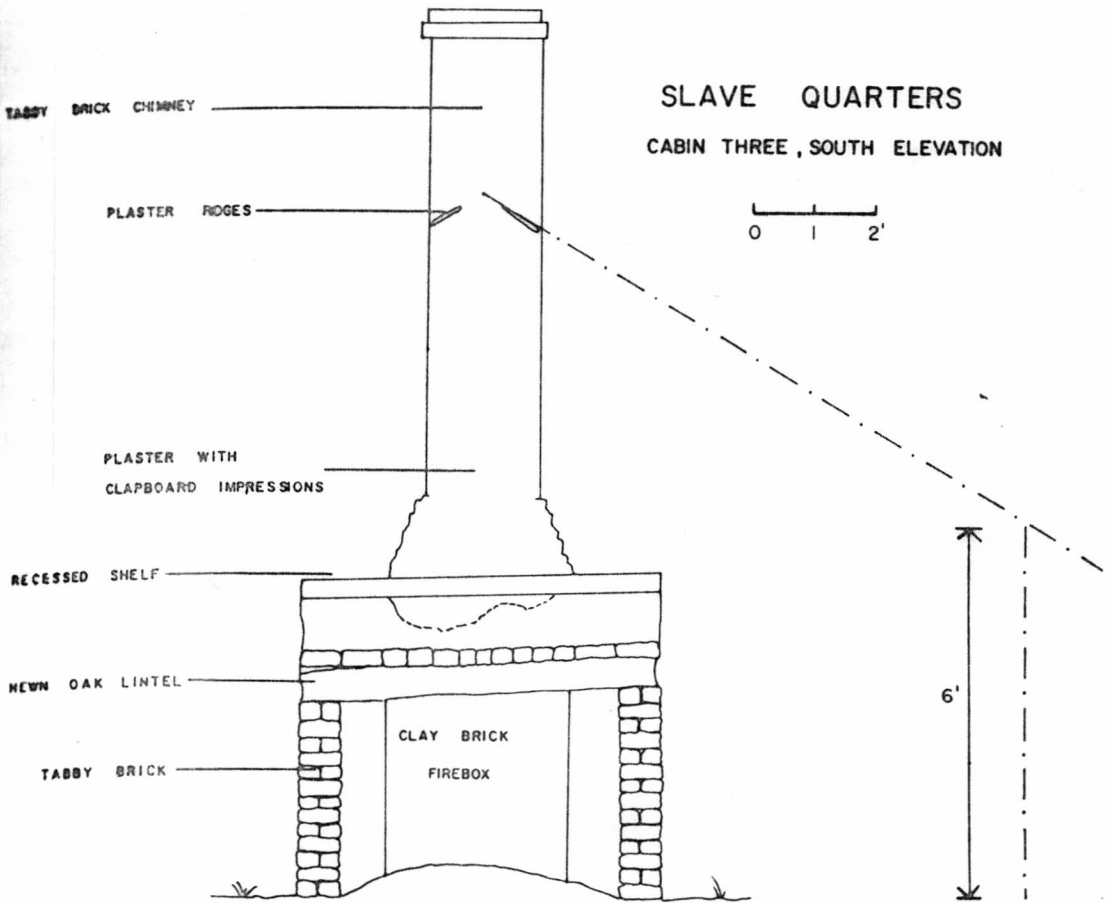


FIGURE 6. Reconstruction of the dimensions of the excavated cabin using the leaning chimney as a guide.

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A water pail, a boiling pot, and a few gourds made up the furniture. When the corn had been ground in a hand-mill, and then boiled, the pot was swung from the fire and the children squatted around it, with oyster shells for spoons. (Smith 1882:8)

The space inside the cabin served as a combination kitchen, bedroom, and living room. Activities such as sleeping, eating, or just being, leave very different tangible remains. One expects to find more evidence for kitchen activities than for anything else people were doing. This expectation is born out in the excavated materials (Fig. 8).

For holding liquids: The people in the cabin had pieces of bottles, tumblers, cups and other kinds of containers. From slivers of glass, we can reconstruct parts of two dark green bottles (cf. McKearin 1941:428). Other

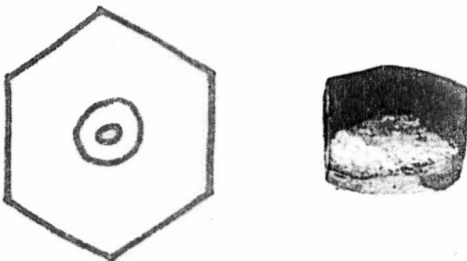


FIGURE 7. Blue, hexagonal, faceted, bead. (Approximate real dimensions: .25, length and diameter.)