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Excavations reveal how Lees' slaves lived

BY CLINT SCHEMMER / THE FREE LANCE-STAR



Stratford Hall's mansion, all 10,000 bricks' worth, is one the most impressive Colonial houses in America.

The plantation's principal family—the Lees—are the stuff of many books, articles, television programs, movies and documentaries.

The people who built the place, not so much.

Filling that void in public understanding is what University of Mary Washington archaeologist Douglas Sanford and his students are all about.

Every summer since 1993, during five-week field schools at the historic site in Virginia's Northern Neck, they have strived to puzzle out how the enslaved workers of the Lees and the property's other landowners lived.

"Their story had not been told. They were the under-documented, or undocumented, people," Sanford said, explaining the school's recent focus on African-American research. "That was very meaningful to me, and includes questions of how slavery still resonates in our society today."

The field school just ended its 20th—and final—season at Stratford, with Dr. Sanford—a veteran faculty member at UMW's Center for Historic Preservation. Years of effort by him and by his students have illuminated how the Lees' slaves lived, showing that their existence was more complicated than people had presumed.

Few contemporary documents about the Lee plantation survive.

"Knowledge of slave life at Stratford is even harder to come by," said Judy Hynson, the site's director of research and library collections.

All across the sprawling Westmoreland County site, archaeology is crucial to determining what structures stood where, what activities took place when and how people interacted on what was a 5,000-acre estate in Colonial times.

"With a lack of extensive documentary evidence, a lot of Stratford's history is underground," said Paul Reber, executive director of the Robert E. Lee Memorial Foundation. "The Stratford-UMW collaboration has enabled us to document a lot of this history, learn more about everyday life at Stratford Hall and evolution of the 18th-century landscape. We are especially grateful for Doug Sanford's over 20 years of work and dedication to this partnership."

BEGINNINGS

At first, the UMW field school's job was to sample sites around the great house, examining issues of its landscape, Sanford said.

"Everywhere we go here, we make new discoveries. ... What was there? How did that part of plantation function, and change over time? It's been our mission to figure that out, for our own archaeological purposes and for Stratford's research and interpretive value."

In the 1970s, a state survey sampled many of the archaeological sites the property holds. And when modern structures were built or changed, "salvage" digs occurred.

But the UMW field school accomplished the most extensive and sustained archaeology to take place at Stratford. In recent years, the school—and a follow-on, five-week session featuring its top graduates—has focused on what it calls the Oval Site, which borders the huge oval drive in front of the great house.

The tree-lined drive was created during the Colonial Revival era, when preservationists saved Stratford from ruin, using then-current ideas of how visitors approached the Lee mansion.

Turns out, that area held an agricultural operation tended by an overseer and his enslaved workers.

After the American Revolution, the Lees demolished its buildings as they reorganized the plantation. Only a few families had the labor force to accomplish work of such magnitude—to remove buildings, move many cartloads of dirt, level the area, and start plowing it, Sanford said.

The Lees had a larger design in mind for economic and aesthetic reasons, he said. They retooled from cultivating tobacco to harvesting wheat and grinding it at a water-powered mill (still on the site, rebuilt in 1939).

Bit by painstaking bit, the archaeologists have found artifacts and postholes from at least four "earthfast" or post-in-ground buildings at the Oval Site, not far from the foundation's headquarters.

"It's been great," said University of Tennessee doctoral candidate Andrew Wilkins, the field school's day-to-day boss. "The site has kept growing as we found new buildings. So it's been something new every season or two."

The complex was probably the home of the head overseer, the plantation's steward or manager, Sanford said.

Early on, the rise atop which it sits was quarried for clay and sand for Stratford's extensive brick-making, to construct buildings elsewhere. The land was occupied about 1740, for 50 or 60 years, then put to the plow and farmed into the 1930s.

The archaeologists' years of labor have revealed that the overseer's house had an expensive addition, an unusually substantial structure with brick walls and a plastered interior, and a head-height, brick-lined basement.

It's a rare and promising find.

Wilkins, who has worked the site each summer since his first field season there in 2005, made it the focus of his master's thesis at the University of Massachusetts and his forthcoming Ph.D. dissertation.

Nationally, only six or seven studies on such archaeological sites have been done, he said.

"Scholars are more drawn to the big comparisons between the owners and the owned, the people calling the shots and people at the lower end of society, than a group caught in the middle," Wilkins said.

Stereotyped as transient and largely ignored by academics, overseers were only found on larger plantations with 20, 50 to 100 slaves, Sanford and Wilkins said.

At the time of the Revolution, the Lees had nearly 100 enslaved people.

It is extraordinarily rare for things that 18th-century slaves used or wore to survive above-ground, said Martha Katz-Hyman, a curator with the Jamestown-Yorktown Foundation in Williamsburg who has studied Stratford Hall. That's why archaeology is so important to interpreting their lives, she said.

Hynson noted that the overseer's complex would have been seen by visitors before they could even get a glimpse of the Lees' home.

"Our idea of what the view from the main house was like has been completely altered since the excavations began in 2001 at the Oval Site," she said. "We now know that the current pristine vista from the main house looking south would have been cluttered with not-so-beautiful structures and domestic activities in the mid-18th century.

"The past field-school season produced some fascinating discoveries—the cellars in both quarters occupied by enslaved laborers have similar uniquely hollowed-out ends, possibly for stashing personal possessions," she added.

The ongoing research by Wilkins and other field-school veterans heartens Sanford, who trained each student in archaeological theory, methods and interpretation.

"One of my favorite parts of the program here is to see students use the field school as a stepping stone for graduate school and careers in archaeology and, in a number of cases, their later studies," he said.

UMW's field school at Stratford may be at a close, but years of laboratory analysis and further study are yet to be done, Sanford said.

FUTURE ARCHAEOLOGY

"The end of these field schools is not the end of our archaeology program," Reber said. "We plan to conduct a major excavation of the West Yard in the coming years, and look forward to working with UMW on the cataloging of the thousands of artifacts discovered during their work at Stratford Hall."

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