

**ARCHAEOLOGICAL  
PERSPECTIVES ON  
ETHNICITY  
IN AMERICA**

Afro-American and Asian American  
Culture History

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## CHAPTER 1

# Race and Class on Antebellum Plantations

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For several decades, archaeologists who have excavated sites in complex societies have confronted the same problem: How are status differences reflected in the archaeological remains? Traditionally archaeologists have routinely inferred the status of site inhabitants from the quality and quantity of archaeological evidence, even though the true status of the inhabitants was unknown (e.g., Trigger in Chang 1968). Many archaeologists have assumed that there was a perfect correlation between the archaeological remains they found and the status of the former site inhabitants. They assumed that high status was always associated with higher quality and quantities of housing, possessions, and foods; in turn, they assumed that low status was always associated with lower quality and quantities of material rewards.

In complex societies, however, there are a great variety of status differences which may produce patterning in the archaeological record. In addition to age and sex differences, there are racial, ethnic, linguistic, occupational, legal, and political differences. These various status positions are ranked in hierarchies and have differing access to symbolic and material rewards. These rewards include power or the legal right to coerce others; psychic rewards such as prestige, dignity, security, and a sense of independence, and property or access to material wealth and labor (Tumin 1967: 39-46; Warner in Tumin 1970: 233, 241). Evidence of these symbolic and material rewards may be difficult to recover at archaeological sites. The symbolic rewards such as power and prestige, which may have been of equal or greater concern to site inhabitants than material rewards, will be lost or only partially described in the incomplete written record. In turn, since so much of material culture is perishable, material rewards such as housing, possessions, and foods will be only partially preserved in the incomplete written record.

Furthermore, status positions and access to material rewards are not perfectly associated in complex societies (Laumann and others, eds., 1970: 63-65). Frequently, people occupy relatively high status positions which have only symbolic rewards or material rewards that are not commensurate with their standing. Conversely, other people occupy relatively low positions but accumulate material rewards that are not commensurate with their true status. Given this imperfect association between status and material rewards, the material conditions in which former site inhabitants lived may not always reflect their actual status positions. It is even possible that the archaeological remains from many sites will not reflect any status patterning.

In Old South society (1789-1861), for example, access to power, prestige, and material rewards was not perfectly associated with status. Not infrequently, there were similarities in the daily living conditions of many Old South whites and blacks despite differences in racial, legal, and social status. In a classic article, Avery Craven outlined the basic similarities in the housing, food, clothing, daily tasks, and recreation of white yeoman farmers, poorer whites, and black slaves (Craven 1930: 16-18). Though free Southern whites had higher racial and legal status than black slaves, their higher status was not always associated with superior material rewards. In fact, many black slaves may have had better housing, possessions, and foods than some of the poorer whites (Genovese 1974: 24, 63, 533). Consequently, archaeologists who are excavating antebellum Southern sites cannot always accurately infer the status of former site inhabitants from the archaeological remains of their living conditions—the quality and quantity of housing, artifacts, and food remains. Given our present limited knowledge of Old South sites, archaeologists should attempt to identify the true status of former site inhabitants rather than simply inferring status from the archaeological remains.

Fortunately, historical archaeologists usually have an independent set of data—written documents and oral testimony—which can be used to identify the true racial, legal, and social status of the people who occupied the houses, used the artifacts, and ate the foods that appear at antebellum archaeological sites. With documentary controls, correlations can be established between the status of the site inhabitants and the archaeological remains they left behind.

At Old South plantations, for example, the true identity and status of the inhabitants can often be established from documents. Frequently, representatives of the three major social groups of the Old South—white planters, black slaves, and white overseers, who were usually the sons of middle class farmers—could be found living on the same plantation (Wall in Link and Patrick 1965: 177; Bonner in Link and Patrick 1965: 158). After identifying the dwelling sites of the plantation inhabitants, the dwellings and associated features can be dated with documents and artifacts to ensure that the archaeological evidence from the sites dates to the same period in time. With documentary and chronological controls, differences in housing, artifacts, and food remains at plantation

dwelling sites can be explained by differences in known status during the same period in time. Since the inhabitants differed in racial and social status, the archaeological evidence can be used to test hypotheses about status differences and their reflection in the archaeological record.

Such a situation existed at Cannon's Point Plantation, St. Simons Island, Georgia (Figure 1), a long-staple cotton plantation where documents attested to the presence of black slaves, white overseers, and a white planter family—the Coupers, who owned Cannon's Point from 1793-1866. The dwelling sites

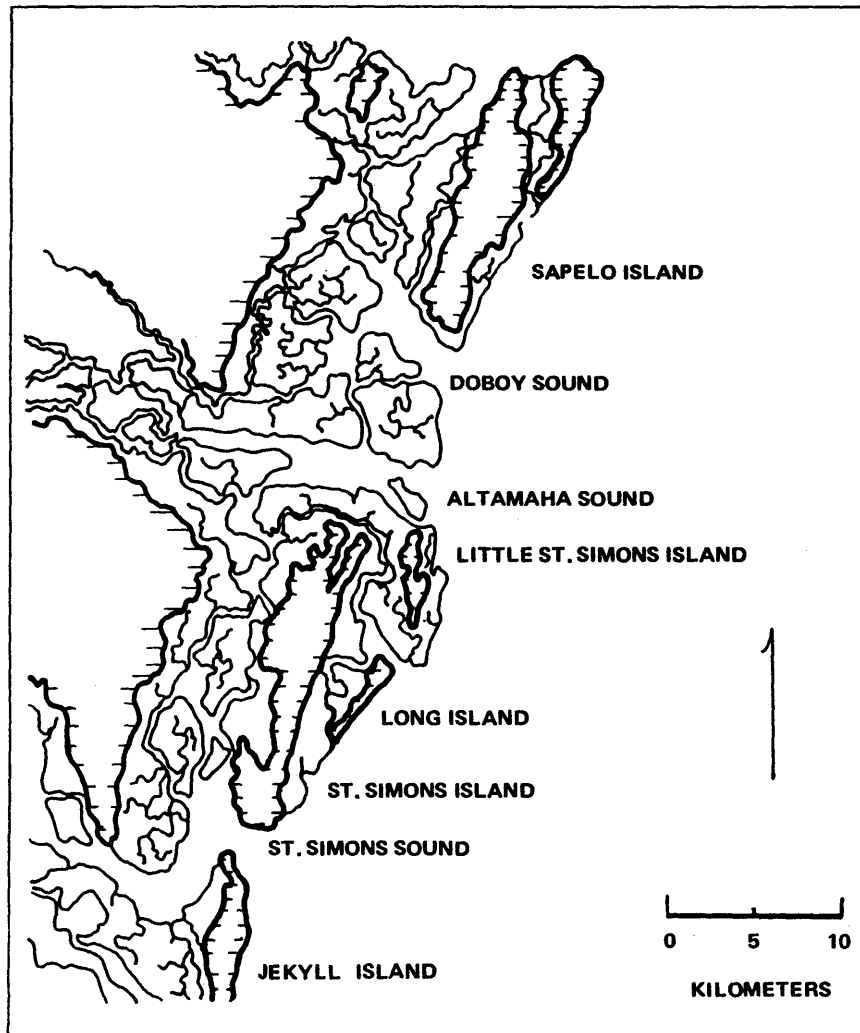


Figure 1. Sea Islands Off the Coast of Georgia

occupied by slaves, overseers, and planters were identified from documents as well as analogies with the settlement patterns of other coastal cotton plantations.

At Cannon's Point, the planter's house was located on the banks of a tidal river, and it was surrounded by the cotton houses and storehouses. The northern set of four single slave cabins was located near the planter's complex; in turn, another set of four duplex slave cabins was located at the southern end of the plantation. The overseers' house was placed in a central location, so the overseers could police both slave quarters. (Figure 2).

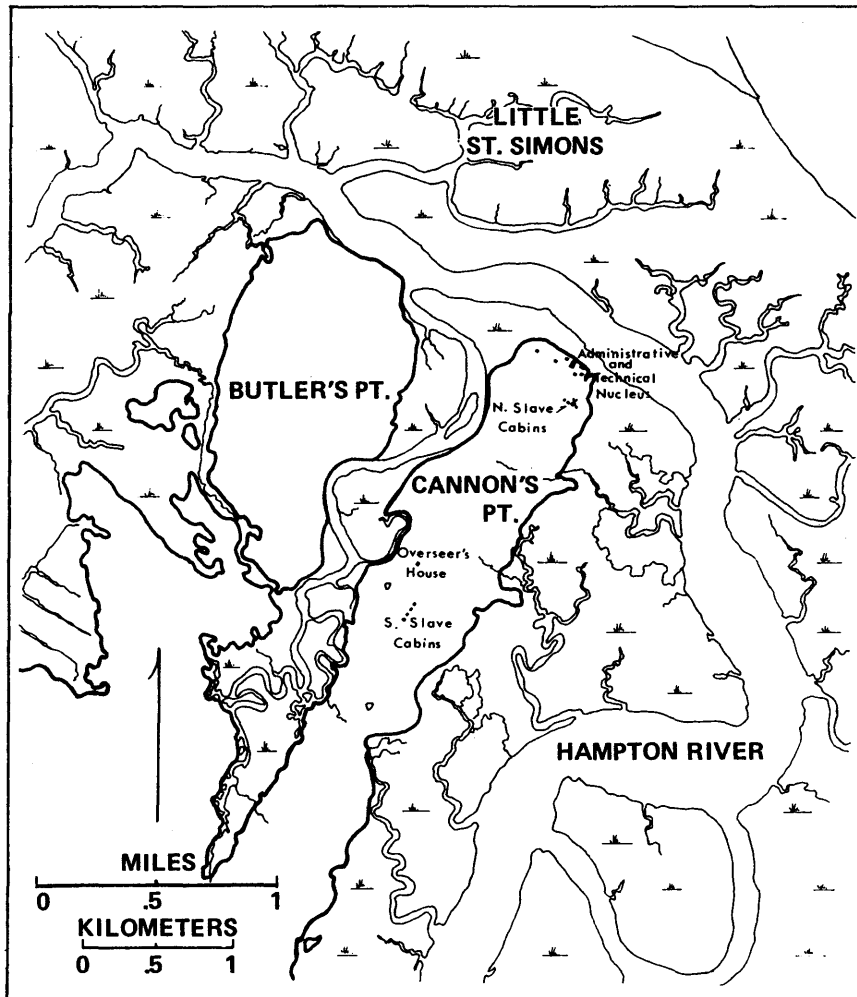


Figure 2. Settlement Pattern of the Cannon's Point Plantation, St. Simons Island, Georgia

These ruined dwellings and the refuse middens in their "backyards" appeared to be relatively undisturbed. As Charles Fairbanks noted in a paper presented at the Society for Historical Archaeology meeting in 1972, the "backyards" of historic sites, especially the refuse disposal areas, contained much of the data that archaeologists needed to test explanatory hypotheses about cultural processes, (Fairbanks MS; Fairbanks 1976: 165). To test our hypotheses about status differences and the archaeological record, the Cannon's Point excavations focused on the refuse areas associated with dwellings once occupied by planters, overseers, and slaves (Fairbanks 1976: 171).

At the planter's site, we mapped the standing ruins, conducted test excavations inside the ruins, and sampled the refuse midden associated with the planter's kitchen. In turn, we cleared and mapped the overseers' house ruins and sampled the associated refuse midden. And at the third slave cabin in the northern slave quarters, we excavated a one room cabin and sampled its associated refuse midden (Figure 2). From documents, we knew the dwellings had been constructed during the antebellum years (US Coast Survey 1869). In addition, the excavations yielded antebellum refuse contexts at all three sites. Three refuse zones in the planter's kitchen midden contained no artifacts whose beginning date of manufacture was later than 1860; the ceramics from these zones provided mean ceramic dates of ca. 1815, 1818, and 1824. Two refuse zones in the overseers' house midden contained only antebellum artifacts; the ceramics in these zones dated to ca. 1821. Finally, a refuse zone in the slave cabin midden, which contained only antebellum artifacts, yielded a mean ceramic date of ca. 1817 (Otto in South 1977: 92, Appendix A).

With chronological controls, it was possible to compare ruins, artifacts, and food remains which dated to the antebellum occupation of the plantation (1793-1861). And with documentary controls, it was possible to establish the true identity and status of the plantation inhabitants. Since status and chronology were held as constants, the differences and similarities in the archaeological remains at all three sites could be explained by differences and similarities in known status (South 1972: 100).

In addition to differing in known status, the Cannon's Point inhabitants are known to have had differing access to the plantation surplus—the cash crops, the food crops, and the livestock produced on the plantation, or their equivalent value in cash. The Couper family who owned and managed their estate monopolized the surplus: they sold crops on the market; they reinvested the profits; or they spent considerable sums on household necessities and luxuries. Although the slaves produced the plantation crops under the supervision of the hired overseers, the slaves and overseers had only limited access to the plantation surplus. In return for their labor, the slaves only received rations of food and textiles, gifts of some household articles, and the use of cabins. In return for long hours of field supervision, the overseers only received the use of a house and yearly incomes ranging from \$200 to \$400. Using credit on their incomes,

the overseers had to buy their own food, clothing, and many of their household utensils (Couper 1826-52; Couper 1839-54; Wolf 1959: 136-138).

The lower status of the slaves and overseers and their limited access to the plantation surplus may have been reflected in the archaeological remains of their housing, possessions, and foods. Nevertheless, the archaeological remains could have reflected several kinds of known status.

First, the people who lived on Cannon's Point Plantation differed in racial and legal status. The inhabitants included free whites as well as black slaves.

**Racial/Legal Status**

- Planters and Overseers — Free Whites
- Slaves — Unfree Blacks

Since the planters and overseers were both members of the free white caste, then qualitative and quantitative similarities may have appeared in the housing, artifacts, and foods at the planter and overseer sites. If so, the archaeological remains at these sites would reflect the racial/legal similarities existing between the free white planters and overseers.

Second, the plantation inhabitants differed in social or occupational status. The planters were managers, the overseers were field supervisors, and most of the slaves were agricultural workers.

**Social Status**

- Planters — Managers
- Overseers — Supervisors
- Slaves — Workers

If qualitative and quantitative differences appeared in the archaeological remains at the three sites, then the archaeological remains would reflect the social differences existing among the plantation inhabitants.

Third, it was possible that the elite planter family regarded both hired overseers and slaves as subordinates.

**Elite/Subordinate Status**

- Planters — Elite
- Owners and Slaves — Subordinates

Overseers were held in low esteem by their planter employers; and overseers had little job security or dignity despite the valuable services they performed on

plantations (Scarborough 1964). Most overseers at Cannon's Point lasted only a year or two before they were fired. Furthermore, they received only a few hundred dollars in exchange for their services (Couper 1839-54). Despite their supervisory roles and their middle class farming backgrounds (Scarborough 1966: 5), overseers' material living conditions may have approximated those of the slaves. If qualitative and quantitative similarities appeared in the archaeological remains at the slave and overseer sites, then the archaeological remains would reflect the subordinate status of both slaves and overseers.

The comparison of the antebellum housing, artifacts, and foods at the Cannon's Point Plantation revealed that the archaeological record reflected all three kinds of status differences.

The housing of the plantation inhabitants generally reflected racial/legal status differences. In terms of construction materials and techniques, expected durability, living space, and conveniences, the large, well-built overseers' house more closely resembled the planters' luxurious house than the small one-room slave cabin. The overseers' house may have been a visible symbol of white racial solidarity for the benefit of the dozens of black slaves living on the plantation.

The artifacts at the plantation sites, however, reflected all three kinds of status.<sup>1</sup> As an example, the liquor bottles from the sites reflected racial/legal status. Fragments of case bottles, which commonly held gin, were relatively more common in the white planter (17%) and overseer (10%) antebellum refuse than in the black slave refuse (4%). Also, fragments of dark olive-green bottles, which commonly held ale, porter, cider, and wines, were relatively more common in the slave antebellum refuse (84%) than in the overseer (74%) and planter (73%) refuse. In turn, the ceramic forms from the plantation sites reflected social status. At the planters' kitchen, transfer-printed plates, soup-plates, and platters composed 62 per cent of the identifiable tableware forms. At the overseers' house, transfer-printed serving flatware composed about 28 per cent of the tableware forms. And at the slave cabin, transfer-printed serving flatware composed only 19 per cent of the tableware forms (Otto in South 1977: Table 5.6). Finally, the ceramic types reflected subordinate and elite differences. At the slave and overseer sites, blue transfer-printed pearlware and whiteware composed about 21 per cent and 14 per cent of the total sherds from the antebellum refuse. But at the planter's kitchen, blue transfer-printed pearlware and whiteware composed 77 per cent of the total antebellum sherds (Otto in South 1977: Table 5.1).

The food remains from the plantation sites reflected both racial/legal and elite/subordinate status. The black slaves, for example, were more dependent on wild animals to supplement their diet than either the white overseers or planters. Converting the bone weights of identifiable food animals to their equivalent edible meat weights revealed that wild animals composed 45 per cent of the slave meat diet. In contrast, wild animal meat composed less than 40 per cent of the



estimated overseer and planter meat diets. Nevertheless, both slaves and overseers ate the same limited range of wild animals. There were only twenty-four and twenty-two genera and species of wild mammals, fish, and turtles in the slave and overseer refuse. Conversely, there were thirty-five genera and species of wild animals in the planter's refuse. The distribution of wild animal taxa at the plantation sites clearly reflected subordinate and elite status differences.

The planter family could appoint several slaves to hunt and fish to supply the planter's table with game and seafood. The planter's slave hunters and fishermen had time to visit the outlying habitats. They frequently fished in the sounds and the landward marshes, and they hunted on the barrier islands, collecting a wide variety of the available animal species. The slaves and overseers, however, had to collect their own food during their leisure hours. Since they were only part-time food collectors, they hunted and trapped in the forests on Cannon's Point; and they fished in the tidal creeks surrounding the plantation. As a result, they collected a more limited variety of game, fish, turtles.

Not only did the slaves and overseers have limited time for food collecting, but they also had limited time for food preparation and a limited variety of cooking utensils. Given this situation, the slaves and overseers may have combined their grains, meats, and vegetables in "seemingly incongruous mixtures" in iron cooking pots, forming pottages, rice porrings, and stews. These one-pot meals could be left simmering for hours, while the slaves and overseers engaged in other work (Booth 1971: 17; Hilliard 1972: 49, 62). One ex-slave from South Carolina described such a meal: "The whole [stew] had been boiled . . . until the flesh had disappeared from the bones, which were broken in small pieces—a flitch of bacon, some green corn, squashes, tomatoes, and onions had been added. . . ." (Ball 1859: 139).

The zooarchaeological and archaeological evidence from Cannon's Point indicated the slaves and overseers often ate such one pot meals. To obtain more nourishment from their limited meat, the slaves and overseers cleaved open the bones and stewed them with the meat, vegetables, and grains. No saw marks were present on the bones in the slave and overseer antebellum refuse; apparently, the meat was not divided up into regular cuts and joints for roasting. Rather, there were axe and knife marks on the broken large mammal bones, which had been cooked up in stews.

The slaves and overseers served up their liquid-based food, with its "spoon meat," in banded ware serving bowls; and they sopped up the pot liquor with bread made from cornmeal and rice flour, which was baked in the hearths. At the slave and overseer sites, banded ware serving bowls were relatively common, composing 29 per cent and 17 per cent of the ceramic forms (Otto in South 1977: 103-104, Table 5.6).

But at the planter's kitchen, banded ware bowl forms were very rare, composing only 6 per cent of the ceramic forms. Also, relatively few bones had been cleaved open; instead, saw marks were present on the scapulae, ribs, and vertebrae

of large mammals, indicating the carcasses had been carefully butchered to produce roasts for the planter's table. In the planter's dining room, the roast meats were served on transfer-printed platters, following the first course of seafood-and meat-based soups served in tureens. The planter family ate these foods from transfer-printed plates and soup-plates rather than serving bowls (Otto in South 1977: 104-105, Table 5.6). Therefore, the food preparation and consumption habits of the plantation inhabitants reflected elite and subordinate status, since the food habits of the planter family differed markedly from those of the slaves and overseers.

The controlled comparison of the food remains, artifacts, and housing from Cannon's Point sites demonstrated that archaeologists cannot always accurately infer the status of former site inhabitants from the quality and quantity of archaeological remains. At Cannon's Point, certain kinds of archaeological evidence reflected certain kinds of status; and some categories of archaeological evidence did not reflect any status patterning. In complex societies such as the Old South, the problem of status patterning at archaeological sites becomes highly complex.

Rather than speculating about the status of site inhabitants, archaeologists should attempt to identify the true status of the site inhabitants by using documents, oral testimony, or other means. Then, by holding status as a known constant, it should be possible to explain differences and similarities in the archaeological record by referring to known status. With documentary controls, we can demonstrate how differences in known status produce patterning in the archaeological record. To quote Garry Wheeler Stone: "The occupation, wealth, social status, and ethnic background of a household is of the same class of information as the statistical distribution of their archaeologically recovered trash." (Stone 1970: 126)

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The differences in the frequencies of artifact types were tested with the chi-square statistic to determine significance.

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