

1999

Book Review: Hidden Lives: The Archaeology of Slave Life at Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, by Barbara J. Heath

Larry McKee

Follow this and additional works at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha>



Part of the [Archaeological Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

McKee, Larry (1999) "Book Review: Hidden Lives: The Archaeology of Slave Life at Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest, by Barbara J. Heath," *Northeast Historical Archaeology*: Vol. 28 28, Article 12.

<https://doi.org/10.22191/neha/vol28/iss1/12> Available at: <http://orb.binghamton.edu/neha/vol28/iss1/12>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). It has been accepted for inclusion in Northeast Historical Archaeology by an authorized editor of The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB). For more information, please contact ORB@binghamton.edu.

portion of household diet, declined in consumption amongst black Annapolitans after 1870. Mullins argues that this dietary shift was one way in which African Americans who aspired to gentility struggled to attain the status and privileges of whites presumed to be exclusive to them.

In the end, Mullins argues that by participating in consumer culture blacks weren't attempting to emulate whites, but were instead seeking self-determination and the subjugation of racism. As the tactics to do so varied, so too did the potential to dismantle structural inequalities. Mullins makes it clear that it was never simply a matter of black "resistance" to white dominance. In fact, a number of consumption practices empowered black Annapolitans, while at the same time served to undermine their efforts to combat imposed racial subjectivities and racial oppression. He succeeds in presenting the complexities of lived experiences, underscoring the need for more archaeological scholarship to consider how individuals were able to influence larger societal change through localized political action.

Mullins's book is richly historical, and diligently researched. Some readers may bemoan the fact that the archaeological evidence does not play as central a role as the historical record here. This reader did not, for this book delivers on a number of important points. One is that Mullins successfully manages to soundly critique some of historical archaeology's most flawed theoretical baggage by showing us a far more productive and meaningful way to approach consumerism and material culture. More importantly, Mullins has demonstrated how archaeological and ethnohistorical scholarship can help to demystify the social construction of race and the role of racial ideology in American society.

Maria Franklin holds joint appointments in the Department of Anthropology and the Center for African and African-American Studies at the University of Texas-Austin. She is also a Senior Research Fellow in the Department of Archaeological Research with The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, Virginia. Her cur-

rent book project considers the intersection of race, gender, and culture in the emergence and transformation of Afro-Virginian identity during the 18th century.

Maria Franklin
Department of Anthropology
E.P.S. 1.130
University of Texas
Austin, TX 78712-1086
mfranklin@mail.utexas.edu

HIDDEN LIVES: THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF SLAVE LIFE AT THOMAS JEFFERSON'S POPLAR FOREST, by Barbara J. Heath 1999, University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville. 81 pages, illus., \$12.50 (paper).

Poplar Forest was one of Thomas Jefferson's secondary holdings in central Virginia, located in Bedford County approximately 90 miles southwest of his main seat at Monticello, near Charlottesville. Throughout the heart of his active public life he grew tobacco and, later, corn on the property, making use of the labor of 50 or so African-Americans enslaved by him at the site. In 1806, looking toward his retirement years, he designed and began construction of a fine brick mansion on the property. The house was intended for use as a country retreat or vacation home for himself when, for whatever reason, he needed a respite from Monticello. The property is now a private museum dedicated to presenting Jefferson's years of ownership and occasional residence. The museum's administration has made use of archaeology as a tool of research, preservation, and interpretation since 1989.

The author of *Hidden Lives*, Barbara Heath, has had a long commitment to the archaeology of slave life in Virginia. In her decade or so of service as the Director of Archaeology at Poplar Forest, she has developed a strong program of research and public presentation of her results. Her success is especially admirable given that this is a fairly small and certainly out-of-the-way site, where funding concerns have no doubt always been a large part of the struggle. Heath and other members of her

research team have delivered regular progress reports on findings and interpretations at conferences over the last decade. Based on this record, one would expect that *Hidden Lives* would be a synthesis and technical exposition of the program's research accomplishments. The book does not fulfill that role, and it is clear Heath did not intend it to do so.

The book's format is a good clue to Heath's intentions. It is a surprisingly slim paperback volume, roughly the size of a weekly news magazine, with an eye-catching, brightly colored cover showing overlapping images of American slave life and hand-written text taken from 18th- and 19th-century documents. The text portion of the book runs 67 pages, set double-spaced with broad margins. The introductory and concluding chapters each run three pages. The large number of figures, 38 in all, means that seldom is a reader confronted with a two-page span of text without some kind of graphic embellishment.

Given its format, it is best to see the publication as not a final synthesis of a decade of intense research but as a broad introduction to the topic of slavery, the archaeology of slavery, and its particular manifestation at Poplar Forest. Its intended audience is more likely site visitors who want to know more about what they have seen at Poplar Forest, or who want to take back a present for some particularly bright and bookish young student in their lives. Heath's professional colleagues with an interest in a deeper examination of her work will do better to look to what she has and will publish elsewhere.

As a popular introduction to slave life and archaeological research on the topic, Heath's book successfully covers all the bases. She provides a smooth presentation of the "active" view of slave life, in which individuals caged within the rigid structure of Anglo-American slavery "struggled to maintain some control over their lives" (p. 12). She has excellent albeit summary sections on family life, health and healing, and the details of the annual agricultural work cycle. The approach and presentation carries no surprises for anyone familiar with recent scholarship on slavery, but will be enlightening to others still holding on to the notion of slaves as utterly defeated, passively carrying out their masters' will. Within her

summary of plantation social structure, Heath has an especially strong passage on the role of kinship as a stabilizing element in the community (p. 15).

Heath's summary statements on slavery gain weight with connection to one time and place, and by her use of Jefferson's detailed personal records on the operation. Heath is able to use many names, and even, in the case of one member of the Hemmings family, some of the writings of those enslaved at Poplar Forest in sketching out what it was like to be a slave at this operation. Jefferson's description of agricultural processes, especially on wheat harvesting, are put to full use here as well. Jefferson writes about his plan to use slave labor within this harvesting system as a way to create a "machine in equilibrio," and Heath presents this as an apt metaphor for his overall vision of how plantation slavery should work.

Heath provides the commonly employed division in the text between field finds and subsequent artifact studies. The description and discussion of the artifact assemblage will be enlightening to newcomers to the topic, and in some cases she brings fresh insights to familiar evidence. In particular, her linkage of recovered locks to the often-frustrated desire for privacy within the slave community is a somewhat novel way to see and interpret these finds. In other cases she misses opportunities to show how archaeological evidence and an archaeological perspective can supplement and enhance the other sources on slave life. In this regard, a more thorough examination of the processes and results of her soil chemistry studies, her important examination of account book records of slave purchases, and the intriguing presence of stone pipe bowl manufacturing would have been welcome. Her readers would also have benefited from some consideration of how her research accomplishments have been used in presenting the story of Poplar Forest to site visitors, and how people have reacted to this new information.

The profuse figures are a well-selected mix of artifact and field excavation shots, contemporary illustrations of slave life, and passages of hand-written script from original documents. Several of these are inventories of Jefferson's human property, taken from one of

his Farm Books and written in his own hand. One very important image or set of images is missing—a location map or group of maps that would put the site into its proper geographic setting and relationship with Charlottesville and Monticello and other settlements and features of Virginia in the early years of the American republic.

Other things are missing as well, especially in terms of Heath's uncomplicated summary of slave life. Beyond some mention of close surveillance, there is little discussion of the systems of discipline, degradation, and misery that the enslaved residents of Poplar Forest and elsewhere always had to contend with. Heath may consider this such an essential "given" that it doesn't bear revisitation. The absence of discussion here is glaring, especially given that her intended audience will be somewhat unfamiliar with the topic.

In summary, *Hidden Lives* mostly succeeds as an attractive and interesting introduction to the archaeology of slavery at one particular place and time, geared toward a readership

coming to the topic with fresh eyes. The hope is that Heath will eventually produce the deeper and more technical exploration that the results of her intensive and long-term research at Poplar Forest deserves.

Larry McKee is a Senior Archaeologist and Senior Program Manager in the Nashville Office of TRC Garrow. After earning his doctorate in Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley in 1988, he went to work at the Hermitage, home of Andrew Jackson, where he served as Director of Archaeology until November of 1999.

Larry McKee
Branch Manager/Senior Archaeologist
TRC Garrow Associates
1865 Air Lane Drive, Suite 9
Nashville, TN 37210
mckee@trc@mindspring.com