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PLANTATION ARCHAEOLOGY AT THE HERMITAGE: SOME SUGGESTED PATTERNS

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ABSTRACT

The interpretive significance of "patterning" in the artifactual remains found on historic sites is just beginning to be understood. In this paper three hypotheses, developed during the course of an archaeological project carried out at the Hermitage, are described and discussed. Each of these is thought to have considerable potential utility for helping understand certain widespread nineteenth-century cultural practices, especially as they occurred on southern plantations.

Introduction

I briefly considered the notion that I might entitle this paper: "Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed, and Something Blue." This time-honored instructional rhyme for brides does seem to summarize the three hypotheses to be discussed. The something old, something new phrase could apply to Hypothesis 1. This concerns a widespread behavioral pattern, long known to medical historians but only recently made intelligible in the archaeological realm by a series of finds (glass vials) at the Hermitage. Hypothesis 2, concerning ceramic type distributions and plantation social categories, was borrowed from a colleague. Hypothesis 3 concerns a particular style of glass bead which seems to be predictably associated with slave activity areas, perhaps in a very special way. Its color is blue.

The Hermitage Site

The Hermitage is located in the northeast corner of Davidson County, Tennessee, on the outer fringe of present day Nashville's urban area (FIGURE 1). It was the third farm owned by Andrew Jackson in the Tennessee Central Basin. It was his home from 1804 until his death in 1845.

The Hermitage's beginnings were rather unpretentious. In 1804, it consisted of 420 acres of land and a group of log houses. However, by 1819, Jackson had started construction of his first mansion. This was a two-story brick building, first finished in 1821 and expanded in the 1830s, which today provides the focal point for visitation to the site. The site is maintained by the Ladies Hermitage Association, which was founded in 1889 and is one of the oldest such associations in the country.

The size of the Hermitage began to increase soon after its acquisition by Jackson, and during the late 1820s and 1830s it was a fully developed cotton and pig plantation, averaging over 1,000 acres in size. This ascension was in direct proportion to Jackson's own rise in fame. By 1834, during his second term as president, the Hermitage with its contiguous tracts totaled almost 2,000 acres.

After Jackson's death his adopted son, Andrew Jackson, Jr., was unable to hold the estate intact. By 1856, it had been reduced to 500 acres, and in this year it was sold to the state of Tennessee. Initially, after their formation in 1889, the Ladies Hermitage Association had control of only 25 acres around the main house. Since that time they have continued to expand the scope of their involvement, and they now own or control 625 acres of the old estate.

Summary of Archaeological Work

The first archaeological work at the Hermitage was carried out in 1970, in an effort to salvage materials being disturbed by the installation of an environmental control system beneath the mansion (Brown 1972). This resulted in the acquisition of a substantial collection of items, most of which had been lost or discarded between the 1820s and the 1880s. Though the salvage nature of the project did not permit good vertical control, the collection is still of interest for comparative purposes.

In 1974, the present writer began directing what became a three season project, sponsored by the Ladies Hermitage Association and the Tennessee American Revolution Bicentennial Commission. The first season was devoted to an exploration of the remains of what had been the main structural area of the first Hermitage (Area A, Fig. 1). The results of these tests were reported in preliminary form (Smith 1974), and it was deemed essential that at least one additional season be spent on the problem of defining the first Hermitage. Thus, work was continued here during the summer of 1975.

During both 1974 and 1975, we attempted to utilize an interdisciplinary problem-solving approach. While the final report on the first Hermitage (Smith 1976) contains the usual archaeological sections, it also contains separate sections on site history (Fred W. Brigance), zooarchaeology (Emanuel Breitburg), dendrochronology (Lynne Jordan Bowers and Dinah L. Grashot), and an independently written discussion of one artifact category, glass beads (Mary Elizabeth Good).

In the first Hermitage area we were primarily concerned with the historical and archaeological records pertaining to two restored log cabins (the West and East cabins), one cabin ruin (the North Cabin), and one cabin or house site (the South Cabin site). Briefly, it was concluded that the West Cabin, which may have been in existence for a few years before Andrew Jackson acquired the property, was used as his principal residence from 1804 until ca. 1821, and was subsequently modified to become a slave cabin. The East Cabin and the South Cabin site represent buildings essentially contemporary, i.e., probably constructed soon after 1804 and later used as slave quarters until ca. 1856. In contrast, examinations of the North Cabin (which the dendrochronology study alone indicated to have been built after 1859) did not yield any evidence that it was part of the Hermitage during the Jackson family's ownership.

In the summer of 1976, we returned to carry out a series of wide-ranging tests. The Ladies Hermitage Association is in the beginning stages of developing a new master plan for site visitation, and this will mean the development of several areas formerly used only for agricultural purposes. These areas required exploration in order to determine the least destructive way to implement this long range plan. Other tests carried out in 1976 were done for specific architectural interpretive reasons. The 1976 portion of the project is summarized as follows.

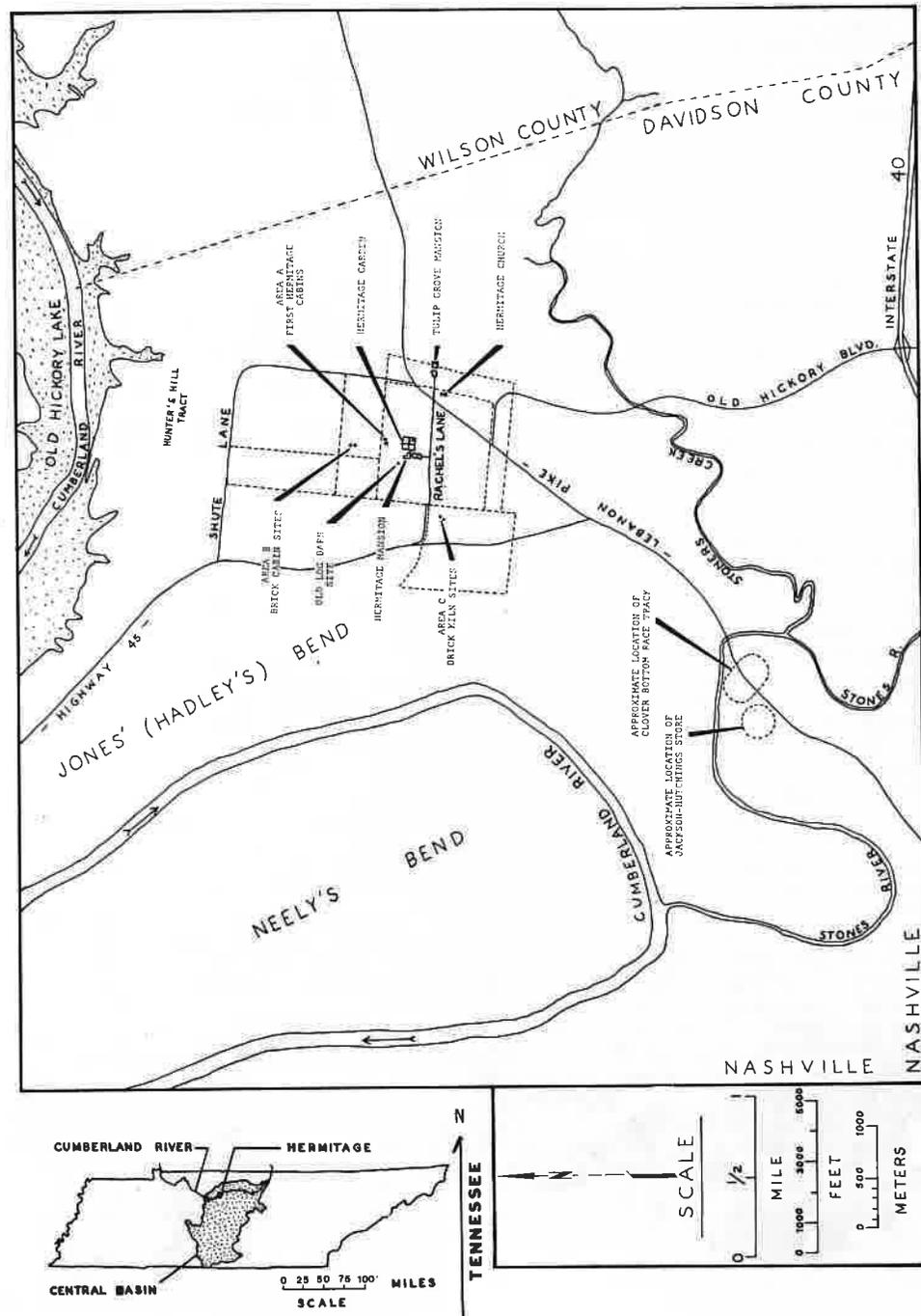


FIGURE 1. Hermitage location map, dotted lines indicate some of the tracts in the nineteenth-century estate.

Area B Brick Cabin Sites

The partial foundations and associated remains of two brick buildings are located in a tract adjacent to the north edge of the main tract (FIGURE 1). This north tract was not technically owned by Jackson until 1821, and these houses were probably built between that date and 1833, when a letter was written that seems to contain a reference to them (Bassett 1926-1933: V, p. 62). The existence of brick slave cabins on the Hermitage is documented more than once, and these are the only otherwise unaccounted-for brick building sites we have found. Interestingly enough, at least one of these (the northernmost or Cabin Site No. 1) was still standing until 1922 and housed a Black tenant family at that time. Both of them had been razed for their bricks by 1929 (Smith, et al. 1977: Part I).

Extensive plowing has disturbed both of the building sites, and only the lower course of the southernmost foundation (Cabin Site No. 2) remains. Cabin Site No. 1 is in better condition, but its earlier use is difficult to assess because of the later occupation. Our limited testing of Cabin Site No. 1 did reveal two sealed layers (under a brick floor adjacent to the outer edge of the foundation) which yielded median occupation dates, based on the South Ceramic Formula, of 1842.6 and 1837.8 (Smith, et al. 1977: Part III). To the extent that the formula is usable in this situation, Cabin Site No. 2 seems to be approximately contemporary with No. 1.

Area C Brick Kiln Sites

Available documents indicate that bricks were made on the Hermitage from perhaps as early as 1817 until possibly no later than 1840. The location of the remains of at least one brick kiln in the northeast corner of a tract adjoining the original 420-acre tract has remained known until the present (Smith, et al. 1977: Part I).

Our tests in this area (Area C, Fig. 1) revealed that there are at least two kiln sites as well as borrow pits and a probable pug mill site located here. Both of the kiln sites were partially excavated, and both were found to be very similar. However, the northernmost (Kiln Site No. 1) is by far the best preserved. Remnants of benches and exterior walls were found resting on a carefully paved rectangular brick floor, which measures approximately 34 by 47 feet. In fact, the lower portion of the structure was so well built that the term "clamp" (Heite 1970:44) hardly seems appropriate. Near the end of our test excavation, this site was shown to a long-time Nashville brick maker, Mr. John S. Herbert, and it was identified by him as being essentially the same as what was once called a "rectangular updraft" or "scove" kiln. Unlike the clamp, which was usually completely disassembled after firing, the floor and benches (lower portion of the arches) of the rectangular updraft kiln were reused from one firing to the next.

Old Barn Site

Test trenching was carried out on the site of a log barn (FIGURE 1) probably built during the Jackson era and still standing until 1929 when it was destroyed by fire. A main objective was to precisely define its former location for possible reconstruction. The artifacts recovered were diverse but heavily weighted in favor of twentieth-century barn/shop debris.

Garden Excavations

Tests were carried out at separate locations in the Hermitage garden in connection with the restoration planning for two structures: a still standing nineteenth-century brick toilet ("The Necessary") and the tomb which houses the remains of Rachel (1767-1828) and Andrew Jackson (1767-1845). The architects' restoration program is now in progress.

Pattern Recognition on Plantation Sites

Though a great deal of emphasis has been placed on the very basic problem of site interpretation, the overall goals of the Hermitage project have been varied. Aside from site specifics, some emphasis has been placed on certain broader objectives, including the development of several pattern concepts which we feel to be of potentially widespread significance.

Much of the credit for the increased awareness and recognition of patterning in the remains found on historic archaeological sites is of course attributable to Stanley South (e.g. 1974: 5 and 1976). But, in the realm of plantation archaeology, examples of clearly demonstrated patterns are rare indeed. One of the very few examples known to this writer is that suggested by John Solomon Otto (1975; also to appear in South 1977) concerning ceramics and plantation status (see Hypothesis 2 below). Yet, it seems certain that some of the patterns observable in the Hermitage artifactual remains should correlate with findings from other nineteenth-century plantation and domestic sites over much of the Southeast. The major problem, of course, is lack of comparative data.

The following are three hypotheses presented for consideration. Each was previously mentioned in the first Hermitage report (Smith 1976). However, they have all been modified on the basis of additional information obtained during the summer of 1976. That these are hypotheses should be emphasized. Much remains to be done to fully elucidate and test each of them. Additional data is needed, not only from our region, but from other parts of the Southeast and perhaps beyond.

Hypothesis 1

The 1974 excavations in the first Hermitage area produced one especially interesting find. This consisted of three small pharmaceutical vials encountered immediately outside the east foundation wall of the South Cabin site. Two of them (FIGURE 2b, c) were found standing in inverted positions but retained partial corks and traces of mercury inside, with additional mercury in the ground below their mouths. The third (FIGURE 2a) was standing almost upright and is approximately one-fourth full of mercury, with the remaining interior space filled with dirt. Evidently these had been placed (stored?) under the floor of an east side addition to the main house, and our best estimate was that they were placed here not too long before the building was torn down, ca. 1856. Presumably they relate to the period when slaves were living here.

This find was discussed at some length in the first Hermitage report (Smith 1976:171-175). Our conclusion was that the original contents of each of these vials was calomel. This is supported by an understanding of the chemical nature of calomel (mercurous chloride), by general historical information on nineteenth-century medical practices (including plantation medical practices), and by specific primary source documents concerning the use of calomel, including "vials" of calomel, at the Hermitage (used by the Jackson family, but in one instance calomel and bleeding are also specified as the accepted treatment for the Hermitage slaves). The

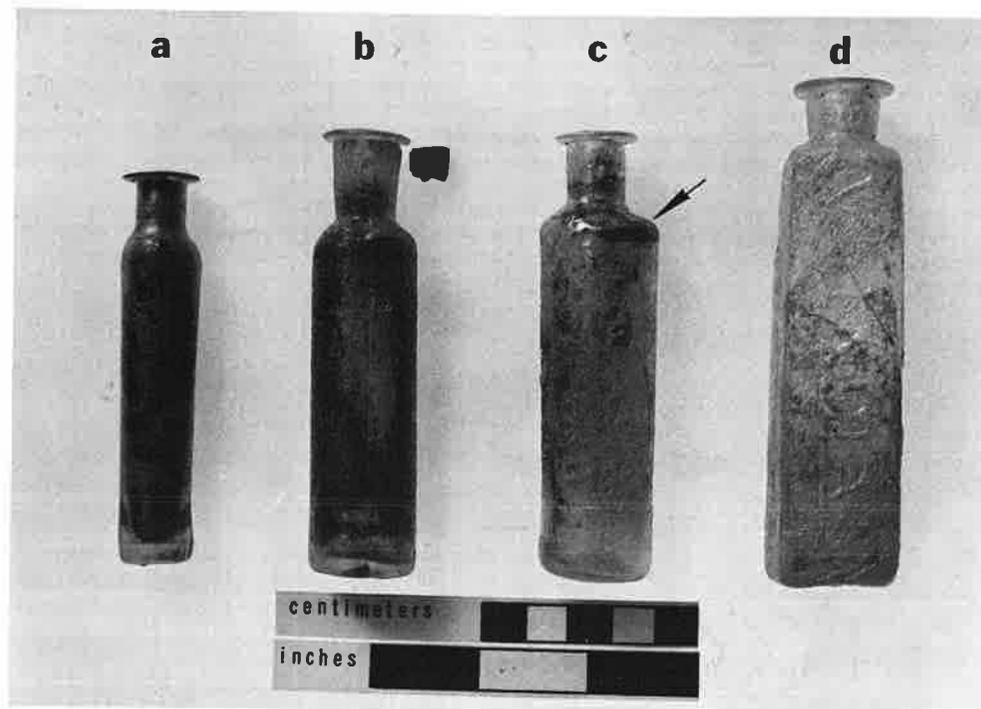


FIGURE 2. Hermitage vials (a-c from Area A; d from Area B).

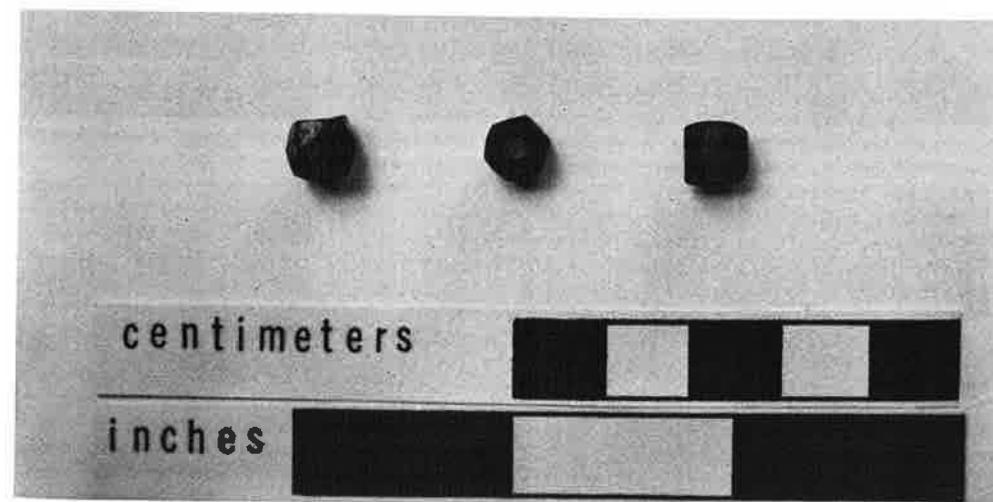


FIGURE 3. Hermitage blue, faceted beads (from Area A).

1 specimen

Munsell color value 7.5PB 4/12 over 5PB 7/8
Diaphanitic color value 7.5PB 5/12

Transparent blue bead which appears to be of compound, drawn construction. The inner layer is translucent sky blue...has an additional row of facets... wavy striations on the exterior surface...[and may be later than the others].

Concerning the associational context of these specimens it was stated that the finding of blue, faceted beads in Area A, when considered in light of the previous finds, seemed:

to confirm the previous implication that over much of the southeastern United States we can expect to find [them] in association with the household debris of slaves. With the completion of a few more studies it may become possible to accept this as an established pattern (Smith 1976:284).*

Thus, in the summer of 1976, as we began testing the two brick building sites in Area B believed to be the "brick negro houses" referred to in an 1833 letter included in the Jackson papers edited by Bassett (1926-1933: V, p. 62), we anticipated finding numerous blue, faceted beads. It soon became apparent, however, that such was not to be the case.

Approximately halfway through the testing program only two beads had been recovered, both of them small seed beads. As this was at variance with the stated hypothesis, we began fine screening in water a sizable quantity of soil from selected locations (including the Cabin Site No. 1 sealed context mentioned earlier) in hopes of improving our recovery technique. Even this yielded only a few more seed beads, so that in all six such beads were recovered from both house sites.

This can also be given as a ratio of slightly less than six beads per thousand ceramic sherds recovered. By comparison, the 52 beads from Area A (the first Hermitage) represent a ratio of 11 beads per thousand sherds and for the blue, faceted style (three types), two per thousand. Furthermore, at the Castalian Springs site (Smith 1975:89), testing of a slave cabin had suggested a ratio of 25 beads per thousand sherds, with 17 of the blue, faceted style per thousand (though the actual number was only three).

With this in mind, we felt some need to seek a possible explanation for the apparent absence of blue or any other kind of faceted beads where we had felt sure we would find them. As with any test excavation there is the problem of adequate sample. While the sample obtained from Area B is not as great as we would like, this is at least partly compensated for by the quantity of soil that was water screened. It is also possible that these were not actually slave quarters. But, all other available evidence suggests that they were.

Still another possible explanation was initially suggested to us by an 1814 letter from Andrew Jackson to his wife, concerning some slaves he was sending from Alabama. His instructions were that shelters be built for them, and "I intend putting the wives in the citchen, the husband in the field" (cited in Smith, et al. 1977: Part I). Though the Area B houses were probably not extant at this time, they are well removed from the main complex (FIGURE 1) and are in what later must have been the outlying "field" portion of the plantation. The question becomes: Could they have been used primarily as quarters for male field workers, and might this explain the absence of larger beads (our assumption being that the blue, faceted beads were worn as adornment by female slaves, whereas seed beads were used as ornamentation on various kinds of garments, beaded bags, etc.)?

* Blue, faceted beads are also common on certain historic Indian sites.

This, it was soon learned, is marginal to one of the most controversial issues concerning the history of American slavery, the question of whether or not the slave family was a truly viable social unit. While the recent work by Gutman (1976) has dispensed with many of the older myths and clearly demonstrated that it was, there are still some nagging questions concerning where slaves were actually permitted to live in any given situation. For example, many of Gutman's conclusions concerning pre-Civil War slave families are based on plantation birth registers which list parents of the child born but do not specify if these same individuals did in fact share the same house or cabin. Granted that they probably usually did, there still may have been instances when this was not the case.

One such practice is described by Gutman (1976:131-135) using the terms "cross-owner" or "broad" marriage to refer to marriage off the home plantation. This seems to have been most common when an owner was on his way to becoming a planter and was steadily increasing the number of slaves in his possession. It would also seem that this would produce a need for sex segregated housing for Blacks living on one plantation with spouses on another.

We would suspect that some such need may have existed at times at the Hermitage for, according to the list prepared by Brigrance (Smith, et al. 1977: Part I), Jackson's slave holdings increased at an almost steady rate from no more than 15 in 1804 to over 111 in 1840. While there does seem to have been a concerted effort on Jackson's part to purchase slaves in family units and to keep them together, it is still difficult to say how this was worked out in terms of housing. Unlike some southern plantations, there is no single area of the Hermitage that can be defined as the slave quarters. The slave housing areas that we can identify are rather widely dispersed. The possibility, supported by some evidence (Jackson 1819), that male field hands were shifted about between the Hermitage and other plantations that Jackson owned, should also be considered in connection with whether or not there may have been some segregation by sex in housing.

It is certainly not intended to suggest that the apparent absence of blue, faceted beads in Area B provides proof that only male slaves were housed here. At least one other possible explanation is that the wearing of such beads was related to slave social status, with field hands of either sex having less status.

What is important is that we may have discovered an interpretive tool with considerable potential utility. We still feel confident that an association between blue, faceted beads and slave cabin sites can ultimately be accepted as a normal pattern. What is further suggested is that they may have the additional potential to help identify former activity areas used mainly by individuals of one sex group or, as an alternative, activity areas used mainly by representatives of a particular slave social status group. What is most needed now is comparative data from better understood situations.

Summary

The above three hypotheses have been described in hopes of stimulating interest on the part of other investigators. They were selected for presentation because it is felt that each should have some degree of meaning on sites over a broad geographical area. It should also be apparent that because of its intricate social relationships and often diverse economic activities, the southern plantation represents a fertile field for the historical archaeologist with a concern for the patterns of material culture. Hopefully, we have only begun to explore its potential.

Notes:

1. This is a modified version of "The Hermitage Project: Some Highlights of an Interdisciplinary Approach," a presentation given at the 1976 Conference on Historic Site Archaeology in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.

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