



This late 19th-century Pearlware from England was found at the site. Photo by Susan Biddle-The Post

Archaeological dig uncovers self-sufficiency of slave families

By LINDA WHEELER
THE WASHINGTON POST

An archaeological team excavating an old James River plantation in Virginia has found evidence that some enslaved Africans partially supported their families with their own gardens and livestock and that they hunted for game and fished the river. They became part of entrepreneurial America, bartering or buying dishes, beads and children's toys.

The work of the College of William and Mary archaeologist Tom Higgins, supported by similar finds at other Virginia plantations, shatters the long-held belief that all slaves were helpless, dependent people who could do little to care for themselves.

"We know now that the people who lived here took the initiative to make their condition better," Higgins said as he walked along a soybean field where 100 or more slaves had lived on the 2,000-acre Wilton plantation east of Richmond. "They were creative. They found ways to take care of themselves under a brutal and oppressive system."

Higgins bases his conclusions on several discoveries made by a team of archaeologists that has been exploring an acre of the farmland since April. The Virginia Department of Transportation hired them to document the area, as required by law, before construction begins on a nine-mile, four-lane state road through the former plantation.

Today, Virginia officials will stand on the site of the slave quarters to announce the start of the road project, Higgins said.

Sunday, Higgins spread out a drawn-to-scale map of the area as he sat cross-legged on a new gravel road laid for the ceremony. He pointed to the location of barracks-style housing and adjoining fenced areas, appropriate for penned animals or garden crops.

Some slaves were given guns to hunt wildlife, and although Higgins found no state government permits issued to the African workers of Wilton, he did find pieces of 18th-century guns buried in the heavy clay along with animal and fish bones.

Within the boundaries of what had been large, single-room buildings dating from the 1700s, Higgins found multiple rectangular holes that had been lined with brick or wood. Similar spaces had been found at the restored Carter Grove plantation near Williamsburg and at Monticello near Charlottesville, he said.

At Wilton, he found five such spaces under what had been a slave house that burned to the ground about 1790. So sudden was the destruction that the log walls caved in, the twig and mud chimneys collapsed and the five rectangular holes were buried by the debris.

In these spaces, which some historians call root cellars or hidy-holes, Higgins found an impressive collection of things that would have been considered special to occupants of the house.

On the gravel, he spread out some of his favorite items: the metal part of an oversized hoe, two heavy clothes irons, earth-tone beads, stone marbles, a dozen common pins and a metal tumbler.

He held up a reconstructed, china chamber pot with graceful blue flowers, blackened at the top by the fire.

"If this had been trash, it would have been broken into small pieces," he said. "It would have been trampled and crushed."

Higgins's theory about the use of the underground storage areas as places to keep important, personal possessions is supported by the director of archaeology at Monticello, Fraser Neiman.

"I like to call them safe-deposit boxes," he said.

Neiman said that the "boxes" were first documented about 20 years ago and that historians have had several theories about their use. One theory holds that they were used in the practice of an African custom; another says they were places to hide items stolen from the plantation owner.

He discounts both. The "boxes" have been found only in Virginia and not in other slaveholding states. They have been found in connection with large, single-room slave quarters, but not at excavations of smaller, family-size houses.

He said people living communally needed secure places to put their possessions, such as extra food, cash or purchased items. They disappeared from use about 1800 when Virginia plantation owners built individual houses that offered a little more security for personal possessions, he said.

The opulent Wilton mansion had eight rooms paneled entirely in elaborately cut pine. The furnishings were from France and England.

The Marquis de Lafayette made Wilton his headquarters during the Revolutionary War, and George Washington was a frequent visitor. Built between 1750 and 1753, the Georgian house was home to William Randolph III, his wife Anne Carter Harrison and their eight children.

Eventually, high debts forced the sale of the plantation in 1859 to buyers outside the family. By 1932, it was used to store hay. Then the National Society of the Colonial Dames of America purchased Wilton and had it dismantled, moved and reconstructed in west Richmond as its headquarters.

It is open to the public for tours. Wilton House Museum administrator Sylvia Evans said the group would like to exhibit the artifacts found by the Higgins team as a way to acknowledge the role played by the slaves at the plantation.

"These are the silent voices of history," she said.

Academics take a look at legacy of Columbus

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

FAYETTEVILLE, Ark. — When it was made a federal holiday 30 years ago, Columbus Day was meant to celebrate the merging of two cultures. Recently, however, it has come to represent the divisions among American people.

Native Americans, for example, protest celebrating an event that led to the demise of many tribes. But the discovery of the New World also resulted in some remarkable alliances — particularly between American Indians and African slaves, say researchers at the University of Arkansas.

While slaves suffered brutal treatment, many Indian tribes teetered on the brink of extinction because of European-borne disease. The result was a peculiar interplay of flight and capture that bonded the two groups.

Michael Hoffman, professor of anthropology at the University of Arkansas, said native tribes such as the Lumbee of North Carolina, the Mashpee of Cape Cod and the Narragansett in Rhode Island harbored escaped slaves, offering them freedom from both persecution and prejudice.

"African-Americans escaped slavery in the South, one of the

areas where they could find relative freedom and egalitarian acceptance was in the Native American remnant communities scattered along the East Coast," he said. "They often ended up living with and marrying into these tribes."

Similar alliances were formed through tribal raids.

"As their populations dropped, one way Native Americans tried to replenish their numbers was through kidnapping," said Elliott West, professor of history and author of "The Contested Plains."

"Raiding neighbors and enemies for captives to integrate into their societies had been going on for a long time before the Europeans arrived, but it took on a new urgency afterwards," he said.

Though captives were forced to perform labor and initially had limited freedom, they gradually assimilated to become full and equal members of the tribe, according to West.

"Unlike slavery among the Europeans, Native Americans did not have this sort of racial categorization where Africans must remain slaves forever because they were different and inferior," West said. "They were all potential members of the society."

One of the most extensive integrations occurred between blacks and the Seminole tribe of northern Florida.

Hoffman has been helping one of his students, Norman Whitfield — a black man with Seminole ancestry — study the ethnic legacy of the alliance.

Whitfield has found a lasting cultural and biological exchange between the two groups, from the widespread use of cornmeal in African American cuisine to common themes in folklore and dance. He has traced the alliance from its origin in Spanish Florida through relocations to Oklahoma, Mexico and, finally, Texas.

When the U.S. government demanded that the tribe relinquish slaves to their "rightful masters," the Seminoles resisted.

"By that time, some of the family alliances were so intertwined that the Seminoles felt blacks were part of their society," said Whitfield, who credits this tension with starting the Seminole Wars in 1835.

"You can see the problem," West said. "First of all, who's African American? Who's slave? This rich, complex mix of blood and heritage confused the issue. These people were

family, part of their household, their neighbors. The government was insisting that they rip that society apart, and they said, 'No, we're not going to do it.'"

The result was a series of the most bloody and expensive wars of American history, spanning 10 years.

But there is another side. The alliance also resulted in a unique union of the American people, according to Hoffman.

"It developed a number of groups that people scratch their heads over because they're not black or white or Indian," Hoffman said. "They're cultural and biological mixtures of them all. It helps us think less simplistically when we see how complicated the world population became after Columbus. I think it's been a real creative force."

West agrees. "If there's a lesson here that's really interesting, it's that, (in) our relations among racial and ethnic groups, this mishmash of cultures has been far more flexible and diverse than we give it credit for," he said. "Every one of these peoples considered themselves superior in some way. And yet, out of that common human trait, you find this wonderful kaleidoscopic mosaic of cultural interchange."

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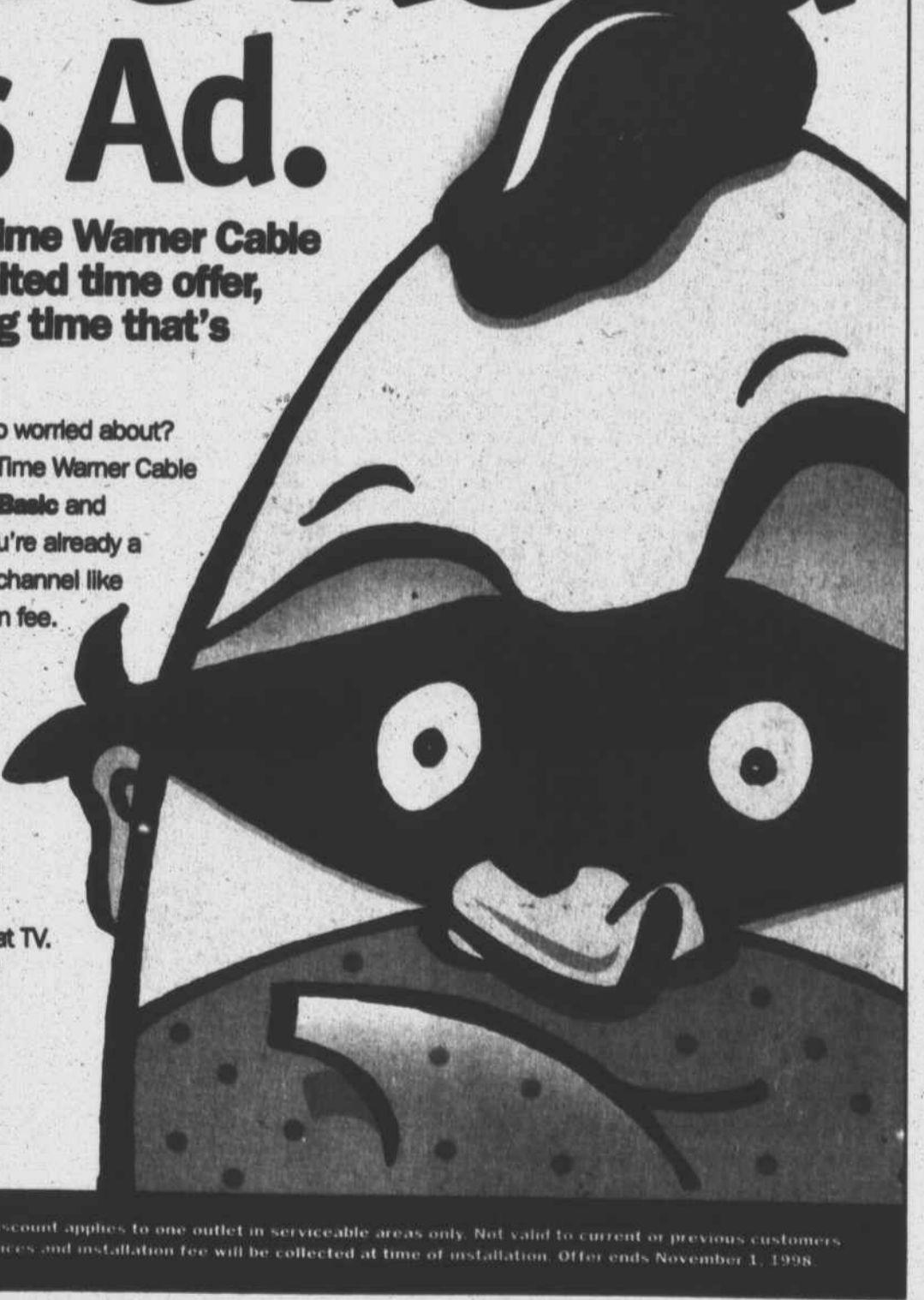
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