



Slave Burial Ground is Identified at Monticello

For many years, a question frequently asked by visitors to Monticello has been: “Where were the slaves buried?”

Because there are no known written records of any African-American graves at Monticello, and no slave burials from Thomas Jefferson’s time had been identified with any degree of certainty, the response had to be: “We don’t know.”

But not any more.

Earlier this year, Monticello archaeologists identified a graveyard on the grounds of Jefferson’s plantation and determined that it is in all likelihood a Jefferson-era slave cemetery. The site is a relatively flat tract of wooded land about 2,000 feet from the main house, near the southern end of Monticello’s parking area for visitors.

The burial ground was dedicated at a Ceremony of Commemoration held Oct. 6 (see Burial Ground Ceremony story).

“It has been a longstanding goal here at Monticello to determine where slaves were buried, and we believe we have now found one such location,” said Daniel P. Jordan, president of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation. “We regard this as a significant archaeological find, one that allows us to fill in one more piece of the puzzle in our efforts to research and understand all aspects of the Monticello plantation.”

A wide variety of trees stand in and around the burial ground.



T.J.F. / Jessica Tyree

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MONTICELLO



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Test excavations at the site, begun in late February under the direction of Sara Bon-Harper, Monticello's archaeology field manager, revealed the presence of 20 burials. The graves proper were not disturbed, as no excavation went deeper than necessary to identify the tops of the grave shafts, and no remains were disinterred.

Because of visible depressions in the ground, the tract had for years been suspected of being the site of a cemetery. Geophysical testing, surface mapping, and soil sampling of the tract in 1990 indicated the presence of more than two dozen rectangular depressions, supporting the likelihood that the area was once used as a burial ground. Similar tests conducted again in 2000 provided additional scientific support, but no conclusive information.

In the 2001 fieldwork, part of the ongoing Monticello Plantation Archaeological Survey, archaeologists removed the topsoil from 24 excavation units measuring 5 feet by 5 feet and identified 20 burials. Three of the uncovered grave shafts had uninscribed fieldstones placed as head- and footstones, while two had one or the other.

The dimensions of the uncovered shafts indicated that 10 are the graves of adults and eight are the graves of children. No such determination could be made for two graves.

The burial ground has dimensions of approximately 75 feet by 65 feet and, based on statistical models, probably contains more than 40 graves.

Because of the acidic quality of the soil at the site, it is highly unlikely that any intact human remains or any artifacts other than coffin nails exist in the grave shafts.

Following the end of the excavation work, the excavation units were filled in and the surface of the area was restored. The site has been marked by an interpretive sign and enclosed by a split-rail fence.

A permanent memorial later will be erected at the burial ground, based on a design concept to be selected from the more than 116



Monticello archaeologists working at the site.

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received in response to a public request for proposals. The creator of the selected design concept will receive a \$1,000 honorarium.

Given the lack of written records and the absence of dated artifacts from the burials, plus the Thomas Jefferson Foundation's commitment to not disturbing the graves proper, it is not possible to determine with absolute certainty that this site is a Jefferson-era African-

American burial ground. However, a number of features of the tract strongly support that conclusion. Among these are:

- The number of graves and the mix of child and adult burials, which indicate a demographic of a large group of families, such as the enslaved community at Monticello, which averaged about 115 people, roughly half of them children, during the period 1774-1826.

- The presence of the unscribed fieldstones placed as head- and footstones, which is consistent with what has been found at other slave cemeteries of the period in Virginia and the Chesapeake region.

- The east-west orientation of the grave shafts and their placement in rows, which is consistent with burial practices of the late 18th and early 19th centuries in the region.

- The location of the graveyard, away from any known area of habitation, which is consistent with the siting of slave cemeteries at other Virginia plantations.

- The presence in the burial area of both hand-made (wrought) nails, in use at Monticello in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, and machine-made (cut) nails, introduced early in the 19th century, indicating activity during Jefferson's lifetime.

The area in which the cemetery is located was referred to by Jefferson as "the Park," and it was used at various times during his life as a deer park and an agricultural field. A plantation roadway dating to at least 1796, known as the Colle Road, passed through the area, near the eastern end of the burial ground. The area was cultivated in the



Two grave shafts – one with a headstone and footstone, the other with a headstone – were revealed in one excavation unit.

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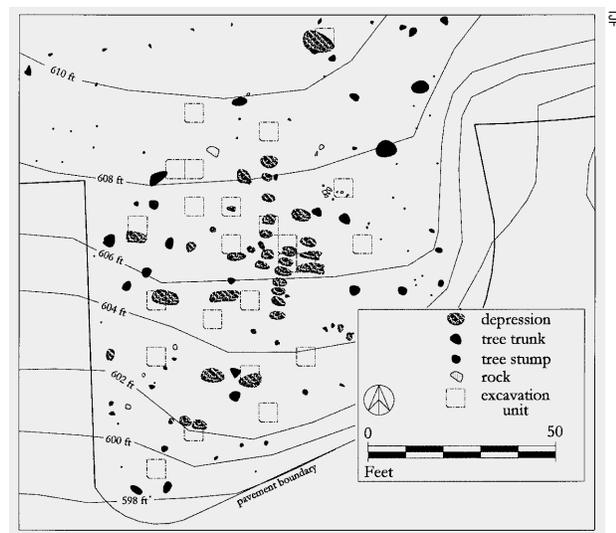


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late 19th and early 20th centuries, but evidence indicates that the graveyard area was never plowed. When Monticello's parking area was expanded in the mid-1970s, the cemetery site was not disturbed.

“The identification of the slave burial ground is important in that it presents a site that was significant to the community ties of Monticello's enslaved African-Americans,” Bon-Harper said. “Our archaeological survey has revealed 18 other sites where Monticello slaves lived and worked, but this is the one that most clearly represents the human element of the community, as distinct from the work that slaves did on the plantation.”



Map showing the location of excavation units and surface depressions at the site.

COMMENTS? newsletter@monticello.org