

African-American History at the Sweet Briar Plantation

*A Report on the Research of Lynn Rainville
Visiting Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Sociology*



Lynn Rainville

Professor Rainville came to Sweet Briar in Fall 2001 to teach a course on Old World Archaeology (her Ph.D. is in anthropology with a focus on ancient Near Eastern archaeology). Once on campus, she realized that the 3,250 acres of historic, antebellum landscape presented a unique opportunity for instructing students in hands-on archaeological techniques and teaching local history. That same year, she had begun researching slave cemeteries in nearby Albemarle County. Within weeks of beginning her research into the former Sweet Briar Plantation, she was introduced to a network of Sweet Briar faculty and staff researching various aspects of campus history.

In the spring of 2002, Dr. Rainville began planning an archaeological investigation; she was particularly interested in gaining a better understanding of the enslaved community of African, and possibly, Native Americans. Her two years of research have been sponsored by generous grants from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities. Sweet Briar students have contributed hundreds of hours in searching for sites, analyzing antebellum artifacts, and conducting archival research. Most recently, in January 2004, a newly-renovated archaeology laboratory (supported by a grant from the National Science Foundation) was completed and is currently being used by students and faculty to conduct research.

In this short article, there is only space to briefly review how archaeological and historical research has contributed to improving our understanding of the enslaved community that lived and died on the Sweet Briar Plantation.

Slaves in Amherst County

Slavery was first introduced to the Virginia Piedmont in the 1720s. By the 1750s, the region contained approximately 40,000 slaves, about 33 percent of Virginia's total slave population. By 1790 this figure increased to 51 percent, or approximately 149,000 slaves. In Amherst, the enslaved population increased from about 30% of the total population (in 1790) to over 50% (by 1860). Within Amherst County, Elijah Fletcher was one of the largest landowners in the county and, accordingly, one of the 10



largest slave owners. His Sweet Briar Plantation is located midway between two famous antebellum plantations, both owned by Thomas Jefferson: Monticello (Charlottesville) and Poplar Forest (Lynchburg). Archaeological and historical research at Sweet Briar provides us with an opportunity to study one Piedmont plantation in detail, thus gaining a better understanding of the lives of enslaved people on antebellum plantations.

Slavery at Sweet Briar: "a curse on any country"

Elijah Fletcher moved to Virginia from Vermont in 1810, arriving at New Glasgow, about six miles north of Amherst, in 1811. Soon thereafter, he wrote to his father and described the institution of slavery as "a curse on any country." Despite this opinion, in 1813 he referred to owning two slaves, a "black boy" and a "black girl" (this occurred several months after he married Maria Antoinette Crawford, raising the possibility that the slaves were a wedding "gift"). Presumably the two youths came to live with him and his family in Lynchburg. After two decades of living in Lynchburg, Elijah Fletcher purchased land in Amherst near his wife's family home (Tusculum).

Over a decade later, a visitor to the Sweet Briar Plantation estimated that Fletcher owned between 80 and 100 slaves (1846). The 1850 census recorded that together, Elijah and his son Sidney owned 115 slaves. Of these individuals, 67 are listed by name in Elijah's will, written in 1852. Elijah's will provided invaluable information on the enslaved community: first names and family groupings, e.g., "Daniel & his children," followed by a list of names including "Daniel, Jr." The average age of the enslaved community in 1850 and 1860 was 27.5 and 29.3, respectively. The youngest slave on record was six months old, the eldest 65 years old. The women living on the plantation were slightly older than the men (either because they lived longer or because Elijah purchased women at an older age), with 25.3 the average age for women in 1850 (compared to 16.5 for men) and 31.1 in 1860 (compared to 25.8 for men in that decade).

Elijah died in 1858. Upon his death, the slaves were divided among three of his children: Sidney (who had inherited Tusculum in 1850), Elizabeth (who lived across Lynches Road [Highway 29] at Mt. San Angelo), and Indiana (who inherited Sweet Briar). The Civil War began shortly after Elijah's death and, within seven years, the slaves gained their freedom.

After emancipation in 1865, several of these individuals continued to work at the farm as laborers and tenant farmers. The decades of labor provided by the African-American community contributed to the success of the plantation and, in part, provided Indiana Fletcher Williams with the income to found a college for women upon her death in 1900.



Everyday Life on the Sweet Briar Plantation

For the past two years Professor Rainville has directed an archaeological survey designed to locate artifacts and structures that date to the antebellum period. The archaeological survey of campus has uncovered hundreds of sites, dating from the 18th through the 20th century. These sites range from stone cabin ruins to agricultural features (such as fences or old fields) and from artifact scatters (containing broken ceramic vessels, furniture, and glass bottles) to gravestones. In order to efficiently survey the 3,250 acres owned by Sweet Briar College today, Rainville arbitrarily divided the campus into 22 sectors, named after natural and historical landmarks, such as “Paul Settlement” (along the eastern side of Paul Mountain) and “Williams Triangle” (just north of Williams Creek).

survey. He pointed out cabins that he remembered locating while conducting research on the Sweet Briar ecosystems several decades ago. Today these cabins are slowly reverting back to the land, one stone at a time. But they have left an artifactual footprint on the hillside that will be explored through excavations by Sweet Briar students. In another sector, “Williams Triangle,” Dr. Rainville and her students located a wooden structure that may have served as an animal pen or tobacco drying barn, several stone terraces, possibly designed to improve drainage for agricultural fields, and a rock quarry. Some of the rocks from the quarry were used to construct the dam at the Lower Lake.

To interpret these sites, Dr. Rainville will apply a combination of archaeological, oral historical, and archival approaches. For example, in the summer, students will excavate test trenches within and adjacent to the cabins along the base of Paul Mountain. Excavated artifacts will allow Rainville and her students to date the use of the structures. In addition, members of the local community will be interviewed regarding their remembrances of the historic landscape and the people who lived on the land.

The historical record provides tantalizing clues about daily life on the plantation. For example, letters written from Elijah to his brother, Calvin (who lived in Indiana), provide insight into the everyday life of the slaves. One letter referred to crops that the slaves grew in their own gardens and sold in nearby markets. In another letter, dated 1855, Elijah wrote to his brother: “We are not doing much except preparing for a happy Christmas for our servants. They have all to sell their crops, which consist principally of corn, and it takes many wagon loads and each wants to go with it and lay in their finery and small comforts.” Other letters referred to the rare

With the help of Sweet Briar undergraduates and UVA graduate students, Rainville surveyed the eastern slope of Paul Mountain. The surveyors (walking east/west transects) located three stone cabins. All three shared similar construction techniques, stone foundations, unpreserved wooden superstructure, rectangular chimneys at one end of the cabin, and nearby rock cairns. Dr. Rainville was fortunate to accompany Dr. Ernest (Buck) Edwards (Dorys McConnell Duberg Professor Emeritus of Biology) on an exploratory walk early in the



February the 16, 1854
Mr. Elijah Fletcher,

I write to you now for you to grant me a great favor which you will oblige me very much. I am now In the hands of Mr. Woodrough and I expect to start very soon too the south if you will not oblige me as much as to buy me I would be very glad if you would. I was a servant of captain Edmond Pen. A sister of Mary which you own. Martha Pen. I was sold in Lynchburg when Mr. george Payne went away. Please to Answer it as soon as you can and buy me if you please.
I shal Depend on you.

Martha Pen
Your humble
Servant
Lynchburg Va.

opportunities that slaves had for leisure activities such as quilting parties, banjo playing, and celebrating Christmas.

One of the many negative repercussions of slavery was the separation of husbands, wives, and children at the death of their owner (when they were divided among heirs as if they were property). Fletcher appears to have been sensitive to African-American wishes to avoid separation. For example, in 1854, Fletcher received a letter written by an enslaved African-American woman, Martha Penn Taylor. In the letter Martha asks Elijah to purchase her in order to reunite her with her sister, Mary, whom Elijah already owned. Fletcher complied and wrote on the back of the letter “Martha’s request to buy her.” After emancipation, Martha moved to nearby Coolwell but continued to work for the Fletcher family. Elijah’s granddaughter Daisy wrote to Martha in 1882, “We think a great deal of you all.” Perhaps because of the close relationship between Martha and Indiana’s family, we have a photograph of her, possibly taken at the Sweet Briar Plantation House.

Death and Dying on a Piedmont Plantation: Slave Mortuary Practices

To date, very little scholarly research has been conducted on slave mortuary rituals or cemeteries. In contrast to churchyard and town cemeteries, slave cemeteries are often located on the plantation. Due to the cost of carved and inscribed stones, slave gravestones are often unaltered stones found locally. Because these memorials frequently lack inscriptions it is difficult to determine which direction the body faces and how many individuals are buried in the cemetery.

Research into the aboveground remains of slave cemeteries is important because these sacred sites are rarely mentioned in archival documents. For example, at Sweet Briar, only a handful of archival records mention deaths among the slaves



and even then, there is no mention of the place of burial. One such example is from 1825 (before Elijah and his family moved to Sweet Briar). In a letter to his father, Elijah writes that “I had a Negro Boy about 10 or 12 years old die last week. He had been sick some time.”

Several cemeteries have been located on the Sweet Briar property. Most, if not all of the locations, are the final resting places of African-Americans owned by the Fletcher family. The Sweet Briar Burial Ground is the largest slave cemetery on the plantation property. Located on a natural hill above the Lower Lake (the Upper Lake was not created until 1962), the cemetery contains more than 60 stones and at least 19 unmarked depressions. The hilltop location of the cemetery may have served practical and symbolic functions. On one hand, it is helpful to bury people above the water table and away from agricultural lands. On the other hand, hilltop locations situated opposite a stream serve a symbolic function in Christian beliefs: that of the “holy hill” associated with Zion and the crossing of the River Jordan. For slaves, crossing to the other side of a body of water may have been interpreted as crossing the Atlantic to return to Africa.

The gravestones are a combination of local fieldstones and quartz. None of the stones is inscribed, but several are carved along the top of the stone. While some stones appear to be paired head- and footstones, other graves contain no preserved markers. The only clue to the location of these graves is unmarked depressions (which tend to occur when grave vaults are not used). Although the stones are distributed across a wide area, the graves appear to be clustered into several discrete groups. These clusters of stones may correlate with family groupings. Elijah’s

own recognition of enslaved families (indicated by his paired children and parents in his 1852 will) suggests that the enslaved community included several different families.

Research into the Sweet Briar Burial Ground is important because it helps preserve the final resting places of the enslaved African-Americans and because it preserves the cultural traditions of the enslaved community. Research into mortuary rituals illustrates the complex relationship between the deceased’s identity, religion, and socio-economic status in life and the corresponding death rituals. For example, the variability among stone types in the Sweet Briar slave cemetery may correspond to the identity or social standing of the deceased, perhaps indicating the difference between field and house servants or between infant and elderly deaths. The placement of stones (and/or their design) may also indicate family groups or the cause of death. Hopefully the ongoing attempt to locate descendants of the African-American community at Sweet Briar will provide some answers to these and many other questions.

The Sweet Briar Burial Ground was recently re-dedicated and is accessible to visit. Please go to www.faculty.sbc.edu/irainville/SBP/AfAmH.html to take a Virtual Tour of the Cemetery and to learn more about the ongoing research into African-American Heritage at Sweet Briar.