Slave and Free Black Settlement and Historical Land Use along the Lower James River: A Cartographical Case Study

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Introduction

The cartographic data analyzed for this work was originally collected as part of a historical land use study on the Virginia Commonwealth University Walter and Inger Rice Center for Environmental Studies (VCU Rice Center). The VCU Rice Center is located along the north bank of Lower James River between Shirley Plantation and Berkley Plantation, just downstream of Hopewell. This area was surveyed by the Confederate Engineering Bureau for the Map of New Kent, Charles City, James City, and York Counties (Gilmer 1863). The Confederate Engineering Bureau charted most Virginia counties east of the Blue Ridge and the maps remain an extremely valuable and oft referenced source of historical information. Additionally, the map (Gilmer 1863) that covers the area of the VCU Rice Center contains a level of detail unmatched by most other Confederate Engineering Bureau productions (Figure 1). An astonishing level of detail, including portrayals of slave quarter locations and free Black residences, provides a clear window into the cultural landscape of the period. Analysis of this Antebellum socioeconomic/racially-determined landscape constitutes the first part of this study. Also analyzed are late 19th and early 20th century cartographic sources that clearly illustrate a shift in local settlement by which former slave quarters disappear from the landscape and at least one apparent new Black community was established on formerly wooded land. The development and ultimate abandonment of this small rural community is traced through historic maps and early aerial photographs.

This work relied on period cartographic sources only, and the findings are in no way intended to represent a comprehensive analysis of changing settlement and land use patterns within the study area. Rather, the period cartographic sources are used to elucidate aspects of the slavery institution as they may be expressed in the local cultural landscape. Moreover, the cartographic data under-

score changes in rural settlement and community organization directly resulting from Emancipation.

Antebellum Cultural Landscape of the VCU Rice Center Area

The Lower James River leading to Richmond constituted one of the most strategic locations of the Civil War. As a result, the Confederate Engineering Bureau map (Gilmer 1863) contains an astonishing level of detail for a mid-19th century cartographic document. Careful examination of the map provides a window to the socioeconomic settlement patterns of the time. Although this view of the Lower James River cultural landscape was recorded during the Civil War, the military map (Gilmer 1863) likely captures long standing land use and settlement patterns, the origins of which date to the rise of the Virginia Tidewater plantation system early in the 18th century. Clearly illustrated are locations of slave quarters and at least one substantial free Black community. Careful study of the map reveals the physical relationship between the slave quarters and the master and overseer houses. Also portrayed is a distinctively hierarchical, socioeconomic-driven settlement pattern expressed in the spatial relation to the James River (Figure 2).

In this hierarchical order, the major plantation owners, middling farmers, small farmers, and free Blacks each occupied a distinct physical place in relationship to the river shore. The major plantations, including Shirley, Berkley and Westover occupied the prime agricultural lands along the James. These elite planters had direct access to the James by way of private wharves (See Figure 1 and Figure 2). Middling farmers wealthy enough to own slaves were located on the terraces along historic Route 5. These intermediate size farmsteads on which slave quarters, or probable slave quarters are shown include the Wilcox, Upshire, and Hone [or Hone] properties. A far larger number of smaller holdings are shown occupying the interior terraces. These home sites typically had
Figure 1: Portion of the 1863 Confederate Engineering Bureau Map of New Kent, Charles City, James City, and York Counties. The VCU Rice Center falls within the dashed circle. The property includes both sides of Kimages Creek (now Lake Charles). Union earthworks (Federal Fortifications) constructed near the end of the 1862 Peninsula Campaign are shown on east side of the Rice Center.
The 1863 Gilmer map underscores a distinctively hierarchical settlement pattern along the James River in the vicinity of the VCU Rice Center, the origins of which date to the early 18th century. 1) Prime lands along the river are in the hands of the elite planters. These holdings include Berkeley Plantation and Westover. 2) Middling farmers wealthy enough own slaves are found on the intermediate terraces along present day Route 5. 3) Small farmers occupy the interior terraces. Typically these settlements are shown as a single structure. 4) The Black community Freetown is located along the headwater reaches of a minor drainage.

only one or two structures and none have slave quarters indicated. Lowest on the hierarchy is the Black settlement in the area labeled Freetown. The Freetown community was located along what is indicated on the Confederate Engineers Bureau map (Gilmer 1863) as the wooded and swampy headwater reaches on Gunns [or Hills] Run a low order James River tributary (see Figure 2). Numerous Freetown structures are labeled Negro, while others have a name indicated (illegible) with a Neg. suffix identifying the race of the occupant. The wooded, swampy setting is indicative of marginal land. Some open land is shown just west of the Freetown settlement. However, four structures in this area are labeled Ruins. It
is possible that their conditions were result of Civil War activity in the area; either Union naval shelling or purposeful destruction or dismantlement during the establishment of the nearby Union fortifications at Harrison Landing in order to deny opposing Confederates shelter/cover. It is perhaps equally likely that the land was abandoned and houses dismantled due to degradation of what was already lesser agricultural soils stemming from a century or more of tobacco monoculture and other unwise land use practices. The presence of a free Black community in the area conforms to the established pattern of Black settlement on undesirable or otherwise marginal land.

The location of slave quarters in relation to the main residences also reveals a potentially interesting pattern (see Figure 1). In the area of the VCU Rice Center, a row of three probable slave quarters are shown just west of the unnamed drainage that defines the contemporary property boundary. These buildings are equidistant from a main residence along the James, which is labeled WM Harrison, and a second residence to the north labeled WH Harrison Overseer. The row of buildings is also situated directly on the road connecting the two main residences. The same pattern is also evident at nearby Shirley Plantation, where two rows buildings labeled Quarters are shown along the road leading to the manor house by the river.

The placement of slave quarters in the line of sight from the main house was not coincidental. Rather than being conceived just to allow the master to keep watch, the intent may have been for the slaves to live in constant sight of the “big house” with this visual cue meant to reinforce their place in the plantation order. The location of the quarters directly along the road leading to the manor is also perhaps telling. Instead of being shielded from view, slave residences bordering the present day Rice Center and at Shirley Plantation appear to have been meant to be seen by visitors arriving by road.

A somewhat different pattern is expressed on middling slave holders located inland from river. One such smaller holding labeled Col. Wilcox is shown along the south side of the historic Route 5 right of way, just west of where the road crosses the abandoned Union fortifications (Figure 3). Two structures labeled Quarters are shown within a wooded alcove whereby they could not have been viewed by travelers on historic Route 5. The Dr. Upshire property is shown on the opposite side of Route 5. A line of three probable slave quarters is shown directly behind main house, which would have blocked their view from Route 5. However, a third property, the Hone house, is shown just northeast of Dr. Upshire’s. A line of four buildings is labeled Quarters. These quarters are aligned parallel to nearby Route 5 and would be clearly visible from the road across an indicated open field. Whether some of the middling slave holders deliberately (or subconsciously) sought to minimize the visual presence of their human property is a social historical research question worthy of consideration. If such were the case, it could be reflective of certain turpitude among some local middling landowners as to their participation in the institution of slavery. Such turpitude was apparently not shared by the major James River plantation owners such as those of Shirley and others who clearly sited their slave quarters in a manner for all to see.

Cultural Landscape Changes during Late 19th/Early 20th Centuries

While the Confederate Engineering Bureau map (Gilmer 1863) provides a detailed view of the long standing cultural landscape of the Lower James, profound changes can be expected to have occurred following the Civil War. Principal among these would have been the abandonment of slave quarters and establishment of new Black communities. These changes appear to be captured in period cartographic sources showing the VCU Rice Center, including late 19th and early 20th century US Coast and Geodetic Survey maps and early air photos. These sources not only illustrate the shifting settlement patterns but also changes in land use.

The 1882 US Coast and Geodetic Survey map Survey of the James River from Sandy Point to City Point (Figure 4) provides good detail of the study area allowing for direct comparisons with the Confederate Engineering Bureau map (Gilmer 1863) to be made. The probable slave quarters and the Harrison Overseer house just west of the VCU Rice Center are no longer depicted. Another change noted between 1863 and 1882 is the clearing of forest along the headwaters of the unnamed drainage that defines the western edge of the VCU Rice Center property. This fan shaped patch of forest,
Figure 3 shows an enlargement the slave quarter locations on the middling holdings along present day Route 5. On the Col. Wilcox property (bottom box) structures labeled Quarters are sited between the barns and a wooded ravine. On the Upshire farm (center box) probable quarters are tucked behind the main house. A free Black community is shown adjoining a marshy area north of middling properties (top box). The Freetown settlement is located along the wooded headwater reaches of Gunns Run. A number of structures are labeled Negro while others have a (illegible) name with a Neg suffix to denote race. Four houses west of the settlement are labeled Ruin.
Figure 4: Figure 4 1882 United States Coast and Geodetic Survey Map of the James River from Sandy Point to City Point Showing Area of Rice Center.

This map of the James River shores shows that some areas around the VCU Rice Center that were forested during the Civil War had been cleared by 1882. The left down arrow points to the headwaters of the unnamed drainage just east of the Rice Center that had been cleared. Also indicated is a newly established settlement with at least three structures in same area. This new settlement likely represents a freed slave community. The two right up arrows point to newly cleared and apparently cultivated tracts along the James River. This clearing of forest land may reflect an increased demand for timber and agricultural products to support a rapidly growing post war Richmond. The laborious process of clearing forest and the (short-lived) cultivation of these tracts may also be associated with freed slaves attempting to support themselves through new tenant farming enterprises.

Figure 5: 1907 Update of US Coast and Geodetic Survey Map of the James River from Sandy Point to City Point.

Figure 5 shows the Rice Center area as depicted on the 1907 update of the US Coast and Geodetic Survey of the James River. At least five structures are shown (left down arrow) comprising the settlement along the very headwater reaches of the unnamed stream just west of the VCU Rice Center (the Kimages Creek area). The two cultivated tracts (right up arrows) first seen in the 1882 version of the same map (see Figure 4) remain open.
clearly depicted on the 1863 map, is shown as open in 1882. The 1882 map also shows at least two structures in this location. The 1907 update of the US Coast and Geodetic Survey map Survey of the James River from Sandy Point to City Point (figure 5) shows at least five structures in the same location. The post-Civil War clearing and settlement of apparently marginal land (wooded stream headwaters) very likely represents the establishment of a freed slave community. Across central and eastern Virginia, a lasting connection may exist between Civil War sites and freed Black settlement. At least one researcher documenting Civil War winter camps has observed a correlation between these sites’ location and present day rural settlement by African-Americans (Joseph: personal communication 2006). Newly freed slaves and displaced Blacks often sought the protection of the Union encampments and later squatted on the abandoned land, taking advantage of wells and perhaps temporary housing structures after the troops moved out. Joseph (2006) notes that some of these squatter camps appear to have developed into established Black communities that remain today, suggesting a direct link between Civil War camp locations and contemporary rural settlement.

This headwaters setting is analogous to that of the pre-Civil War Freetown settlement (see Figure 3).

Interestingly, this settlement is shown on a 1937 air photo (Figure 6 and Figure 7). While only two or perhaps three structures are visible on the photo, the apparent footprints of several former structure locations are discernible as doughnut shaped areas that remain clear of vegetation. The existing structures and apparent former structure locations are linked by a looped road, indicating an interesting level of community organization. No traces of the structure locations or the circular roadway are discernible in a 1953 air photo of the same area.

In the area of the VCU Rice Center, other formerly wooded areas are shown as being at least partially cleared following the Civil War. The 1882 map James River Virginia Sandy Point to City Point shows two large James River-fronting tracts just east of the Rice Center as newly cleared and apparently in cultivation (see Figure 4; also Figure 5). The 1937 air photo (see Figure 6) and mid-20th century USGS maps (1948, 1960) show these tracts as once again having reverted to forest. It is possible that this clearing of forest was driven by a need for timber to support the rebuilding and growth of Richmond in the decades following the Civil War. Richmond’s rapid growth would also have greatly increased requirement for feed and fodder acreage, as draft animals continued to be the primary form of urban, local, and farm traction until the mass production of the internal combustion engine early in the 20th century. The (short-lived) clearing and cultivation of these tracts could also be associated with freed slaves attempting to sustain themselves through new tenant farming enterprises, with this and the former explanation in no way exclusive of each other.

Summary

Cartographic sources examined in the context of a historical land use study on the VCU Rice Center provided insights into the cultural landscape of the Antebellum Lower James River, particular in regards to slave quarter locations and free Black settlement. Careful study of the Confederate Engineering Bureau (Gilmer 1863) map of the area revealed a distinctively hierarchical, socio-economically determined settlement pattern expressed in the spatial relationship to the James River. Another observation is the
This 1937 air photo of the VCU Rice Center area allows one to chart settlement and land use changes by comparing to the 1882 and 1907 UCGS surveys of the James River (Figure 4 and Figure 5). The VCU Rice Center lands surround the Kimages Creek impoundment (Lake Charles) with Route 5 the northern limits. The white down arrow points to the remains of the probable freed slave settlement first seen in the 1882 map. The up arrows point to the areas cleared after the Civil War that had been allowed to revert to forest.
Figure 7: Enlargement of 1937 Air Photo of James River Showing Rice Center Area.

Figure 7 shows an enlargement of the probable historic Black community established along the headwaters of the unnamed drainage that defined the VCU Rice Center western boundary. Two structures are visible along with apparent former structure locations. The structure locations are connected by a looped road. These stream headwaters had been wooded during the Civil War (see Figure 1). A 1953 air photo shows the area having reverted to forest with no trace of the structure locations or the looped road.
occurrence of an Antebellum free Black settlement along a drainage headwaters. Similarly observed was the post-Civil War establishment of a probable freed slave community in an analogous stream headwater setting. These headwater areas were likely marginal land unsuitable for period agriculture and thus available to the lowest status segment of Virginia society of the time. Free Black settlement of these locations has significant implications in regard to archaeological site predictive modeling and evaluating the archaeological potential of these settings. Finally, the cartographic sources help underscore the dramatic shifts in settlement and local community organization that resulting from freeing of the slave population. This formative period in African American history has perhaps not been archaeologically studied to the degree that the pre-Civil War era has been. As such, the archaeology of Emancipation should perhaps be bestowed the same emphasis that the archaeology of slavery has been given. The settlement shifts that accompanied Emancipation can also be seen as integral to the final undoing of the Tidewater plantation system which had defined the cultural landscape of Lower James River since the early 18th century. These shifts also created the basis of early modern rural settlement, many aspects of which persist through the present day.

References


Joseph, John Mark 2006 Personal communication

United States Coast and Geodetic Survey 1882 Survey of the James River from Sandy Point to City Point. Copy on file at the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond

1907 Survey of the James River from Sandy Point to City Point. Copy on file at the Virginia Historical Society, Richmond

United States Geological Survey 1960 7.5 minute Charles City quadrangle. 1948 air photo.

1937 Air Photo on file at the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Quinton Service Center, Quinton, Virginia.

1953 Air Photo on file at the Natural Resources Conservation Service, Quinton Service Center, Quinton, Virginia.