



June 2011 Newsletter

Marsh House Slave Quarters at Avery Island, Louisiana

By David T. Palmer*

Abstract: This article presents a report of preliminary results from archaeological survey and investigations of the Marsh House Slave Quarters site (16IB34) for the 2010-2011 winter field school conducted by the University of Louisiana at Lafayette

For the winter 2010-2011 “inter-semester,” the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (UL Lafayette) conducted an archaeological field school at the Marsh House Slave Quarters site (16IB34) at Avery Island, Louisiana. A salt dome near the coast of southwestern Louisiana, Avery Island is best known as the birthplace of Tabasco™ brand pepper sauce, made on the island since 1868. During the approximately month-long project, 11 students from UL Lafayette and Millsaps College learned archaeological fieldwork skills by participating in site mapping, shovel test pit survey and limited excavations under the direction of Regional Archaeologist, David Palmer. The project results include the documentation of four features and the recovery of numerous artifacts dating to both the antebellum and postbellum eras.

The Marsh House Slave Quarters site includes two small standing brick cabin structures on the west side of Avery Island (Figs. 1, 2). The site is a portion of the housing area for enslaved Africans and African Americans working for the sugar plantation established by John Marsh in 1818. Marsh, from Connecticut, brought enslaved people from New York and New Jersey with him to his sugar plantation in Louisiana. By 1840, the plantation was known as Marsh-Avery plantation, and by the time of the Civil War, was known just as Avery Plantation. The 1860 slave schedule lists 100 enslaved persons living on Avery Island during that year. The plantation continued after the war as Avery Plantation until 1908, when it became the Avery Planting and Improvement Company.

The site was first recorded in the late 1980s by David Babson on the basis of historical data and the standing structures, without subsurface archaeological investigation. The Regional

Archaeology Program at UL Lafayette was contacted by McIlhenny Company and Avery Island Historian, Dr. Shane Bernard, in June 2010 after a portion of the site was unintentionally damaged by residential construction activities, exposing 19th century artifacts and the remains of a brick feature. After documenting the damage to the site with Dr. Mark Rees, the regional archaeologist discussed the need to define site boundaries and determine the extent of intact archaeological deposits with Dr. Bernard. This discussion expanded to involve the leaseholder of the site and McIlhenny Company and Avery Island Inc., and resulted in an invitation to work at the site and partial financial sponsorship of a winter field school project.

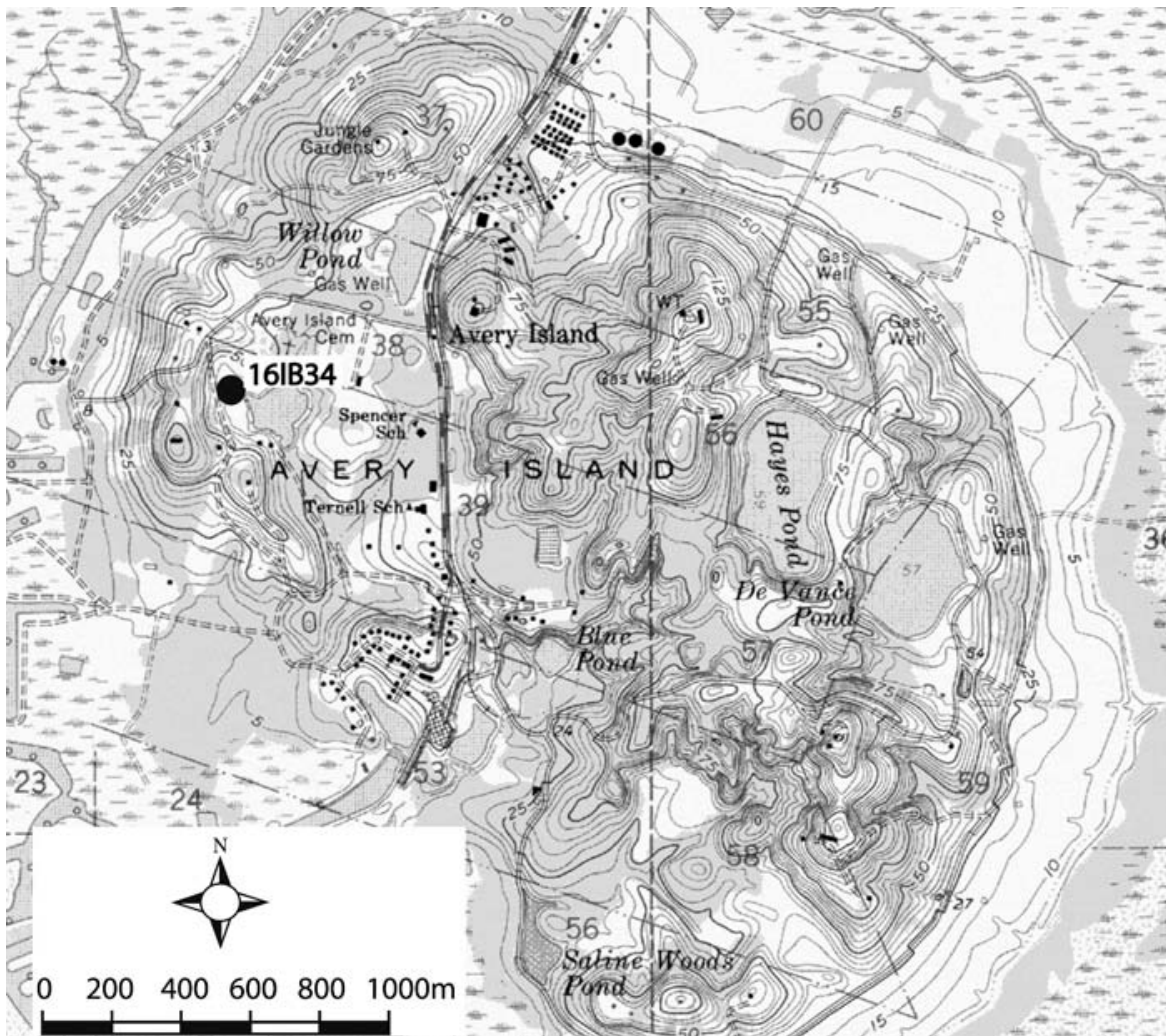


Figure 1. Map of location and topography of Marsh House Slave Quarters site (Source: author).

Project goals for the winter field school included better defining the horizontal and vertical extent of the site, and determining if intact archaeological deposits relevant to the

plantation era still existed. These goals were accomplished through site mapping, systematic survey via shovel test pits of the area south and east of the extant structures, magnetometer survey south of the extant structures and the excavation of a limited number of excavation units. A total of 28 shovel test pits and 13 square meters of excavation units were completed for the project, with many artifacts and four plantation period features uncovered (Fig. 3).



Figure 2. Standing brick structures on Marsh House Slave Quarters site (Image by Jim Delahoussaye).

Features and deposits relating to the plantation era discovered through the project included part of a wooden post, (Feature 003), three refuse deposits, and two brick features.

The wooden post feature, (Feature 003), was a square post of c. 15-x-15 centimeter width and 98 centimeters extant length. It was identified as being made from bald cypress on the basis of visual comparison of a sample under low-power microscope magnification with published examples of identified species. On the basis of associated artifacts, the feature dates to the early-mid-19th century. This feature was most likely a fence post, or perhaps a pier support for a no longer extant house.

Feature 002, a late 19th-early 20th century refuse deposit, was initially defined as a feature because brickbats within it were thought to be the remains of a house pier pad. Further excavation proved this not to be the case, but a dense deposit of late 19th-early 20th century artifacts were well-documented. Among the glass, ceramic and other artifacts and ecofacts in

this feature was a “Hunyadi Janos Bitterquelle” mineral water bottle imported from Hungary, a harmonica plate, doll parts, and a toy cannon (Figs. 4-7).

Excavation Unit North 1984.5 East 2052.5 contained a shallow (c. 35 cm) but dense deposit of artifacts and ecofacts dating from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Abundant charcoal and partially melted glass in the unit was evidence of burning, likely use of this area for trash disposal and burning.

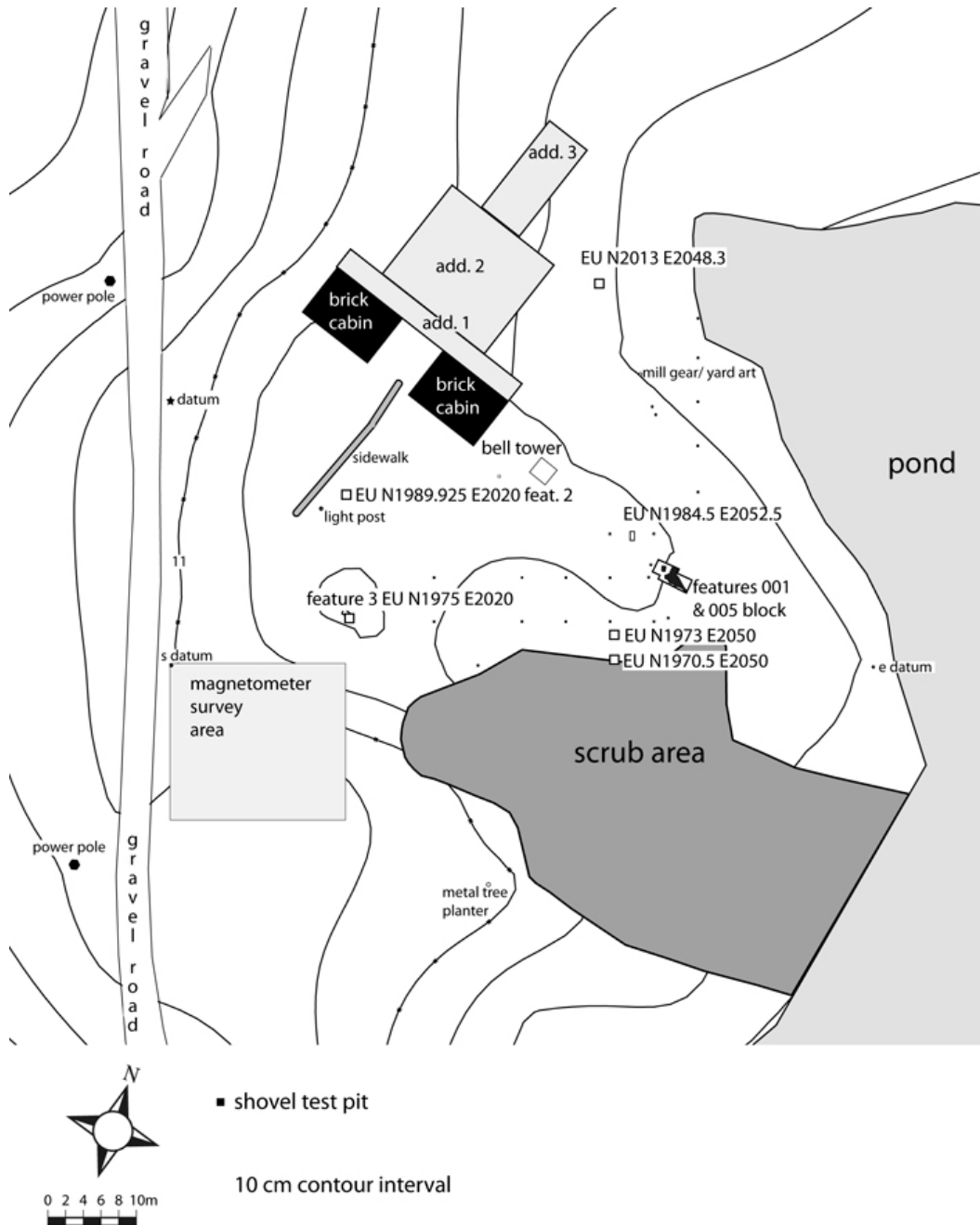
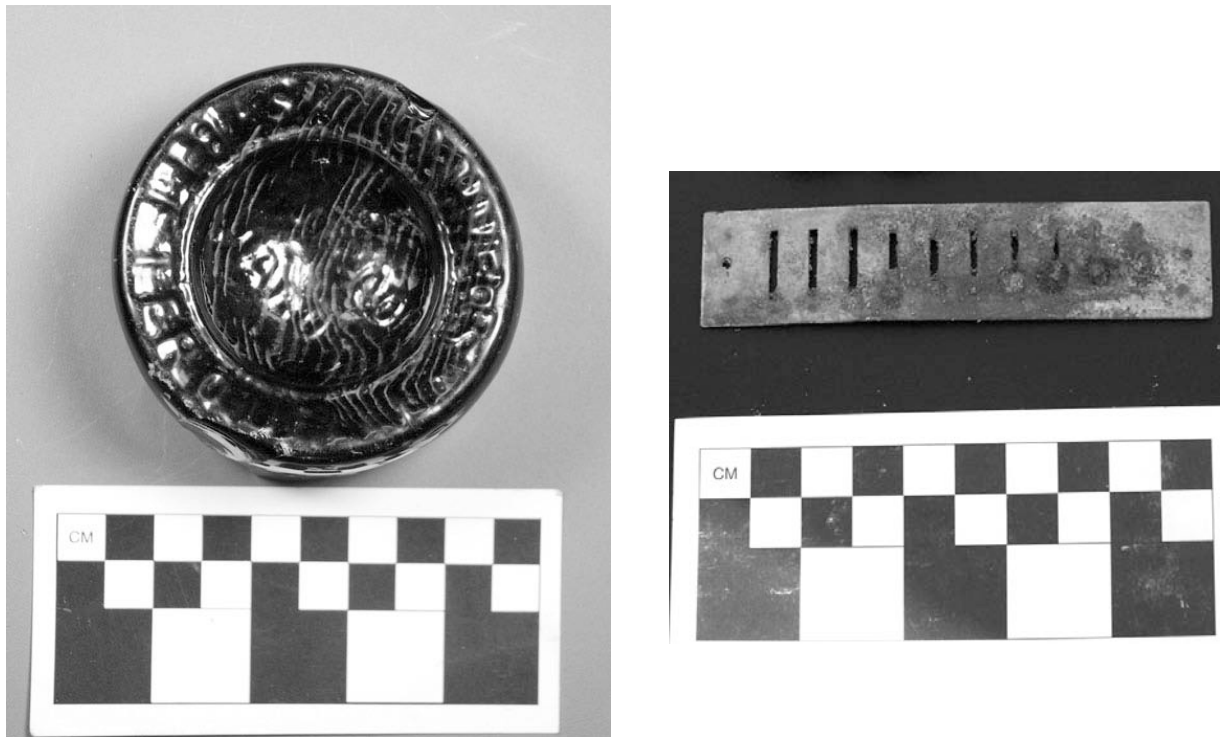


Figure 3. Map of survey and excavations (Source: author).

At the southern end of the area investigated, in excavation unit (EU) N1970.5 E 2050, we found a thick (c. 90 cm) midden layer consisting of early-mid-19th century artifacts of glass, metal, ceramic and animal bone. Artifacts recovered from this EU included kaolin clay smoking pipe stem fragments and numerous decorated pearlware fragments. Animal remains identified so far include white tailed deer, pig, alligator and oyster.

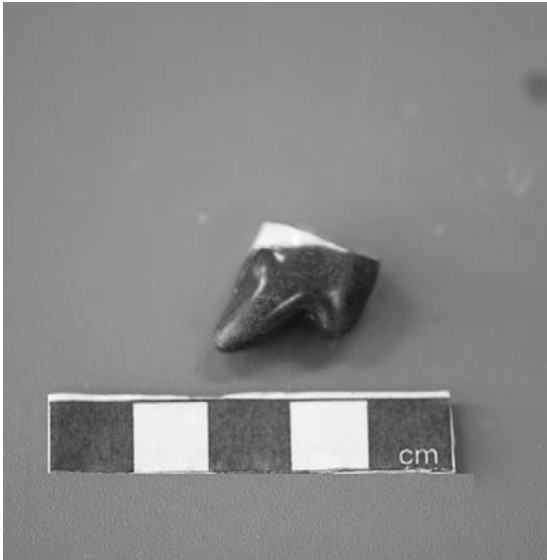


Figures 4 (left) and 5 (right). Hunyadi Janos Bitterquelle mineral water bottle imported from Hungary, and a harmonica plate, both recovered from Feature 002 (Images by Chad LaComb).

Feature 001 is a layer of brickbats to the southeast of the extant structures, of c. 1-x-2 meters (Fig. 8). Feature 005 was found to the west of Feature 001 in the same excavation block, and was differentiated from Feature 001 because it consisted of full bricks more formally laid than the brickbat paving of Feature 001. These features probably related to the church which used to be in this area of the site (Fig. 9). They were likely a landing or walkway and a pier pad for the church structure.

Magnetometer survey data will need to be ground-truthed via excavation at a future date, but does seem to indicate some anomalies which are likely related to the site, including a rectangular anomaly which may be related to a structure (Fig. 10). Artifact processing and

preliminary analysis took place during the spring 2011 semester as part of the “Archaeological Records” laboratory course at UL Lafayette. All but two of the field school students enrolled in the course and enjoyed the opportunity to follow-through with the research. Dr. Bernard is leading the on-going archival research portion of the project.



Figures 6 (left) and 7 (right): Doll part and toy cannon from Feature 002 (Images by Chad LaComb).

Through this investigation we were able to determine that intact archaeological deposits with good integrity pertaining to plantation-era African American life remain at the site, and we were also able to begin to define the extent of the site. Analysis of the artifacts and ecofacts is ongoing, but preliminary findings suggest that there is sufficient data from which to interpret aspects of daily life such as foodways and health practices. The 11 undergraduate students benefitted from the opportunity to learn archaeological field methods while participating in original research (Fig. 11). Through interactions with volunteers and visitors to the site, students also gained valuable first-hand experience in public archaeology. Further survey and excavation at the site, in conjunction with historical research, is warranted to more fully define its extent and recover data to interpret the lives of the enslaved and postbellum free workers of this sugar plantation.



Figure 8. Feature 001, a layer of brick fragments to the southeast of the extant structures (Image by author).



Figure 9. 1926 photograph of two remaining brick houses and wooden church once standing in southeast area of the site (Image by Robert Tebbs, Louisiana State Museum Collection).

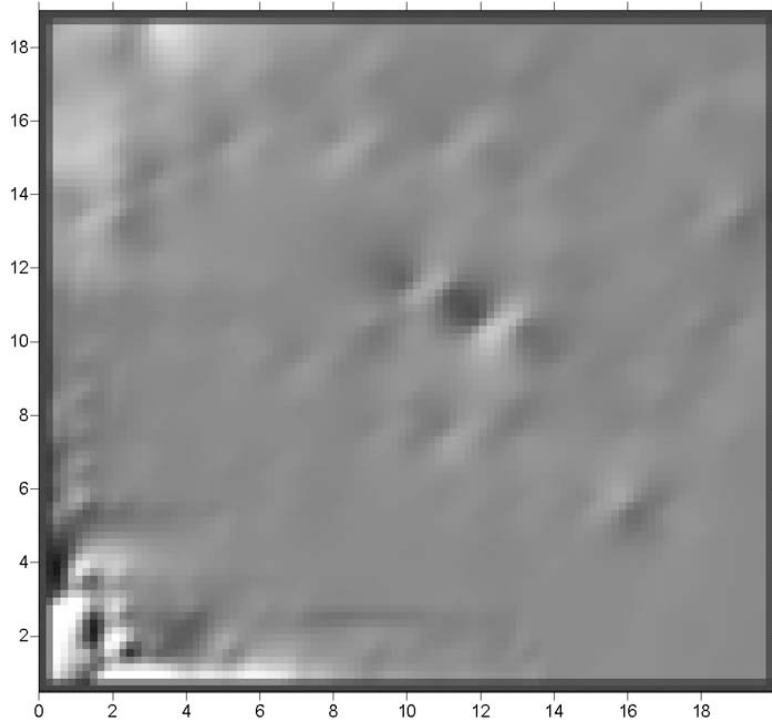


Figure 10. Magnetometer survey data indicating anomalies which may include subsurface structural remains (Source: author).



Figure 11. Participants in the 2010-2011 winter field school conducted by the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (Image by Mark A. Rees).

Acknowledgements

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Note:

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