



June 2023 Newsletter

“Dwellings of the Enslaved” on Preservation Virginia’s 2023 List of Virginia’s Most Endangered Historic Places

By Douglas W. Sanford and Dennis J. Pogue

On May 9, Preservation Virginia announced its 2023 listing of the State’s most endangered historic places. Nominated by the Virginia Slave Housing Project, the state-wide listing for “Dwellings of the Enslaved” recognizes the diverse range of threats to surviving examples of domestic housing associated with unfree African Americans (the text of the full nomination is set out below). These buildings represent cultural resources critical for understanding the history of race-based slavery in Virginia and for interpreting descendant communities’ heritage. In addition, the same cabins and quarters have significant archaeological components that when excavated and analyzed, allow for more complete and nuanced interpretations of enslaved people’s daily lives, resistance to oppression, and their sense of identity.

Begun in 2007, the Virginia Slave Housing Project is co-directed by Douglas W. Sanford, former professor of historic preservation at the University of Mary Washington, and by Dennis J. Pogue, recently retired from the graduate historic preservation program at the University of Maryland, College Park. A major goal of the Project has been to compile comparative data on slave housing from archaeological sites, historic documents (such as fire insurance policies), previous architectural research, and especially, surviving dwellings of the enslaved in rural and urban settings across the State. To date, the Project has documented 120 standing buildings in the field.

Another primary objective centers on promoting the preservation and interpretation of these buildings. Based on our experience over the last 15 years, we realize that the physical survival of slave-related buildings does not equate with preservation. Proactive means of maintenance, repair, and rehabilitation are needed. We hope that Preservation Virginia’s listing for “Dwellings of the Enslaved” will encourage local citizens and community organizations to consider steps for identifying, documenting, and preserving the cabins, quarters, and kitchens that formerly housed enslaved Blacks.

Most slave quarters on the Virginia and National Registers of Historic Places exist as minimally documented “contributing resources” within the nominations for the upscale residences and plantation complexes associated with white enslavers. Only a handful of dwellings of the enslaved have been nominated on their own merits with developed statements of significance.

Appropriately preserving and interpreting slave dwellings, with input and collaboration from descendant communities, not only helps to honor enslaved African Americans, but can contribute to restorative justice, while providing meaningful places for educating the public on the broader topics related to the difficult history of race and slavery. In these times of public attacks on conveying more inclusive versions of America's and Virginia's history, retaining the material manifestations of slavery and Black cultural history becomes a more vital preservation mission.

We encourage interested people to contact either Doug Sanford (dsanford@umw.edu) or Dennis Pogue (denjp1952@gmail.com).

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Nomination for "Dwellings of the Enslaved"

While individual dwellings for enslaved African Americans have been nominated before to Virginia's Most Endangered Historic Places List, the 2023 nomination seeks a more comprehensive approach due to the large-scale nature of threats, and the diminishing status of these dwellings in general.

Dwellings for the enslaved, in many cases built by enslaved carpenters and masons, are critical and complex cultural sites that embody the history of slavery and its legacies of racism and divisive politics in the post-bellum world and today. Once a widespread form of American vernacular architecture throughout Virginia's rural and urban communities, few examples of housing for the enslaved survive as compared to the thousands of cabins and quarters that formerly existed in Virginia's counties, towns and cities. There are no standing examples from the 17th century and only a handful from the 18th century has survived. Those surviving from the 19th century largely date to the late antebellum era (ca. 1830-1860).

Dwellings for the enslaved are tangible places that not only embody suffering, trauma, oppression and survival, they also represent domestic spaces that helped sustain families, communities and African American cultural heritage. They can also reveal negotiation and power struggles between the enslaved and enslavers, and the enduring Black resistance that grew from oppression.

After the Civil War, quarters for enslaved children, women, and men often became housing for free African Americans, at times working for their former enslavers as sharecroppers. As such, many quarters have even deeper Black histories and mark regional, family and personal histories that deserve to be respected and told.

While written documents can provide information about the lives of enslaved African Americans, few were written by or from the perspective of the enslaved themselves, so they rarely provide unfiltered insight into the lives of these people. Studying buildings associated with the enslaved, as well as the material evidence recovered through archaeology, can provide a more holistic understanding of these peoples' lives, and insight into individuals who were not included, and in some cases purposefully excluded, from the written record.

Threats

Dwellings of enslaved people face a variety of threats, ranging from long-term deterioration and neglect to development pressures. From the research conducted by the Virginia Slave Housing Project, it has been determined that the physical survival of these buildings does not guarantee or equate to preservation, but that stabilization, repair and ongoing maintenance is crucial. Many standing cabins and quarters in poor condition will likely not last another ten years.

Another threat stems from continued residential and commercial development, which often leads to the willful destruction of these historic buildings and the related loss of their rural, agricultural landscapes. Former quarters also have been put to incompatible and insensitive alternative uses, leading to the extensive alteration of their interiors and the wholesale replacement of doors, windows, and roofs. Insensitive renovations that convert the former housing of enslaved people to modern guest houses often result in the near complete loss of period materials and finishes.

Solutions

Dwellings for the enslaved are threatened cultural resources that need careful documentation, repair and preservation. Many are owned privately by conscientious individuals, but they do not have sufficient funds to maintain them, let alone carry out more complex forms of preservation.

While experts and organizations including Jobi Hill and the Saving Slave Houses Project, Joseph McGill and the Slave Dwelling Project and the Virginia Slave Housing Project have worked tirelessly to record, preserve and interpret slave houses, more educational and financial resources are needed to help private individuals and nonprofits preserve these buildings, as well as other historic sites of historically marginalized and underrepresented communities.

Appropriately preserving and interpreting slave dwellings, with input and collaboration from descendant communities, could help honor enslaved African Americans, their major resistance efforts and their unending strength and spirit. Preservation of these buildings can contribute to restorative justice, while also providing a meaningful place for more truthfully educating the public on broader topics related to the difficult history of race and slavery, especially since there continues to be no consensus or uniform recommendations on the educational curriculum around slavery, and how it affected people in the past, and how it continues to negatively impact people of color in Virginia and the nation today. For more information see the Program sponsored by Historic Richmond.

Preservation Efforts of Historic Sites of Virginia's Black, Indigenous, and People of Color

The Virginia General Assembly has recently made commendable and long overdue efforts to raise awareness, record and fund African American historic places in Virginia. In 2000, the General Assembly passed the African American Cemetery & Graves Fund to provide grants to support the maintenance and care of cemeteries established on or before December 31, 1947. The General Assembly also recently established the Virginia Black, Indigenous, and People of Color Historic Preservation Fund (BIPOC) to financially support Virginia's historically

underserved and underrepresented communities, and the cultural and historical sites associated with them.

Earlier this year, House Bill 1968 directs the Department of Historic Resources to install signs at historic sites listed in Victor Hugo Green's The Negro Motorist Green Book. Written during the Jim Crow era, the Negro Motorist Green Book was a list of hotels, service stations, businesses, parks and houses where African Americans could safely stop while travelling. The Green Book was essential for the survival of thousands of Black Americans in an era of segregation, cemented into the American legal system through Jim Crow laws.

Similar legislation to record, investigate, protect and fund dwellings for the enslaved would be a substantial step towards the preservation of these important buildings that have the capacity to teach history and culture, and to lay the groundwork for social change.

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