

Archaeology of the Red Overseer's House

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The Overseer's House at Wye House plantation is nestled between a marshy cove to the east and a farmed field, usually planted in corn or soybeans, which sweeps out to the west. The Overseer's House was mentioned by Frederick Douglass in his autobiography as the home of a particularly cruel overseer, Mr. Sevier, and due to Douglass' work, is one the most famous buildings on the plantation. It is a frame building of 1½ stories on a brick foundation, with chimneys at either end of the pitched gable roof. The house incorporates a hall-and-parlor plan on the first story with and two rooms in the garret.

The house is often attributed to the 18th century, but only a few hand-wrought nails are evident in the construction. The majority of the nails used in the building were double-struck machine-made nails of a type found from the 1790s to the 1830s, but most often in the first and second decades of the 19th century. A dendrochronological analysis of several wooden beams from the overseer's house (Worthington and Miles 2007) indicates a build date of around 1815, and the archaeology and architectural history of the structure affirm this assessment.

During the summer of 2006, the Tilghman family initiated an extensive rehabilitation of this structure. The soil surrounding the foundation was excavated to a depth of about three feet, and the house was lifted and held off its foundations by a series of wooden supports while a new, more structurally sound foundation was constructed.

Unfortunately, the excavation around the foundation destroyed most of the archaeological evidence that would have provided clues about the building, such as its age, how it was built, and whether any pre-existing structures might have occupied the same spot. The area directly beneath the house, exposed for the first time in almost 200 years, was completely untouched by the modern construction project, and so a brief archaeological investigation was begun within the footprint of the building.

The Overseer's House has chimneys on the north and south ends. The soil underneath the house showed significant rodent activity and this was damaging to the stratigraphy, but the areas next to the hearths were not wholly disturbed. Unit 15 was opened in front of the north chimney, and Unit 18 was excavated near the south chimney.

In Unit 15, a builder's trench for the north chimney was identified, but no artifacts were present in the fill that could not be explained by the extensive rodent activity. No other features were identified. Builder's trenches were probably present before the renovation efforts, but since the entire foundation footprint had already been excavated, except in front of the two chimneys, none were identified during the exploration under the house.

Builder's
Trenches
destroyed

Artifacts recovered from the area beneath the house were, for the most part, likely brought in by rodents. Large concentrations of artifacts were found inside rodent burrows, and the hard-packed soil undisturbed by rodents contained no artifacts.

Another means by which artifacts may have come to be underneath the house might have to do with earlier renovations: the overseer's house has been renovated at least twice previously, first in the mid-19th century, and again in the late 1950s (Worthington and Miles 2007). The first renovation appears to have stripped the house down to its frame. The chimneys were rebuilt, the siding was replaced, and the extant

plaster and lathing dates to this period. Renovations in the late 1950s included construction of a small frame addition to accommodate a bathroom, and installation of a modern kitchen. Flooring was replaced on both stories, the fireplaces were blocked, and some of the exterior siding was replaced (Worthington and Miles 2007).

At the time of our investigations, the floors were constructed of wooden boards that were flush with one another, with no gap between boards. These floorboards were installed in the 1950s. If the floorboards were spaced farther apart prior to the 20th-Century renovation, it is possible that artifacts could have fallen between cracks in the floor. Further supposition is impossible, since the entire yard area of the house had been mechanically removed by a backhoe without archaeological monitoring. Nothing is known about trash deposits or excavations that might have been done during renovations, or other events which might have influenced the arrangement of material culture under the house or in its surrounding landscape.

Artifacts found included architectural materials such as nails, brick fragments, plaster and mortar, more modern items such as fragments of linoleum tile and plastic, fragments of pottery, glass bottles, clay pipestems, and coal. The datable artifacts range in date from around 1800-present, which coincides more or less exactly with the date of construction (1815) indicated by the dendrochronology study.

The archaeological survey under and around the Overseer's House was, of necessity, limited in scope, but it works along with the known architectural history and recent dendrochronological study of the building to provide at least a partial picture of the lives of those who occupied the house. In addition, it offers a further insight into the lives of the Lloyd family, their overseers, and their slaves. The construction of the

Overseer's House was part of a much larger overhaul of the entire Wye House farm property and the Lloyd's plantation enterprise. Although there is some evidence that "The Long Green" existed prior to Edward Lloyd (IV)'s extensive reimagining of the plantation, the Long Green as Frederick Douglass encountered it *very likely did not*. It is now clear that the landscape Douglass confronted as a small boy was almost entirely new, including the "little red house, up the road, occupied by Mr. Sevier, the Overseer" (Douglass 1857: 47). It reinforces the overall impression of the Long Green area uncovered by the ongoing archaeological project: one of constant and responsive change, adapting to the ever-changing problems of surveillance and discipline presented by the increasing population of enslaved families at Wye House.

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