

Excavation of a Crossroads Deposit at Magnolia Plantation



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Background:

I wanted to assist in expanding on the work done by Dr. Kenneth Brown at the Magnolia Plantation (part of the Cane River Creole National Historic Park) in Natchitoches, Louisiana. Specifically, I wanted to complete excavation of a crossroads deposit found in Cabin 4 on the plantation. Two deposits had already been unearthed, one had been found, but not excavated, and yet another possible deposit had not yet been found. My specific interest was in the cultural and religious implications of the findings in Cabin 4, and what they could tell us about the lives of the people who lived there.

Techniques/ Approach:

Primarily, my approach consisted of further excavation beneath the floors of Cabin 4. The units dug were 3 foot by 3 foot, and divided into 9 subunits, each 1 one foot by 1 foot. Units were dug one subunit at a time going to a depth of a tenth of a foot (a level) at a time. This method takes longer and is more involved than other alternatives, but it allows the findings to be analyzed more meticulously, because we can have a better idea of which artifacts were likely deposited near the same time, and make more educated guesses at how they relate to each other. The deposits themselves might also have had artifacts around them which, though not part of the actual deposit, could shed more light on the interpretation of the deposits as well as refine the time estimates of when these deposits were put in the ground.



Results and Analysis:

In the process of excavating what we believed to be the Western crossroads deposit, we were able to confirm that there had in fact been a hole dug there, as evidenced by lighter soil in a rectangular shape. Western deposits are traditionally linked with the transition to death. In the deposit, we found significant amounts of both ash and plaster, both white, a color that is symbolically linked with death. If there was more to the deposit than what we found, it could be that it was made of organic materials which had already decomposed. We were unable to find a Northern deposit, and there are several possibilities as to why. The deposit may have been carried off by rodents (there was much rodent activity around it). It also could have been an above ground altar. This is historically plausible in African Creole settings, and an altar would have been acceptable to the surrounding Catholic culture. In Cabin 3, a shell was found just in front of the hearth that had 4 holes deliberately drilled into it in cardinal directions. This supports the idea that crossroads, or cardinal directions, were an important concept to the people who lived in the slave quarters. Additionally, another crossroads deposit was found in Cabin 1 on the same plantation (believed to be the midwife's cabin). The Northern deposit in Cabin 1 also was not excavated, as it would have been under the hearth, which was inaccessible.

