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The Big House and the Slave Quarters

Two Articles by Carl Anthony -- 1976

Part I. Prelude to New World Architecture

Part II. African Contributions to the New World

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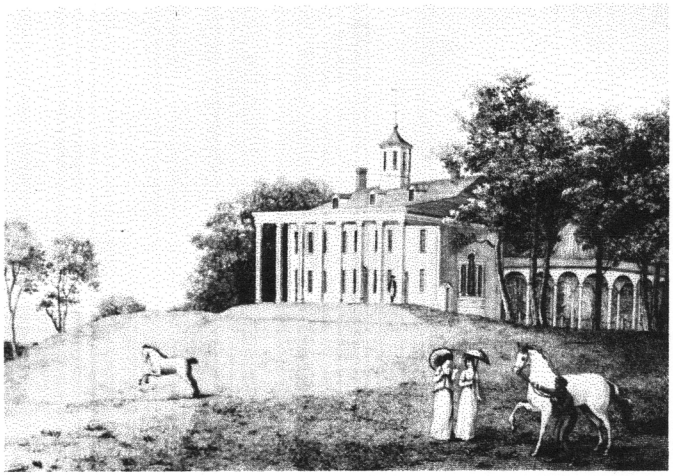
The Big House and the Slave Quarters

Part I. *Prelude to New World Architecture*

Carl Anthony

If we are to have a fine architecture, we must begin at the other end from that where our sumptuously illustrated magazines on home-building and architecture begin—not with the building itself, but with the whole complex out of which architect, builder, and patron spring, and into which the finished building, whether it be a cottage or a skyscraper, is set. Once the conditions are ripe for a good architecture, the plan will flower by itself. . . . Lewis Mumford



"Mount Vernon, the Seat of the late Gen. G. Washington." Drawn by L. Birch, 1801. Engraved by S. Seymour, 1804. Reproduced courtesy of The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union.

LANDSCAPE is publishing Professor Anthony's article in two parts. The first installment, which appears here, traces settlement patterns in the South and describes social and economic factors that influenced the design of the built environment. The second installment, which will appear in our Autumn 1976 issue, will explore African architectural elements in the new world.

I went visiting old plantations in the South mostly to satisfy my curiosity about the physical setup of slavery. I also hoped to gain some historical perspective on the role of the contemporary Afro-American architect. My interest in this subject goes back to the middle sixties, when a great deal of national attention was focused on black people. Afro-American writers, musicians, and political leaders were showing the nation how much of its own inner life had been ignored by avoiding the experience of its Afro-American population.

During those same years, the central myth of modern architecture was falling apart. Planners and architects were beginning to see that architecture was more than industrial and technological efficiency and that man-made environment reflected values and a way of life. The narrow interpretation of architecture, characterized by the international school, was giving way to a broader appreciation of the diversity of human communities whose needs had to be met.

By the late sixties, it had become very fashionable among a certain group of Afro-American architects to speak of "black architecture," that is, a way of making buildings that responded to the particular needs of black people. However, a great deal of confusion lay beneath such talk, because of the absence of concrete examples. There were a few practicing Afro-American architects, but their work was indistinguishable from most of the work of their white counterparts. They had received their professional training in American architectural schools where no reference was made to black people. There were no important black architects to speak of, no building enterprise save slums and housing projects that reflected Afro-American aspirations for a better life.

If the black American architect occupied a marginal position in the western architectural tradition, his situation was compounded by the fact that the Afro-American intellectual tradition had no organized body of thought concerning architecture and environmental design. The racist institutional climate that existed prohibited the introduction of African examples. Few black American visitors to Africa had the interest or courage to marvel at the ingenuity of traditional African architecture. What little that had been published on the subject was mostly in French. In any case, a black American searching in Africa for architectural roots faced a certain paradox: a house in the black ghetto of North Philadelphia has more in common with a wealthy residence on Society Hill in the same city than it has with an Ashanti shrine house. The study of traditional African architecture would carry the black American far away from the rooms and porches, streets and alleys where he grew up. Yet these intimate places, which had played such an important role in forming his perception of the world, were designed and built by others with no understanding of his community.

Nothing in my professional education prepared me to examine such paradoxes. An architect perforce begins buildings at some point in history, and everything he does is affected by his understanding of what came before. The roots of the Afro-American community are in the institution of slavery. In the course of my own professional education I came to understand that I could not be released from this insane preoccupation with the relationship between architectural form and racial identity until I came to terms with that disgraceful period of American history.

The depravity of the "peculiar institution" has made it impossible for the descendants of master and slave alike to view the period without passion, producing on one side an extreme sentimentality for lost worlds and on the other a kind of vacuum born of shame and outrage. Recent historical studies have illuminated this dark period of American history, and the momentum of the Afro-American struggle for human rights has brought much of this information to the attention of the public. No books on American architectural history, however, explore the total context of building in the American South. Specialized works, dealing with a particular state or locality, concentrate on the stylistic variations of the mansion houses. More generalized works on national architectural history mention these mansions in passing, with an apologetic remark about slavery. But the main story line moves from New England to the industrial and commercial explosion marked by the flowering of the Chicago School.

The institution of slavery, however, is an important chapter in the emergence of American architecture. Both Jefferson and Washington were slave holders, and their political and architectural prominence in the eighteenth century was directly related to the value of their holdings. The plantation system was a territorial factory, which consumed people and laid waste the natural environment. A West Indian philosopher, C. R. L. James, once noted that for purposes of study, its precision of outline is unique. Within the plantation system's boundaries it is possible to examine the beginning of industrial agriculture, which embodies new attitudes toward the landscape; the early and formative social relations between European and non-European peoples; the rationalization of the labor force and the new building types it required; the dialectic between town and country; and the systematic destruction and transformation of old ways, both African and European, within the context of a global economy.

The large plantation was a microcosm of that transformation. Its finite population was relatively isolated by distance and social convention from the rest of the world, yet connected by an umbilical cord to the pulse of global change. The plantation was a shared environment. Between the big house and the slave quarters were places of work and play for master and slave alike. Its extremes of penury and luxury made a deep psychic impact on all who passed their lives within its secluded precincts.

The landscape of social consciousness in the colonial and antebellum South had its physical counterpart. The political and legal history of slavery is inexorably intertwined with and influenced by its specific environment and setting. Thus, the architecture of slavery reveals social and political dynamics. It tells of the hunger to create at any price an illusion of wealth, beauty, ease, and graciousness in a land of harsh realities.

For the historian of the built environment it offers a chance to notice and evaluate much that has been missing from the history of American architecture. For the sociologist of architecture, it offers a field in which to test certain assumptions about architecture, political power, class, and ethnic identity. The environmental psychologist can study the proliferation of meaning attached to specific places in the landscape: the swamp, the big house, the kitchen, the quarters, the sugarhouse, the landing, the bayou, the levee.

But for the Afro-American architect, the plantation system is an essential element of the past, the missing link without which his present and future roles are incomprehensible. Black people had an enormous impact on the settlement pattern of the Old South. Indeed, the complexities and opportunities posed by their presence were major determinants of southern regional architecture; perhaps, in the final analysis, these factors gave the built environment its peculiar characteristics.

The story is far from simple. It requires an appreciation of the cultural baggage brought to the New World from both Europe and Africa and an understanding of that strange natural and social setting that was the stage for confrontation. The Europeans brought feudal traditions of the medieval period, emerging technologies, and the geometric, authoritarian, rigid architectural traditions of the Renaissance. On the African side were intricacies of climatic adaptation suitable for the rain-forested tropics, extended-family compound arrangements, and ways of building in mud and thatch that would work in a pinch when no other materials were available. The amalgam produced on southern soil was, perhaps, unflattering to both European and African newcomers. But it is, nonetheless, an important chapter in the emergence of the architecture of the modern world.

My exploration of the built environment of the colonial and antebellum South from several points of view suggests the ways in which the encounter between African and European shaped the land use arrangements and ultimately the architecture of the Old South. The pattern of colonization reveals the basic geographic contours of the peculiar institution of slavery, the scale of its impact, and its dynamic interplay with other settlement forms. The examples at Mount Vernon and Monticello show that the accommodation of slavery was one of the early achievements of American architecture. The configuration of these buildings in the landscape, their layout, internal organization, and detailing reflect the preoccupations of the planter class as part of an international slave-trading elite. These different facets all raise the issue of the African contribution to the regional architecture of the southern states, where in many places black people outnumbered whites.

The settlement pattern

The built environment of the South sprang out of the larger pattern of colonization and land settlement, and the plantation system was central to the process. The evolution of the southern pattern of land tenure and use has been outlined by Ulrich Phillips. Essentially he saw a dynamic relationship between two settlement types in the ante-

bellum South: the plantation and the frontier. The plantation was a sizeable unit of agricultural industry based on a highly rationalized division of enslaved gang labor producing a single commodity. The frontier economy, in contrast, relied primarily on hunting and trading with Indians for subsistence, which required individual effort, not gang labor. The farm as a prototype lay roughly between the extremes of plantation and frontier because it employed a modest labor force with little social distinction between supervisor and workman. Differentiated crops were produced largely for subsistence and a local market.

The scenario that unfolded in the South involved an interplay between these ideal settlement types. The pioneers opened fresh soil and dealt with the indigenous population. Soon they were replaced by the farmers who domesticated the territory and raised subsistence crops; these people were in turn pushed out by the highly capitalized, highly organized industrial-agricultural system based on slave labor. This cycle depleted the soil, and the planting class discovered that it was cheaper to move on to new territory than to practice conservation of the land. Thus, the impetus for expansion continued until the South was fully settled. Each settlement type implies a different kind of architecture based on its own programmatic assumptions. The pioneer learned from the Indians and housed himself in temporary structures. The farmer had his homestead. The rich planter required a mansion worthy of his station and shelter for his slaves who represented a valuable investment.

Thus, the institution of slavery exercised a profound influence on the shape of the settlement of the Old South. In his remarkable book, *Tidewater Towns,* John Reps offers a convenient illustration. In the early seventeenth century, Jamestown was settled by the London Company. At the time of settlement, the company thought that town life should constitute the basis of the colony, because of a long series of precedents stretching back to the Roman occupation of England.

> Wee think it fitt, that houses and buildings be so contrived together, as to make if not handsome Townes, yet compact and orderly villages; that this is the most proper, and successful maner of proceedings in the new Plantacions, besides those of former ages, for example of the Spaniards in the West Indies, doth fully instance. (Speech by Governor Culpepper, 1680, quoted in *Tidewater Towns.*)

However, geography combined with a newly emerging plantation system to produce an unanticipated departure from precedent. Attempts were made to establish viable village industries, but these proved unsuccessful; tobacco cultivation attracted the interests of the colonists. They saw that they could do well for themselves by acquiring their own land, producing the staple in quantity, and shipping it directly to England. The navigable tidewaters undermined the need for port towns. Africans had arrived in 1619 and were gradually reduced to slavery. An agricultural system emerged consisting largely of autonomous plantations. Town life was not required since necessities were either produced on the plantation or shipped directly to the colony from England. This new system harmonized with British mercantile policy, which required the shipment of raw materials from the colonies, but the system did not stimulate the growth of towns in Virginia.

> English policy on towns in the Tidewater colonies was thus curiously contradictory. Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, English colonial administrators grumbled about the lack of towns in Virginia and Maryland. Part of this dissatisfaction stemmed from an intuitive judgment that somehow no civilization could exist based almost exclusively on a rural population. Nothing appeared less natural and rational than a settlement pattern of small farmers and large plantations dispersed almost uniformly across the land. Surely this was quite un-English. The Crown could and did almost unceasingly point to the example of New England as a prosperous colony that had properly gathered itself into nucleated settlements of at least modest size, and in the case of Boston, a community that might fairly be called a city.

The slave system underlay this peculiar originality in the settlement pattern, distinguishing the South from the towns of New England.

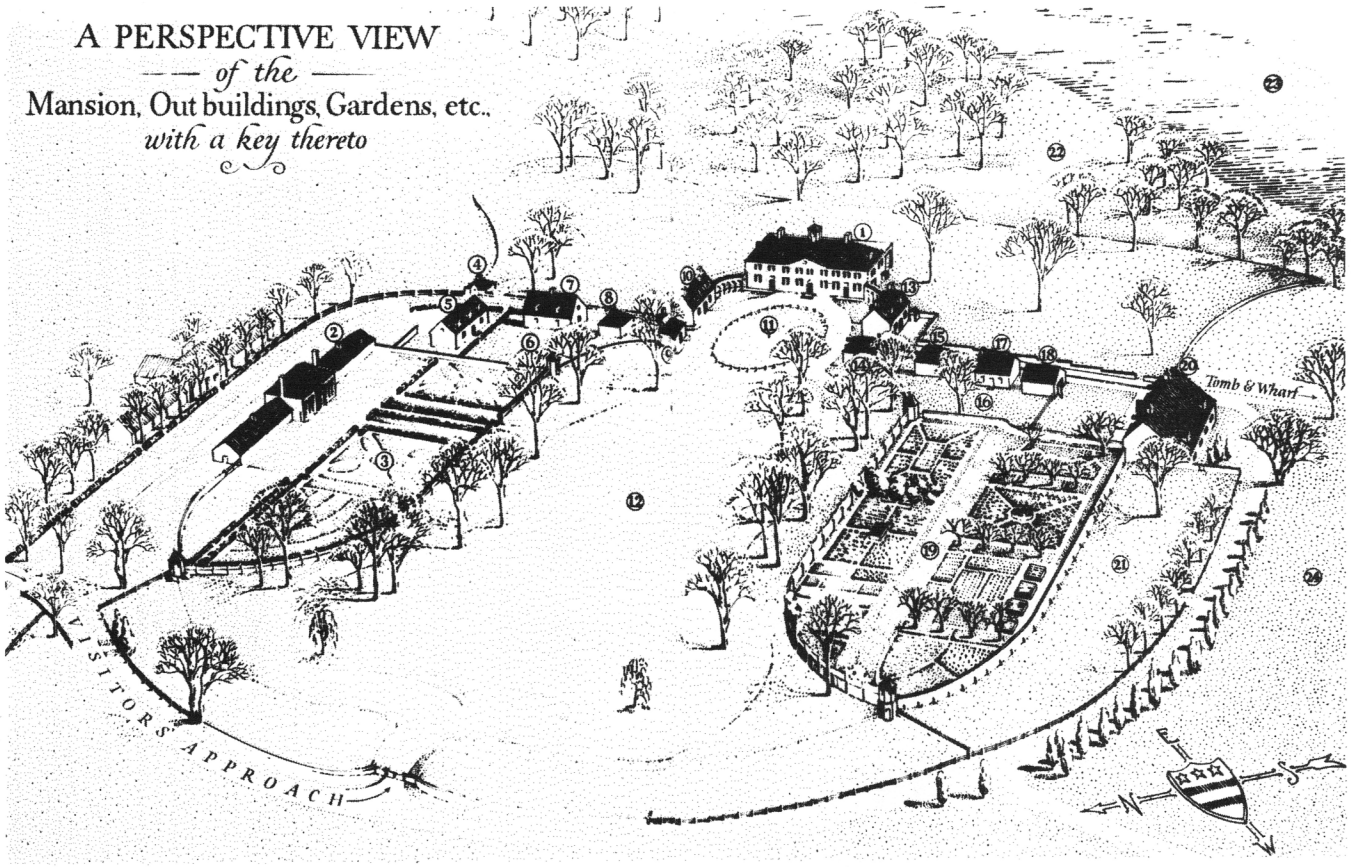
As part of the larger economic system, the colonial South failed to produce its own unique urban building technology. Being predominantly rural, it supported the growth of urbanization elsewhere, in Europe as well as New England. But despite this lack of urbanization, certain programmatic assumptions about the relationship between caste and class, between the rich planters and bondsmen, poor whites and free blacks, house and field slaves were being worked out in the landscape. When sufficient wealth was accumulated, these assumptions emerged in the building projects of the ruling class, producing a distinct, southern regional architecture.

Buildings with real academic character emerged in the tidewater area with the maturity of the slave system. Blacks had arrived in 1619 as indentured servants. Between 1640 and 1660, their status had begun to decline, and in the last third of the seventeenth century a series of legal statutes institutionalized lifetime servitude of blacks. A pronouncement of the 1705 Assembly stated explicitly "that all negro, mulatto, and Indian slaves in all courts of judicature, and other places within this dominion, shall be held, taken and adjudged to be real estate." The institution of slavery enabled the rich planters to accumulate larger and larger plots of land. In 1632, landholdings in Virginia averaged 200 acres; a century later, 5,000-acre holdings were common, according to Monroe E. Billington. During this period black slaves came to dominate the labor scene. They were the backbone of the economic prosperity of the colony.

With this newly created wealth, the planters could begin to dream of keeping up with the latest English fashion in building. Prior to the eighteenth century, their houses were modest and informal. The governor's palace in Williamsburg, built in 1706, was the first great Virginia house. The plans for this building were probably prepared in London and have been attributed to the fashionable British architect Christopher Wren. The palace began a period of mansion building unequalled in the history of English colonies, Waterman writes.

> The first of the eighteenth century houses, which might be expected to have its origin on other grounds, the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg, itself owed, to some extent, its origin to a tax on slaves. On June 10, 1700, Nicholson wrote to the Council of Trade and Plantations, 'I am in hopes that this year, please God (!) there will come a good many negroes. So that there may be money enough in a year or two to build a house for his majesty's Governor, as also the Capitol.'

During the eighteenth century, many mansions were built in the colony of Virginia. The plantation system shaped the form of these mansions in important ways. The

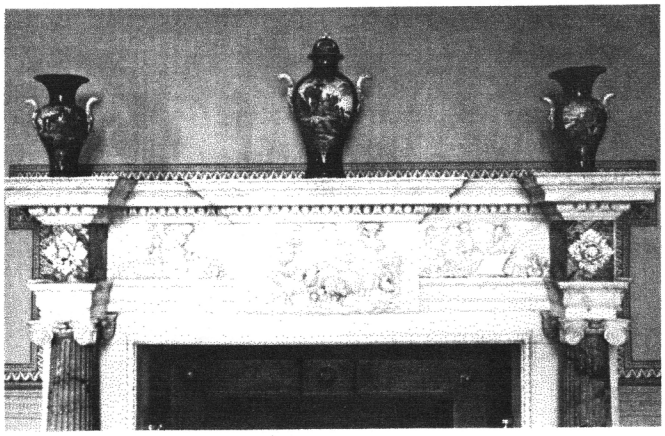


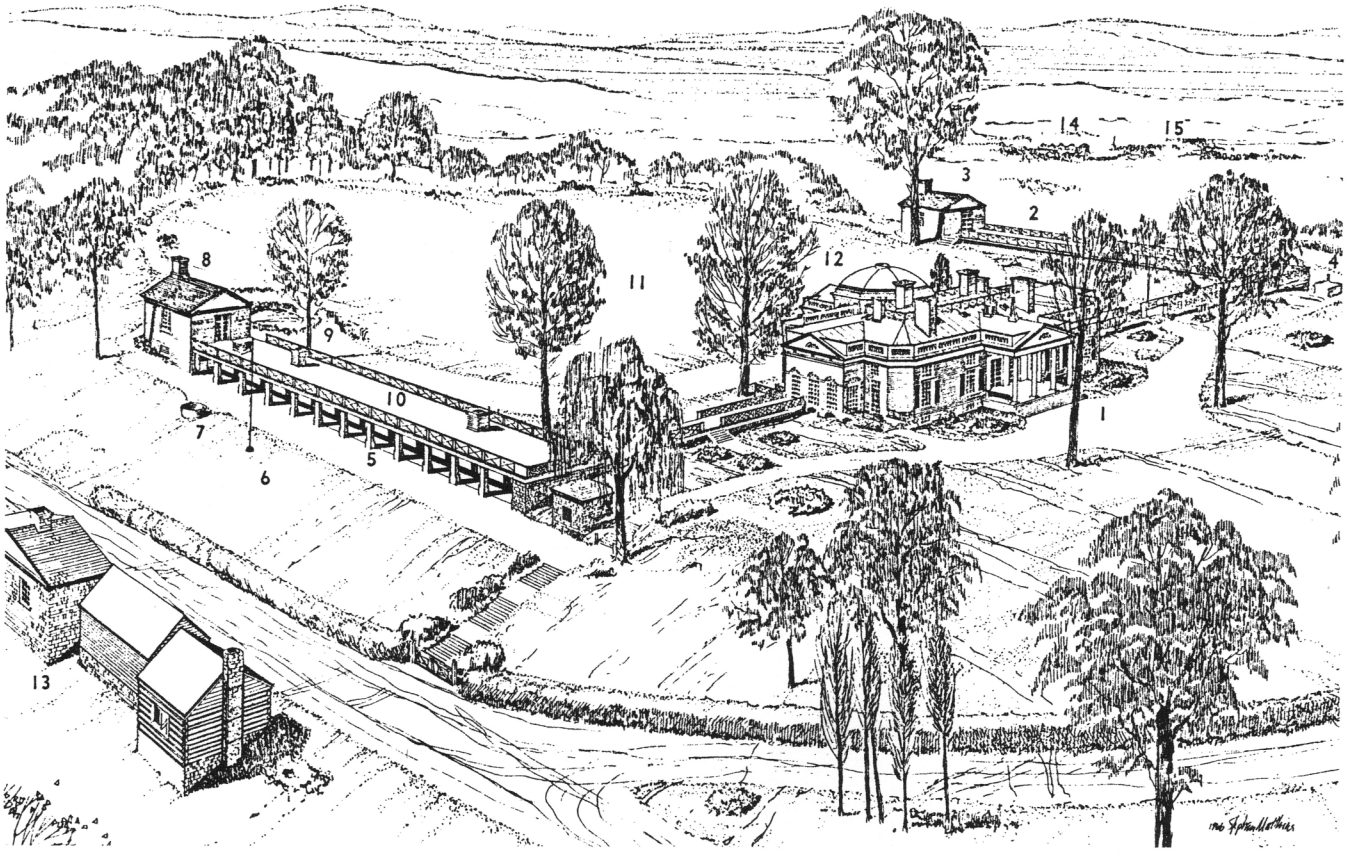
1. Mansion
2. Greenhouse & quarters
3. Flower garden
4. Icehouse
5. Museum
6. Botanical garden
7. Spinning-house
8. Storehouse
9. Gardener's house
10. Office
11. Courtyard
12. Bowling green
13. Kitchen
14. Butler's house
15. Smokehouse
16. Laundry yard
17. Washhouse
18. Coachhouse
19. Kitchen garden
20. Stable
21. Paddock
22. Park
23. Potomac River
24. Vineyard enclosure

Mount Vernon

Reproduced from *Mount Vernon, An Illustrated Handbook*, courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union.

Detail of the mantel piece in the Banquet Room, Big House, Mount Vernon. Reproduced from *Mount Vernon, An Illustrated Handbook*, courtesy of The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union.





1. East front.
2. North terrace walk.
3. North pavilion; also known as Colonel Randolph's study or law office.
4. North offices, i.e., stalls for horses, ice house, carriage house, washroom.
5. South offices, i.e., dairy, servants' rooms, smoke house, kitchen.
6. Fifteen-star flag flown when Jefferson was president.
7. Site of original well.
8. South pavilion; also known as southwest outbuilding.
9. Fish pond.
10. South terrace walk.
11. West lawn, roundabout walk bordered by flowers.
12. West front.
13. Weaver's cottage and gift shop on Mulberry Row.
14. University of Virginia.
15. Charlottesville, Virginia.

Monticello

Reproduced from *Monticello* by Frederick D. Nichols and James A. Bear, Jr., Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, 1967, courtesy of the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation.

Detail of the slave quarters fireplace at Mount Vernon. Reproduced from *Mount Vernon, A Illustrated Handbook*, courtesy of The Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union.

social distance between master and slave was greater than the distance between the upper and lower class in England and required a special accommodation in domestic architecture. The dispersed settlement pattern of the New World and the tenuous wealth of the emerging planter class forced a lowering of scale and a horizontal spreading, which represented a gradual departure from British prototypes.

The patriarchal household

The plantation house at Mount Vernon, built during the period 1730–1787, exemplifies many common features of the patriarchal mansion houses of eighteenth century Virginia. It was on the northwest bank of the Potomac with its gallery overlooking the river. It was located in the center of a complex of buildings, which housed the many people and activities that made up the life of the plantation. It had its own cemetery and wharf. The proximity of their dwelling to the big house indicated the social rank of the hands. The gardener and overseer were closest and symmetrically opposite one another. The slave quarters and the stable were farthest away and occupied similar positions in the hierarchy. As one approaches by land, the mansion is visible from a great distance. The bowling green in the foreground presents the visitor with his first impression of a patriarchal family comfortably at play in the country. The mansion is flanked by large trees, emphasizing the importance of the big house, making it distant and monumental, while at the same time screening the dependencies. The lower level of the entrance road makes the mansion seem bigger than it is, at least to persons arriving on foot. The curve in the driveway passes the bowling green and gives fleeting glimpses of the big house and lengthens the arrival itinerary.

Upon arrival at the forecourt, the intimacy of scale of the big house and its immediate flanking dependencies is surprising. It seems like a stage set deliberately conceived as a kind of theatrical illusion. The channeled wood siding has been sanded to look like stone. The main building is three stories high and connected by a colonnade to the adjacent courtyard buildings, the kitchen on one side and an office on the other. These are two stories and visibly lower in scale than the main house. A service lane runs through the village-like collection of buildings perpendicular to the main line of approach, and the courtyard of the big house serves as a kind of central square.

"A large Virginia estate was a little empire," Washington Irving wrote in his biography of George Washington. "The mansion house was the seat of government, with its numerous dependencies, such as kitchens, smoke house, workshops and stables." Approximately ninety people lived at the mansion house complex at Mount Vernon in 1786. Most were slaves who provided essential services to the household and to more than one hundred fifty slaves on four tributary farms. Stepping down from the main dependencies of the big house at the intersection of the service lane and the courtyard were the gardener's house on the north side, and the overseer's house symmetrically opposite it on the south side. (The illustrated handbook given to tourists at Mount Vernon today shows a curious inconsistency on the overseer's house. On one page, it is called the butler's house; on another page, it is called a storehouse.) The visual reduction of the subsidiary buildings is carried consistently throughout the complex. As the guidebook says:

> These subsidiary buildings housed many people and served a variety of essential purposes; only a carefully developed plan could have subordinated them in such proximity to the main household and, at the same time, incorporated them as harmonious units of the group.

The service lanes are sloped downward away from the big house, further diminishing the visual scale of the outbuildings, while providing direct access to them. On the north lane, the spinning house was a residence and workspace for ten or more slave women who manufactured textiles for the plantation. It is further away from the big house than the residence of the gardener, who was a German, and seems about the same size, though it undoubtedly supported a great deal more activity. As the path leaves the main house in the direction of the slave quarters, it curves to the left so that the residence of the slaves is quite invisible from any of the main vistas. The principal entrances to the barrack-like quarters turn their backs to the garden and greenhouse, which is given an exaggerated importance. No windows of the slave quarters are visible on the garden side, so the structures give the appearance of an enclosure wall forming the backdrop for a row of espaliered fruit trees, instead of wings for the housing of slaves. Yet this arrangement, which casts an unflattering light on the democratic pretentions of our first president, was probably welcomed by the slaves because it afforded them some privacy from the activities of the big house.

The quarters, however, were crowded. Evidence suggests that seventy-five to ninety slaves lived in these barracks with no special accommodations for family units. The quarters consisted of four separate rooms, each with its own fireplace. The dimensions of each room, which served as a common living and sleeping room for approximately twenty slaves, were eighteen feet by thirty-four feet. The rooms may have been furnished with double-tiered bunks that provided sleeping accommodation for house slaves, artisans, and their children.

The main rooms of the big house were, and still are, elaborately decorated with carved plaster mouldings and intricate mantel pieces. Some upper chambers were originally wallpapered, but the patterns have not survived. By contrast, interior decoration is wholly lacking in the service areas as it is in the slave quarters. This lack of ornamentation in the subordinate parts of the complex curiously foreshadowed a later movement in architecture, which stripped away every unnecessary embellishment to make buildings appear more functional. The windows of the slave quarters are much smaller than those in any other part of the complex.

Such was the housing accommodation of Washington's favored house servants. Their dwelling place was considered far more comfortable than the typical cabins on outlying farms where 250 of Washington's field slaves lived and worked. These cabins no longer exist; the farms that were the source of Washington's wealth have long since been divided up for suburban development.

The mansion built by Thomas Jefferson at Monticello is even more remarkable in its handling of domestic slavery than the collection of buildings at Mount Vernon. Lambeth and Manning observed:

> Jefferson's conception was a step forward in the art of home building. The colonists had crowded about themselves offices and shops for the conduct of a planter's business: weaving, drying, distilling, shoemaking, tailoring, blacksmithing, and wagon making. Jefferson began by concealing all these handicrafts, removing the symbols which suggested service, veiling the materials of our lower activities, perfecting and minimizing the labor in them, *while preventing their overflow into, and their hard intrusion upon, the spirit of a home. Not only did Monticello do this, but it went further by obscuring those that performed the service.* Dishwashers and cooks, butlers and maids came quietly through concealed passages; with wood, water, food and ashes they ascended and descended stairs which had been cunningly tucked away in unobtrusive fashion. . . . The old time Virginian required for his living as well as for the entertainment of his guests, that troops of slaves be moving in all directions with wood for fires, cans for ashes, cold water for drinking, warm water for bathing, and hot water for shaving.

Jefferson's plan called for a broad terrace behind the main portion of the building at ground level, extending outward in the form of twin "L" shaped promenades that conceal extensive out offices underneath. The lower-level plan is shaped like a "U." An all-weather passageway forming its base connects an exposed, colonnaded pathway on both the north and south sides of the complex, turning away from the central lawn. The slave quarters, smokeroom, dairy, and kitchen open onto the south colonnade, while the stalls for horses and space for carriages open on the colonnade to the north. Like the site layout at Mount Vernon, the symmetrical placement of the slave quarters and stables was not merely a formal accident. Though it echoed certain arrangements borrowed from Palladio, it indicated in architectural terms what was commonly accepted among planters in the South—that slaves were equivalent to livestock. In fact, as Frederick Law Olmsted noted during his journey to the cotton kingdom a half century after Jefferson's time, slaves were often traded for horses.

At the upper level, the parlor at Monticello opens onto a broad lawn. This layout prevented the slaves who carried out the daily functions of the plantation from intruding on the atmosphere of ease and relaxation. Thus, Jefferson's remarkable achievement consisted in his skillful handling of the servant and served spaces of the building. He effectively rendered the slaves invisible while integrating their activities into a single structure at one with the surrounding landscape.

The decision to put the main floor above the service areas followed a typically Latin custom of placing the important floor on the second level. This vertical delineation of functions is found, for example, in Portuguese slave trading fortresses all along the coast of West Africa. The first European building in the tropics, the fortress at Elmina (in what is now the modern state of Ghana) incorporated this arrangement in 1482. The governor's quarters and accommodation for his guests and military attaché were on the upper levels, with dungeons for imprisoned slaves below. The courtyard of the very same building contained a two-story structure—the room below served for the marketing of the slaves; the upper level was fitted out as a chapel. The architectural device of a hidden access connecting the "higher realm" of the whites with the "lowly functions" that were the domain of the blacks is also found in the slave castle at Elmina. A narrow stairwell connects the governor's apartment to the dark recesses below where female slaves were kept for sexual exploitation and entertainment.

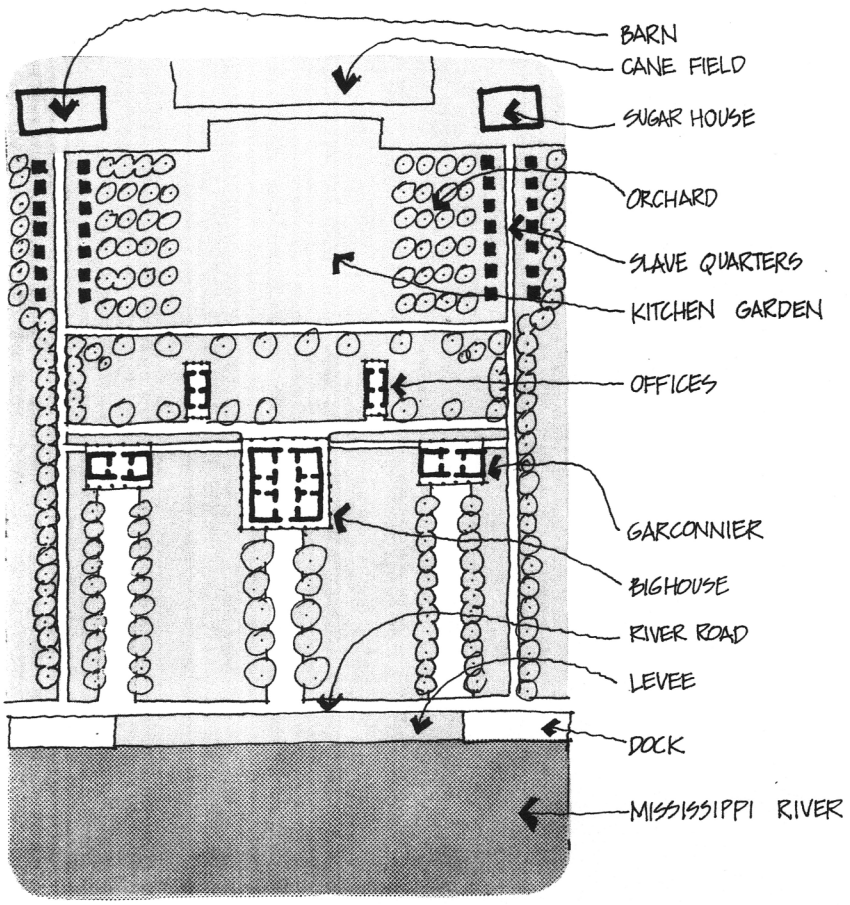
A member of the slave-holding elite, Jefferson belonged to a class that had connections in the West Indies as well as Africa. Since he was a man conscious of precedent in all his undertakings, he was probably influenced by the weight of the European slave-trading experience, which by this time had been going on for three centuries.

Jefferson was surrounded by his own slaves who numbered around 125 hands. *They* built Monticello. Le Duc de la Rochefoucauld explained the system in a letter written in 1796:

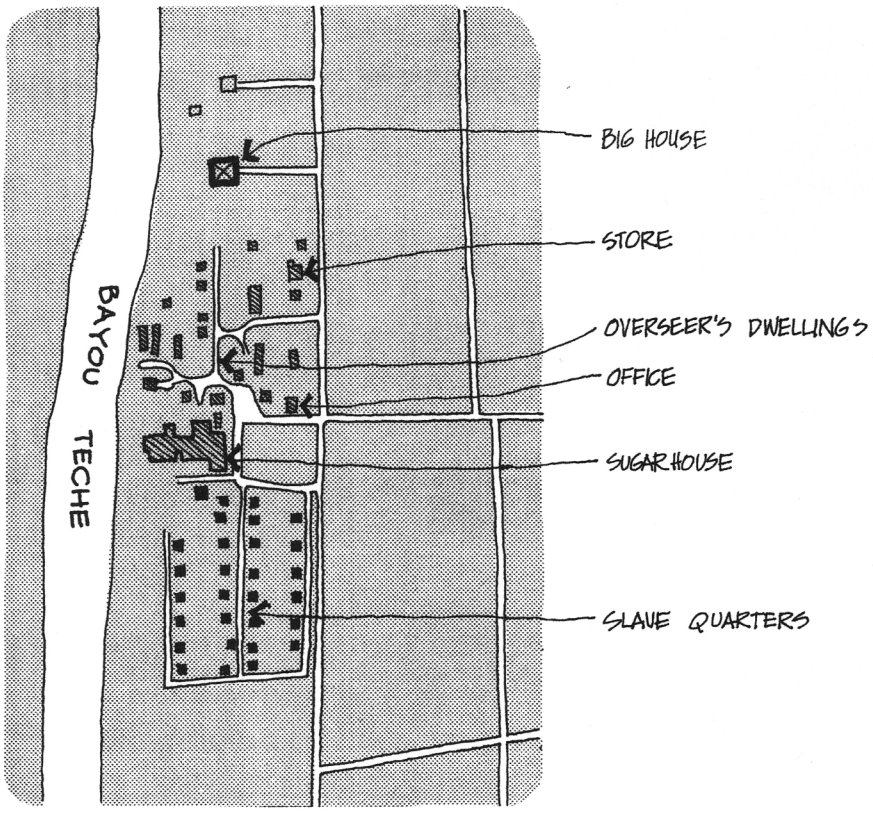
> As he [Jefferson] cannot expect any assistance from the two small neighboring towns, every article is made on his farm: his negroes are cabinet makers, carpenters, masons, bricklayers, smiths, etc. The children he employs in a nail factory, which yields already a considerable profit.

The twenty-mile road system, which includes generous leisure walks and connects every part of the 3,900-acre plantation, was scratched out of the untouched mountainside by slaves using only hand tools. The presence of blacks at Monticello posed for Jefferson a contradiction that he was not particularly proud of. He apparently thought slavery immoral, but he needed slaves to maintain his property. He claimed that blacks were intellectually inferior to whites, but he acknowledged the genius of Benjamin Banneker, the black mathematician he later appointed surveyor of the nation's capital. He claimed that blacks were physically repugnant, but he is reputed to have fathered five children of his house slave, Sally Hennings, according to Winthrop Jordan.

Perspective view of Elmina Castle, the first European building in the tropics. The castle was begun in 1482 in present-day Ghana. Reproduced from *Trade Castles and Forts of West Africa* by A. W. Lawrence, Stanford University Press, 1964.



Plan of Uncle Sam Plantation, St. James Parish, Louisiana. Redrawn from *Atlas of Louisiana* by Milton B. Newton, Jr., Louisiana State University Press, 1971. Original illustration by Ada K. Newton. Reproduced courtesy of Milton B. Newton, Jr.



Bayou block plantation. Redrawn from *Atlas of Louisiana* by Milton B. Newton, Jr., Louisiana State University Press, 1971. Original illustration by J. B. Rehder. Reproduced courtesy of Milton B. Newton, Jr.

Jefferson found the presence of slaves annoying. His genius turned toward the invention of architectural devices that would keep them discreetly hidden, but available for service. He invented a rotating door with semicircular shelves on one side allowing servants to bring food from the kitchen without actually entering the dining room or being seen. Slaves had to use two tiny stairways, each unobtrusively located in the cross passageways serving the principal wings, to reach the upper floors. Perhaps one of these stairways, not unlike the hidden passage in the Elmina slave castle, was used by Sally Hennings coming and going from her master's bedroom.

Mount Vernon and Monticello are two examples of prestigious eighteenth century tidewater plantations whose architecture was an intimate reflection of the slave system. The pattern of land subdivision, the siting and arrangement of buildings in the landscape, the circulation between rooms of the big house, the garden and the quarters and the order of detailing—all indicate a grappling with the peculiar institution and its social implications. The success of these buildings is underlined by the gross weight of facts about life on the plantation. Planters like Washington and Jefferson had scores of slaves, perhaps ten or twenty times the number of relatives and guests residing at any one time on the land. Yet upon arriving, one was only aware of the mansion house and the comfort it suggested. The architects of these mansions manipulated the builder's art to arrange a setting that reinforced the image of the planter at the pinnacle of a caste system in which poor whites were more or less irrelevant and black slaves were at the bottom.

Plantation houses such as these still dot the landscape in the southern states. Many serve as museums for tourists who take a patriotic and antiquarian interest in them. As one might suspect, few of these tourists are black. When I showed up at a Potomac plantation named Shirley, the owner and caretaker who was a direct descendant of Robert E. Lee, was as surprised to see me as I was to meet him. When I arrived, he was describing the furnishings of the mansion house to an attentive audience of perhaps fifteen tourists, in a rapid dialect that was barely intelligible to me. The tour concluded beneath the spectacular mansion staircase where it had begun, and when his daughter took over to meet the new group of tourists already forming at the door, he and I had a chance to talk. He was quite pleasant, and I learned from him that the domestic slaves had lived over the kitchen in a building flanking the entry court, some distance from the big house. Presumably, the arrangement was dictated by a desire to keep the odors of cooking and the noise made by the slaves away from the main house. It certainly was inconvenient from other points of view, particularly when, during a great rainstorm, the slaves were forced to carry food through the mud and slush from the kitchen to the big house.

Approximately 200 field slaves at this plantation slept in seven barrack buildings three-quarters of a mile from the main house. Only the chimneys remain, because the buildings were deliberately burned down in the 1840's in order to control a cholera epidemic.

Patterns similar to the tidewater plantations were repeated in other parts of the antebellum South. For example, sugar plantations built along the Mississippi in the nineteenth century usually had a large mansion facing the river flanked by the *garconnier,* where young men of the ruling family entertained their friends through sexual adventures with black and mulatto concubines. Slave quarters were constructed in the sugar fields out rear.

The buildings I have been describing were known to antebellum southerners as "show plantations." Most whites could not achieve this ostentatious display, which, nevertheless, set the tone for the whole region. On a journey from Washington to Richmond by steamboat and rail, Olmsted made the following observation:

> A good many old plantations are to be seen; generally standing in a grove of white oaks, upon some hilltop. Most of them are constructed of wood, painted white, and have, perhaps a dozen rude looking log cabins scattered around them, for the slaves. Now and then there is one of more pretention with a large porch or gallery in front, like that of Mount Vernon. These are generally in a heavy compact style; less often, perhaps, than similar establishments in the North, in markedly bad, or vulgar taste, but seem in sad need of repairs.
>
> A more common sort of habitation of the white people are either of logs or loosely boarded frame, with a brick chimney running up outside at one end. Everything is very slovenly and dirty about them. Swine, hounds, black and white children, are commonly lying very promiscuously together on the ground about the doors.

Despite its rarity, the romantic ideal of the country gentleman thus came to dominate the architecture of the Old South.

According to W. E. B. DuBois, the cotton gin finally destroyed the old patriarchal grouping of the plantations in the countryside. This invention made it possible to detach the slave quarters from the big house. The mass of slaves stayed down at the quarters by themselves, under the eye of the overseer who became a third party between the master and the slave. From the detached group to absentee landlordism was but a short step. The rich lands lay to the southwest. The high price of cotton and the rapidly increasing internal slave trade from the early nineteenth century onward was the beginning of a system of commercial slavery in the Gulf States, which will ever remain one of the most disgraceful chapters in American history. The big house with its quarters for domestic slaves now moved to the city.

Housing of urban slaves required different facilities from those in the countryside, according to Richard Wade. In the rural setting, planters could choose the location of slave housing from among many options. Given the size of plantations and the lack of good overland transportation, the semi-isolation of the slaves from other plantations was assured. The city, with its small lots and incessant mingling of populations, represented a potential for communication among the slaves. Lack of distance between master and slave created a special problem and required special arrangements. The most common solution had the main house set on the street, with "negro buildings" long and narrow behind. The urban slave quarters, although not much of a home, were better built and possibly more comfortable than their rural counterparts. They were definitely crowded. Although bondsmen outnumbered masters, the slave quarters were much smaller than the big house. Travelers' accounts and statistics of the period show that a significant proportion of the white families living in cities had ten slaves or more.

The physical design of the housing complex forced the

slave to center himself upon the owner and his activities. High walls surrounded each lot, and access to the street was through the main house or a side door. Masonry walls a foot thick, sometimes twelve to sixteen feet high, surrounded and dominated the enclosure. These arrangements, characteristic of New Orleans, Charleston, Louisville, Richmond, Mobile, and Savannah, can still be seen. Alleys were omitted, because they might become gathering places for the slaves (a phenomenon described by Doris Lessing in urban Rhodesia and South Africa). This compound was the urban analogue to the rural plantation.

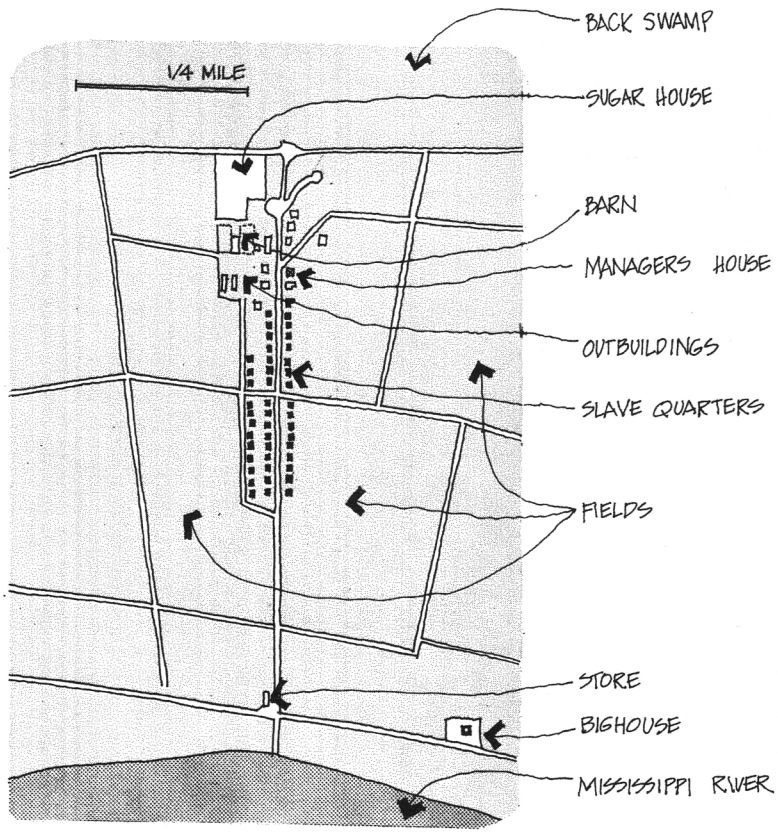
The compound arrangement described was a model in the early years of cities in the South, but with time it gradually loosened and blacks began "living out." Legal sanctions prohibited the slaves from seeking lodging for themselves. Ordinances were passed in every city in the South with provisions for punishment: twenty lashes for the slave, fifty dollars fine for the master. But enforcement of the law was not effective despite its clarity; the system of living out was so widespread that fines for abuse formed an important source of income for the cities.

Masters, especially those engaged in industrial operations, found this living out arrangement more convenient than constructing shelter for many slaves. From the point of view of municipal authorities, problems of supervision were compounded, but from the slaves' perspective, these problems were an advantage. Alleyways in border cities, such as Richmond, became gathering places for blacks. Warehouses, stables, and utility sheds in mercantile districts were usually good places for transients. These provisions were almost always physically inferior to the compound, but slaves, to whom freedom was more important than comfort, preferred them nevertheless.

Blacks began improvising shelter in sheds, basements, attics, single rooms, and small houses. These arrangements, though shabby and inelegant, provided a new level of privacy and independence. Blacks also slept in passageways and hotels and boarding houses. Some bondsmen, who had been hired out, rented rooms or dwellings by themselves. Sheds and shanties began to spring up at the edges and back ports of cities. These, built by both blacks and whites, were constructed expressly for and rented to persons of color.

Slaves did not live in ghettoes in the early years of the antebellum South. Blacks and whites were scattered almost uniformly throughout the urban fabric. The slaves lived in households together with the ruling families, and these compounds were designed to keep them isolated from the larger groups of blacks who shared a common set of concerns. The compound buildings, with their high walls and controlled entry points, were constructed to reinforce the exclusive control the master held over his bondsmen. By the time the Civil War began, however, the system was falling apart. Slaves began living together in communities not unlike modern ghettoes. It was in the economic interest of the industrialists that the slaves should provide, by whatever crude means were available, the cheapest possible housing for themselves.

(Next issue: *African Fragments in the New World.*) □



Linear plantation. Redrawn from *Atlas of Louisiana* by Milton B. Newton, Jr., Louisiana State University Press, 1971. Original illustration by J. B. Rehder. Reproduced courtesy of Milton B. Newton, Jr.

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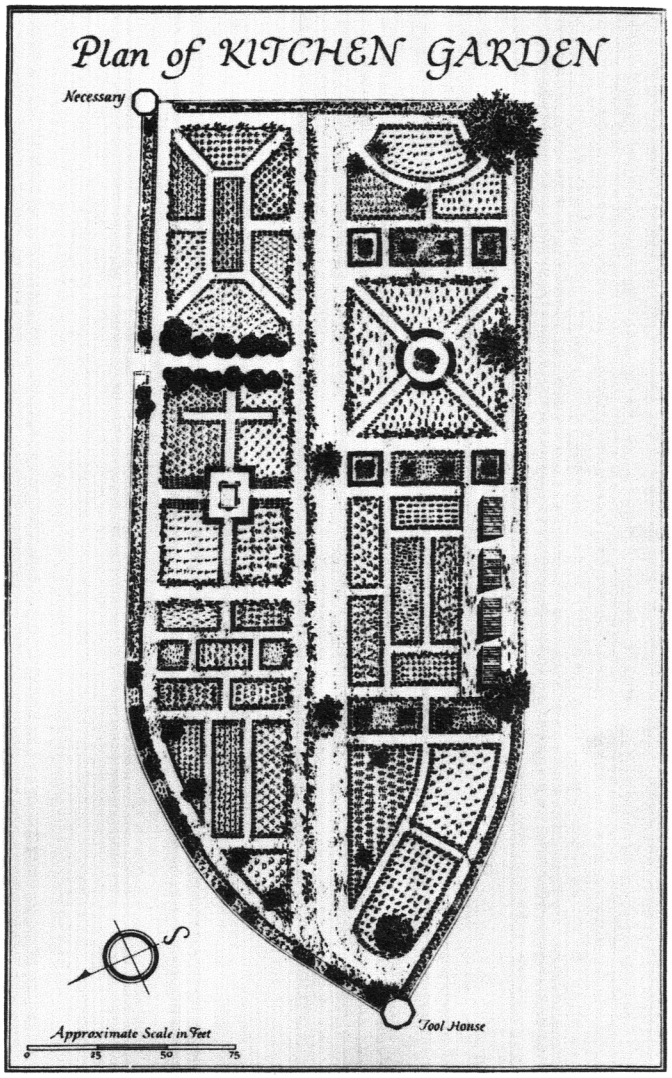


Reproduced from *Mount Vernon, An Illustrated Handbook,* courtesy of the Mount Vernon Ladies' Association of the Union.

But the fact is not that the Negro has no tradition but that there has as yet arrived no sensibility sufficiently profound and tough to make this tradition articulate. For a tradition expresses, after all, nothing more than the long and painful experience of a people; it comes out of the battle waged to maintain their integrity or, to put it more simply, out of their struggle to survive. . . .

This sense of how Negroes live and how they have so long endured is hidden from us in part by the very speed of the Negro's public progress, a progress so heavy with complexity, so bewildering and kaleidoscopic, that he dare not pause to conjecture on the darkness which lies behind him; and by the nature of the American psychology which, in order to apprehend or be made able to accept it, must undergo a metamorphosis so profound as to be literally unthinkable and which there is no doubt we will resist until we are compelled to achieve our own identity by the rigors of a time that has yet to come. James Baldwin

The Big House and the Slave Quarters

Part II. *African Contributions to the New World*

Carl Anthony

In the last issue, Professor Anthony related the social and economic forces underlying the development of southern regional architecture. He postulated that the plantation system provides a missing link in our architectural tradition, and that the accommodation of slavery was one of the tradition's most ingenious accomplishments. As a black architect, he wanted to determine how much of the architectural legacy of the New World represented the building traditions of the twenty million Africans enslaved in the South. What he found in his trip through the South and by research was a curious mingling of European architecture and African building techniques adapted to the climate and the needs of the extended family. The man-made environment that evolved from this exchange reflected a value-system and way of life. In this concluding Part II, he traces African architectural fragments in the New World back to their probable origins.

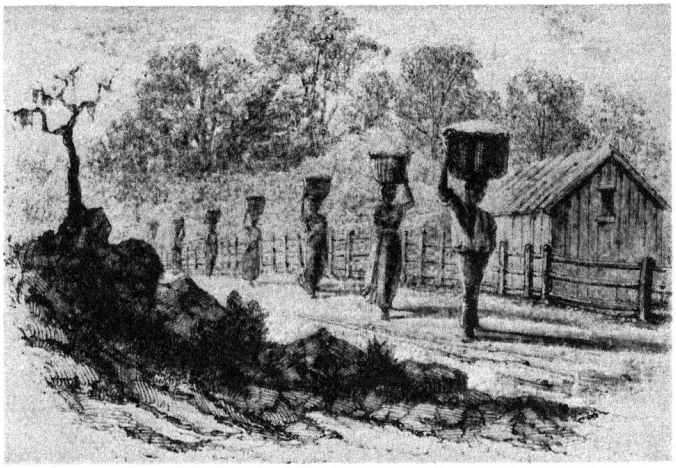


Illustration courtesy Picture Collection, The Branch Libraries, The New York Public Library.

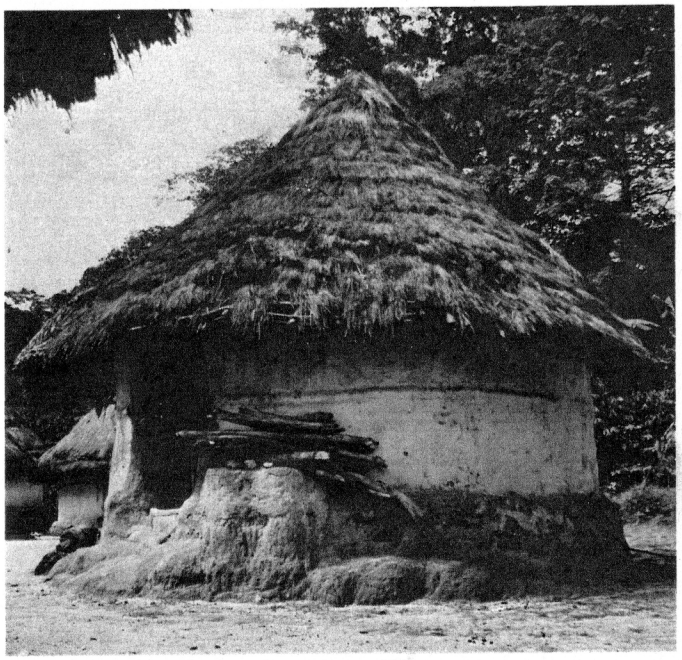
The oppressive institutional arrangements that characterized the period of slavery left an unmistakable mark on the physical environment of the Old South. These arrangements were essentially adaptions and modifications of European feudal and renaissance traditions, and the architecture of the New World reflects these roots.

But what of the Africans? What architectural traditions, if any, did they bring to the American South? We must examine this question from the perspective of the African, who, as Lerone Bennett put it, "stepped out of his hut for a breath of fresh air and ended up, ten months later, in Georgia with bruises on his back and a brand on his chest."

Published studies have shown recently that West Africa has a rich and complex architectural history that predates the European slave trade by centuries. What became of this heritage in the New World? We know slavery destroyed much African tradition and that new syncretic forms sprang up. The transformation is eloquently documented in the history of Afro-American music as well as Afro-American religious experience. But many sociologists and anthropologists (even Herskovits who insisted on the existence of non-material survivals) have suggested that the African material culture was quickly destroyed. Carved wooden masks and ritual objects are nowhere as pervasive in the New World as are survivals and transformations of Afro-American music. Yet we should be careful about accepting the prognosis on the demise of African forms. A comparison between the architecture of the Caribbean and West Africa and that of the South could confirm new precedents for the South.

No such such study has been done. Architectural critics have, until recently, shown no curiosity about traditional African architecture, or the possible survival of the material culture of twenty million black people. Documenting it would present problems. The traditional African compound was build of impermanent materials. Without constant care and attention, they disintegrate without leaving a trace. During the time the English colonies imported many handbooks on the proper methods of construction and the most fashionable aspects of English, French, and Italian building, no documents were available on traditional African construction methods.

Finally, and perhaps most important, the traditional African compound is based on the highly organized social order of extended families. The architecture is an intimate reflection of religious belief and attitudes toward ancestors. The repressive social order of slavery exploited the black population and destroyed the integrity of many social functions, which shaped traditional African architecture. Because of his subordinate status and ignorance of his own traditions, the slave eventually came to model his cabin on



Compound building, Guinea rainforest. Reproduced courtesy of the Musee de L'Homme, Paris. Collection of Dr. Pales.

Waters-Coleman smokehouse at Colonial Williamsburg, Virginia. Reproduced courtesy of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

the house of the master. The situation created a paradox: Any improvement made in the living arrangement of the slave reinforced the superiority of the white man's model and further divorced the African from his own historical roots. Yet the African building traditions in North America were probably far more tenacious than heretofore recognized.

The black population was in the majority in many sections of the Old South. In 1720, sixty-five percent of the population of South Carolina was black. Slavery was widespread, because Europeans needed the skills and labor of Africans to colonize the New World. Africans brought with them a familiarity with malarial marsh and the cypress swamp, which the Europeans found mysterious and lethal. African cultures had placed a high priority on the knowledge of pharmacopoeia, and the slaves brought their remedies to the New World. Africans also knew indigo, rice, and cotton cultivation, all of which were strange to most European and native American workers. During the early years of settlement, traditional African construction skills in mud and thatch probably proved useful as well.

Houses constructed of forked posts in the ground and curtain walls of daub and wattle were common in Louisiana in the early nineteenth century. They were, and still are, in Haiti, Jamaica, and parts of West Africa. DuBois quotes this description of slave quarters in Florida in 1840:

> The dwellings of the slaves were palmetto huts, built by themselves of stakes and poles, thatched with the palmetto leaf. The door, when they had any, was generally of the same materials, and sometimes boards found on the beach. They had no floors, no separate apartments, except the Guinea Negroes had sometimes a small enclosure for their "god houses." These huts the slaves built for themselves after task and on Sundays.

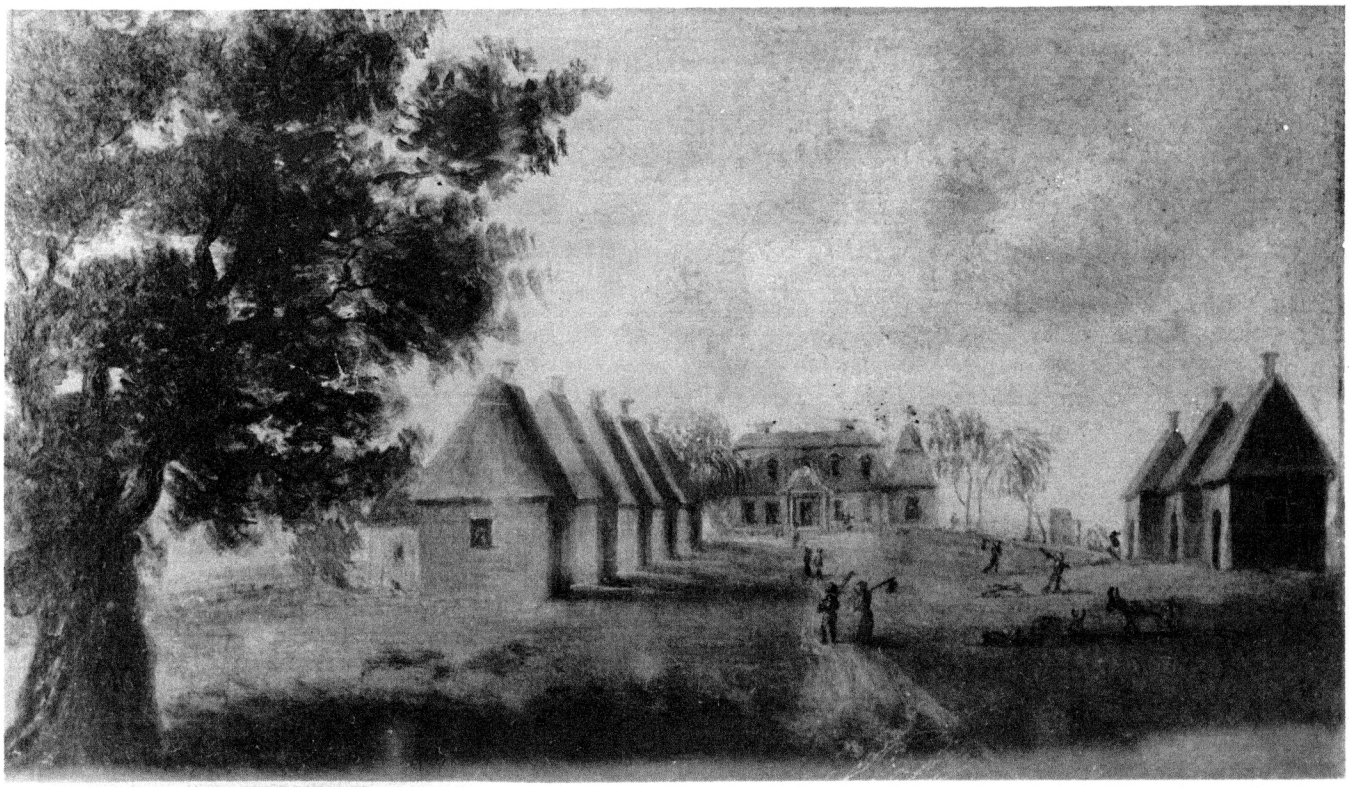
Though thatch was widely used as construction material in various parts of Europe, the palmetto leaf was unknown to Europeans and became a symbol of the novel landscape. Africans and native Americans were familiar with this useful leaf, and they made fans and brooms out of it. And, according to Peter Wood, they "may well have entered into competition with Bermudians who were already exporting baskets and boxes made of woven palmetto. South Carolina's strong basket weaving tradition undoubtedly represents an early fusion of Negro and Indian skills." I saw these leaves still widely used in house construction in West Africa.

The forms of buildings in the South also suggest African influence. In Nachitoches, the oldest settlement in Louisiana territory, there is an odd building now known as Africa House. Metoyer, a free man of color, built it in the early nineteenth century, and it served for a time as a storehouse and a jail. The roof structure, with its steep pitch and deep overhang, recall similar buildings in the West African intermediate rain forest.

In 1859, Frederick Law Olmsted came upon a group of log cabins, which seemed to him curiously small:

> On a very large plantation, there were many exceptionally small negro cabins, not more than twelve feet interiorly. . . . Except for the chimney, the purpose of which, I would not have readily guessed, I should have conjectured that it had been built for a powder house, or perhaps an icehouse; never for an animal to sleep in.

Had he traveled in West Africa, he would have seen many buildings of similar scale used only for storage or sleeping. The climate and social customs there allow most family activities to take place outdoors.

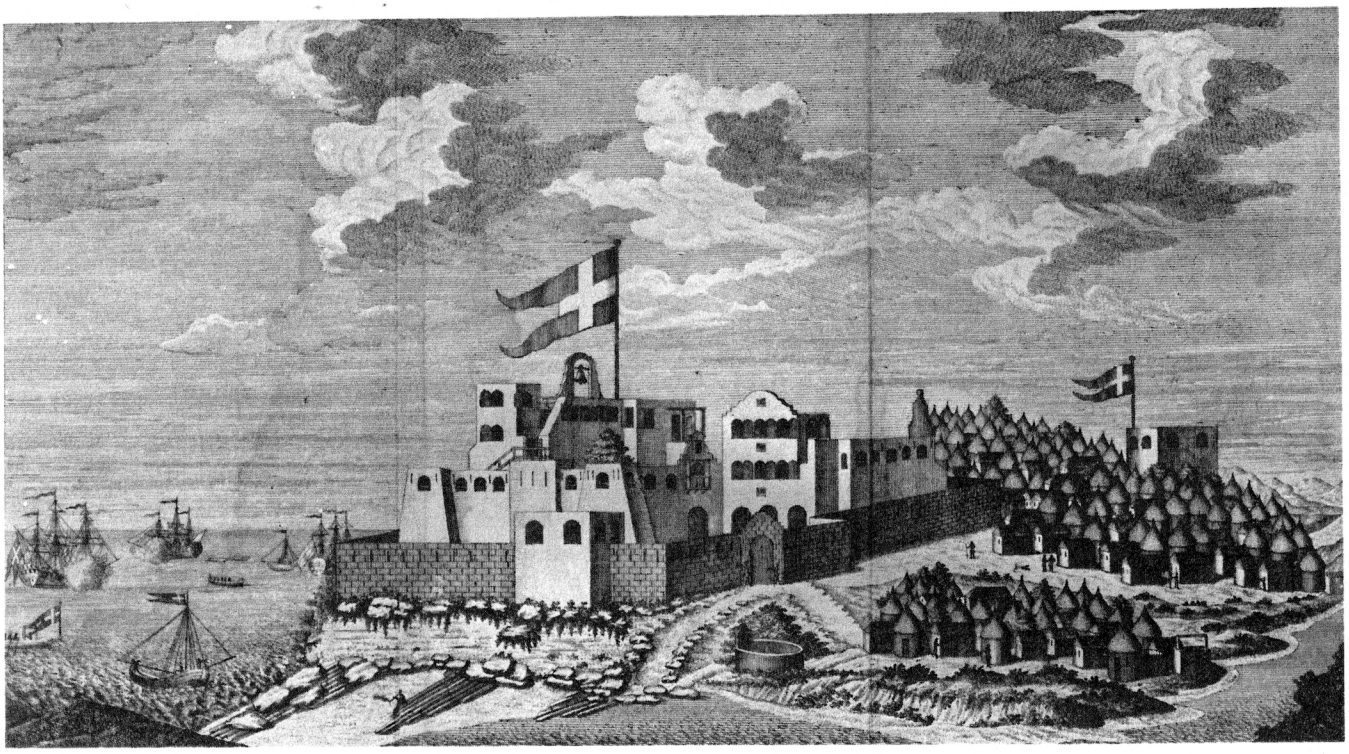


"Slave Quarters at Mulberry Plantation" by Thomas Coram. Collection of the Carolina Art Association, Gibbes Art Gallery, Charleston, South Carolina.

A late-eighteenth-century painting of the street and big house at the Mulberry plantation in South Carolina shows a row of slave quarters, which are unmistakably African. The big house itself, built in 1714, seems a fusion of African and Huguenot architecture. Perhaps the strength of the African influence on the built environment prompted a Swiss newcomer named Samuel Dyssle to comment in 1737 that, "Carolina looks more like a negro country than a country settled by white people."

In my own visits to tidewater plantations in Virginia, I was struck by the number of modest eighteenth-century outbuildings behind the main house and its dependencies that seemed genuinely African in proportion, siting, or construction. According to contemporary authorities, these outbuildings at Mount Vernon, Shirley, Keswick, and elsewhere were not usually slave quarters, but dairies, smokehouses, and storehouses. The most remarkable example of these buildings I have come across is at Williamsburg, Virginia—an eighteenth-century town whose growth stopped when the state capital moved away from the malarial climate to Richmond. Some eighty outbuildings in the rear yards of townhouses have survived for two centuries, or they have been painstakingly reconstructed as part of a $75 million preservation program.

To a visitor familiar with African architecture, the impact of Williamsburg is startling. Several groups of outbuildings with their modest dimensions and pyramidal roofs create the visual effect of a piece of an African village with its multiplicity of dwelling units and granaries. According to Paul Buchanon, architectural curator of Williamsburg, there is no documentation on the designer of these buildings, which were not sleeping quarters for the slaves. They were not constructed of traditional African



This eighteenth-century drawing of Christianborg Castle, Ghana, shows traditional African buildings outside the fortified Big House. Reproduced courtesy of the Royal Commonwealth Society, London.

materials—mud and thatch—which would have disappeared long ago without a trace. The outbuildings I saw were built in the eighteenth-century colonial tradition of brick or clapboard walls and shingle roofs. However, half the population of Williamsburg was black when the first census was taken in the 1780's, and most blacks were either artisans or domestics.

Undoubtedly the outbuildings of Williamsburg were often constructed by slaves and may have been their own design. When the attention of the emerging ruling class shifted toward the construction of major buildings that replicated fashionable British prototypes, domestic slaves were probably given responsibility for minor construction. "The Virginia planters readily learn to become good mechanicks in Building, wherein they are capable of directing their servants and slaves," observed the Rev. Hugh Jones in 1724. Carl Bridenbaugh quotes a Georgia planter, who half a century later wrote of building a house, barn, stable, and outhouses for only $174 and the labor of ten Negroes for three months: "This was done by hiring carpenters and paying them by the month; and two of the slaves learned so much of that art in that time, that by working since with them occasionally, they are become good carpenters enough to raise a shed or build any plain outhouse."

Evidence suggests that slaves built numerous outbuildings. Describing New Orleans as seen from the masthead of a ship in the harbor, the novelist George W. Cable wrote: "One looked down upon a gathering of from twelve to fourteen hundred dwellings and stores, or say four thousand roofs—to such an extent did slavery multiply the outhouses."

The gallery or porch, so striking in southern regional architecture, might well be the legacy of slaves brought from the tropical rain forest to the Caribbean. A recent study done by Marcus Christian, a leading black poet of New Orleans, has shown that the famous wrought iron balconies of that city were fabricated largely by blacks. They dominated the building trades in New Orleans for nearly thirty years in the early nineteenth century. A casual examination of the work itself suggests the possibility of motifs drawn unadulterated from Dahomey. I have seen iron standards used for sacred ancestral shrines in Dahomey very much like the *garde de frise* frequently used on balconies in the Vieux Carré.

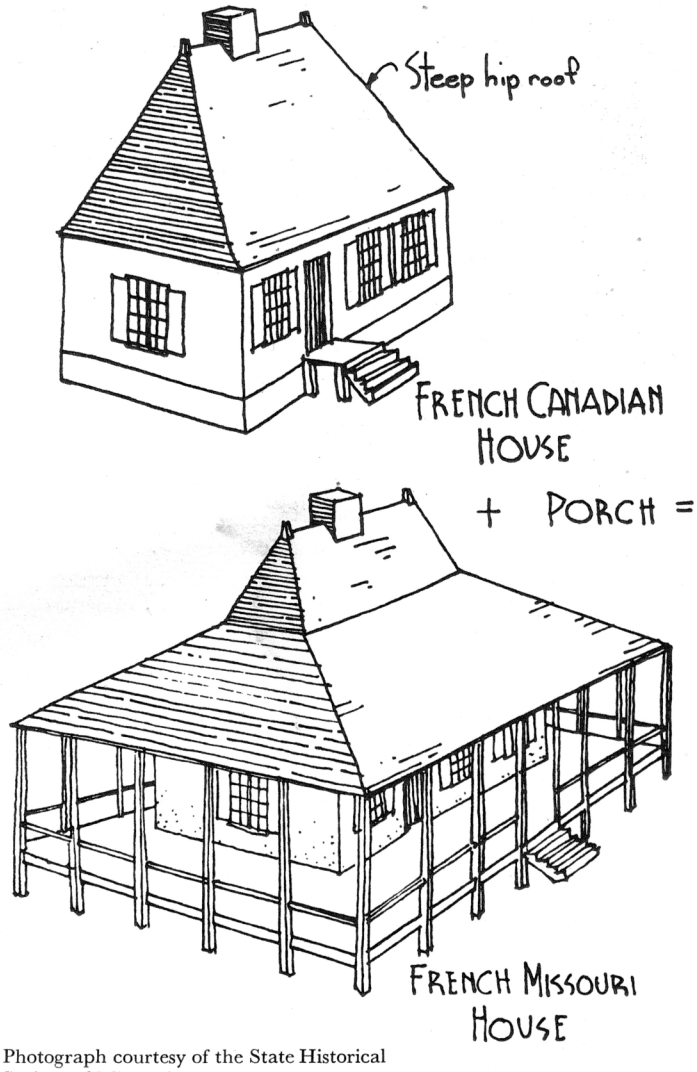
American architectural historians have apparently overlooked the historical precedents for the veranda. They have assumed that early European colonists invented it in response to new climatic requirements. For example, James Marston Fitch, who encouraged me to undertake this study, noted in his pioneering work on American building: "The problem of ventilation, always closely associated with that of heating, did not escape the attention of early Americans, and as the Carolinas and Virginia developed . . . we see the beginnings of another American invention, one might say institution: the porch. This grew steadily in size and importance until it became the dominant aspect of upper class residential structures." Closer investigation

reveals, however, that the veranda probably evolved from earlier forms in the islands of the Caribbean, where the African population far outnumbered the European. Architectural historian Joseph Jackson notes: "as a matter of fact, although this feature is popularly supposed to have been indigenous to the Southern colonies, it really did not originate there, but in the West Indies, especially Jamaica, where the British, being an ingenious and practical people, designed the piazza to suit the conditions found there." Another historian, Charles Peterson, biased toward the study of French ingenuity, suggests that the *gallerie* was introduced into the Mississippi Valley from the French-occupied islands of the Caribbean. Neither study recognizes that African slaves, common to both English- and French-dominated areas of the West Indies, brought architectural traditions, which Europeans may have adapted.

The veranda is widespread in the indigenous architecture of the West African rain forest. It is an important locus of social and ceremonial life in the extended family compound. Its generous proportions offer relief from the hot sun and encourage the flow of cool breezes. An eighteenth-century etching illustrating the king of Dahomey entertaining slave traders on the veranda of his palace depicts a scene typical of many early European encounters with traditional African architecture. However, for the first 250 years of their tenuous establishment on the West African coast, Europeans constructed buildings for themselves, which totally ignored the climate. A. W. Lawrence's book on European trade castles and forts notes that until the eighteenth century, lodgings built by and for Europeans in West Africa, housed

> underprivileged residents (who) usually sweltered in rooms built against the curtain walls . . . devoid of cross ventilation, while even on the upper floor the breeze might be blocked to some extent by a parapet beyond the walk wall. There are extraordinarily few indications that anyone gave a thought to the modification of European architecture to suit the tropics. The earliest instance may be Moore's veranda of 1733, but he seems to have been inspired by a scheme traditional in Portugal.

No study has documented the way Europeans adapted their architecture to unfamiliar climate. But it is not unreasonable to suppose that the millions of African slaves upon whom Europeans depended taught them more about tropical architecture than they later cared to remember.



Photograph courtesy of the State Historical Society of Missouri.

Remarks

We can pretend, as so many architectural historians have, that the slaves played no important role in shaping the architectural traditions of this country during its formative years. Yet the plantation buildings of the South offer irrefutable evidence of the presence of large numbers of black people.

The capital required for extensive building projects came mainly from black labor. This virtually inexhaustible resource cleared the pine barrens and built the roads and transportation ways. The population on a typical plantation was mostly black, and the architecture had to accommodate a caste system. The relationship between the master and the slave had a paradoxical quality. If the social and cultural distance between them was great, the physical distance was non-existent. How to accommodate these conflicting needs was a central problem of the built environment, and we can still see the remains of various solutions.

Freedom exists only in a world where what is possible is defined at the same time as what is not possible.

. . . The artist's task will not only be to create a world, or to exalt beauty for its own sake, but also to define an attitude.

Albert Camus, *The Rebel*

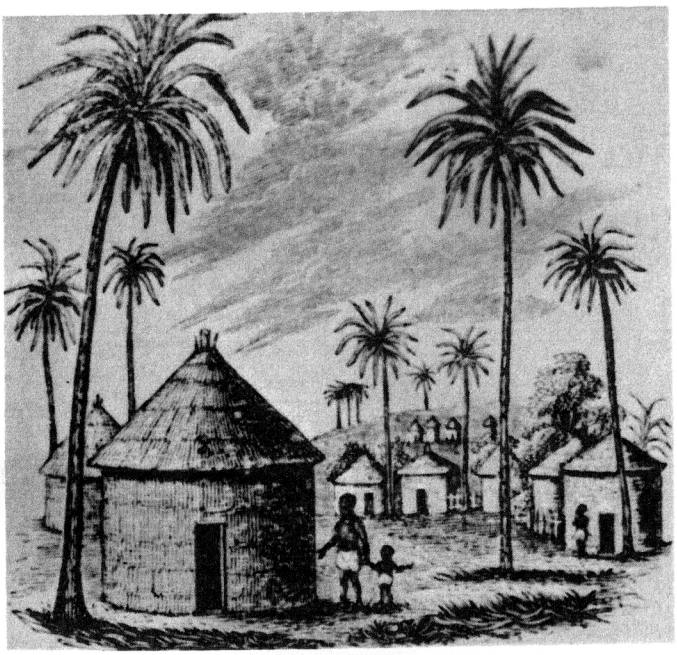
The physical traces may not reveal the most repugnant features of the peculiar institution, which assured the colonization of the South. Perhaps the mansions and the shanties, the concubine quarters, the prisons, smokehouses, and kitchens do not tell the whole story of furtive liaison in the swamp, flogging, intimidation, rape, and the endless round of toil that helped finance the industrial revolution. But the hierarchical organization of plantation life is writ large in the landscape, plain for anybody to see. There are buildings, which yet survive from the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, that carry strong reminders of the old African ways. Though few and faint, they suggest a story still to be told.

Without this telling, we cannot measure the architectural legacy of the period in question. The fragments we have examined testify to the destruction of feudal ways, and the emergence, at the expense of the African, of a pattern of life that is essentially modern. Against the backdrop of the plantation setting with its highly rationalized barracks, constructed without adornment or amenity, we can begin to appreciate the role of the agricultural slave as a prototype of the modern industrial laborer. Minimal quarters like those at Mount Vernon and Uncle Sam Plantation in Louisiana can also be found in the Antilles and Curacao, as well as in Salisbury, Rhodesia, and Johannesburg, South Africa. Indeed, they are the building blocks of many a company town throughout the world, and it is hard to resist the conclusion that they are the model for this country's low-income housing projects.

The brief history I have outlined might be summed up in a single sentence: When the black people were enslaved, their traditional ways of building were destroyed, and eventually they adopted the ways of their masters so they could survive. Yet this capsulization is not enough. If African building traditions were wiped out, into what limbo did they vanish? That millions of Africans would leave no trace of their own architectural heritage on the New World they helped to colonize is untenable. Under conditions of close proximity, one would expect an exchange between the African and the European. If the African adopted certain techniques from the European, we should be prepared to expect the reverse. The outbuildings I found in Virginia strongly resemble African prototypes, but the techniques of construction are eighteenth-century British colonial. They likely represent an intermediate step before the disappearance of African building traditions in North America.

We need much more evidence than I have put forth here to establish the importance of African building traditions in the architecture of the Old South. Undoubtedly the heavy concentration of slaves in agricultural work and their systematic exploitation modified and curtailed whatever creative role they might have played in shaping the New World environment to their own needs. But a fuller appreciation of the interaction between the African slave and the ruling class might help us to understand the unique American variant to European architectural forms in the South.

I have presented a hypothesis that the veranda, so typical of southern regional architecture, may have been adapted from the building traditions of the West African rain forest



A Mendi village in Sierra Leone, British West Africa. Reproduced from *The History of the Amistad Captives* by J. W. Barber, 1840.

that were brought to the Caribbean by slaves. This is only a guess. To demonstrate this hypothesis, we would have to take into account the genuine inventiveness of the British and French settlers confronted with a new climate in the West Indies. We would also have to recognize the importance of classical thought among the slave-holding classes, which, in the nineteenth century, led to the widespread Greek Revival in the South. We would also have to acknowledge the influence of the Spanish, who, after all, introduced both the plantation system and African slaves into the Caribbean in the sixteenth century, and the building traditions of the native American, which were, in some places, carefully studied by European newcomers. Yet when all these factors are taken together, we still cannot minimize the impact of the slaves on the early European architecture of the Caribbean. Consider the implications of the following complaint written by a slaveholder in eighteenth-century Haiti and quoted in *The Myth of the Negro Past:*

> Have pity for an existence which must be eked out far from the world of our own people. We here number five whites, my father, my mother, my two brothers and myself, surrounded by more than two hundred slaves, the number of our negroes who are domestics alone coming to almost thirty. From morning to night, wherever we turn, their faces meet our eyes. No matter how early we awaken, they are at our bedsides, and the custom which obtains here not to make the least move without the help of one of these negro servants brings it about not only that we live in their society the greater portion of the day, but also that they are involved in the least important events of our daily life. Should we go outside our house to the workshops, we are still subject to this strange propinquity. Add to this the fact that our conversation has almost entirely to do with the health of our slaves, their needs which must be cared for, the manner in which they are to be distributed about the estate, and their attempts to revolt, and you will come to understand that our entire life is so closely identified with that of these unfortunates that, in the end, it is the same as theirs. And despite whatever pleasure may come from that almost absolute dominance which it is given to us to exercise over them, what regrets do not assail us daily because of our inability to have contact and correspondence with others than these unfortunates, so far removed from us in point of view, customs and education.

I have tried to construct an argument that shows how the history of early American architecture was intimately bound up with the history of black people. I want our communities to become more conscious of the physical environments we inhabit. The conventional wisdom of black folk, in America at least, treats the physical environment as an obstacle, an obstruction created by somebody else, a given condition to be ignored. We have not understood the way buildings we inhabit embody an ideology and reflect someone else's perception of our place in the world. Nor have we been able to marshal the enormous intellectual and practical energy to shape our environments to clearly reflect our needs and aspirations.

These reflections have a tension that I have not resolved —how to accept the American reality without giving up the perception of the uniqueness of the black experience. The black architect, like the black musician and the black poet, will have to face these contradictions—to accept the past and begin, finally, to understand it. We cannot continue to demand more "low-income" housing. Rather, we will have to reach through and beyond the pain of this history and discover a new basis that we can build on with style, beauty, and functional clarity.

When this process is well underway, and there is money and leisure enough, there remains a story yet to be told. It is a lacuna in the national landscape, an enormous cavity that corresponds precisely with the national unwillingness to deal with the challenge black people represent. But for us, the priority and responsibility must be clear: We as the nation's most conspicuous minority are faced with an intellectual, practical, and political challenge to gain control of the space we inhabit, to rebuild it in our own image, and imbue it with a clear perception of who we are and who we might become. □

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