

Summary of 2003-4 Archaeological Research at the Seibels House Site

At the request of the Historic Columbia Foundation, archaeological research concerning a kitchen building was conducted by University of South Carolina (USC, Columbia) archaeologists in May of 2003. This kitchen is one of three buildings on the Seibels House property, and it is one of the oldest standing structures in Columbia, South Carolina. The property on which the kitchen stands was inhabited by some of the most powerful South Carolinians and their enslaved and free servants over the last 200 years. The kitchen building was actively used for food preparation well into the 1950s. Sometime in the 20th century, the wooden floor was covered with concrete, and the north chamber room was used as a laundry. In the 1960s, the floor was removed, and the kitchen building left empty. Today, the Seibels House & Kitchen are being preserved as a part of The National Register of Historic Places.

In May 2003, Archaeologists from USC, students, local volunteers and staff from the Historic Columbia Foundation conducted field work that focused on the Seibels House Kitchen flanker. The goals of the project included refining our chronology of the construction events at the Kitchen site, identifying past activities that occurred within the kitchen, and recovering material culture which can help us interpret the role of African American's on the property. In particular, researchers sought to determine whether the kitchen building was a workspace for food preparation and storage or whether the structure also served as a residence. In addition to excavating two test units in the interior of the building, archaeologists placed two test excavations in the service yard area outside the kitchen. Histories, ethnographies, and archaeological studies suggest that the service yard was used for gardening or other kitchen related activities.

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Archaeological fieldwork should only be undertaken after the formulation of well-conceived questions that guide the techniques of data-recovery, the analysis of evidence, and the scope of investigations. During our first field season (2003), our questions were limited to the local, site scale of analysis, in part because of the priorities and support of our sponsors. We sought to answer three fundamental questions concerning the kitchen. First, when was it built? Documents are not available that specify the kitchen's date of construction, but the Seibels house was built around 1787. Archaeologists usually answer this question by exploring the style and form of structures, the clues provided by builder's trenches and building materials, and the presence of temporally-diagnostic artifacts. One month of excavations produced over 5,000 artifacts, most of which date from the late 18th to the 19th centuries. Features were also discovered, including a 180 cm (approximately 6 feet) deep pit that abutted the hearth, and the original builders trench for the Kitchen.

Next, we sought to clarify the function of the kitchen building. Specifically, what kind of activities were conducted in each room? From the variety and quality of artifacts, we inferred that a number of activities took place in the kitchen: food preparation (utensils, pottery, bone); leisure time activities such as smoking pipes or playing marbles; clothing maintenance or production (pins, buttons, clasps, etc.). Patterns can be discerned from the distribution and condition of artifacts, site features (e.g. trash pits), and architectural remains that hint at habitual or synchronic behaviors. We surmised that inhabitants both lived and worked in the kitchen building.

Finally, we strove to make a contribution to the growing knowledge of historic everyday African American life in early Columbia. The small number of names of the

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enslaved Africans that were owned by the residents of the Seibels house probably formed part of a wider Black community that included the servants at the neighboring Hampton Preston Mansion and the free Black home called Manns-Simon House (Clement 2000). What can be learned about urban slavery on the property based on the artifacts that are recovered? Beyond the everyday aspects such as diet, dress, and leisure, we can begin to explore belief systems or personal aesthetics that may have created artifacts that we have recovered such as the pierced 19th century dime. In addition to answering these questions, another important outcome of the project is to provide an assemblage of artifacts, some of which have already been integrated into urban slavery exhibits constructed by Historic Columbia.

The 2004 field season promises to be as interesting and exciting as last year. The research design has been modified to explore wider questions that relate to the development of the whole site. Specifically, we seek to locate traces of all previous occupations so that we have a more complete site chronology. The spatial development of the various households that inhabited the property over time must be clarified so we can understand urban settlement patterns and landuse. This summer, the unknown depths of kitchen flanker's southern chamber will be excavated. More emphasis will be placed on discerning African American cultural practices and social relations on the site and in the city.