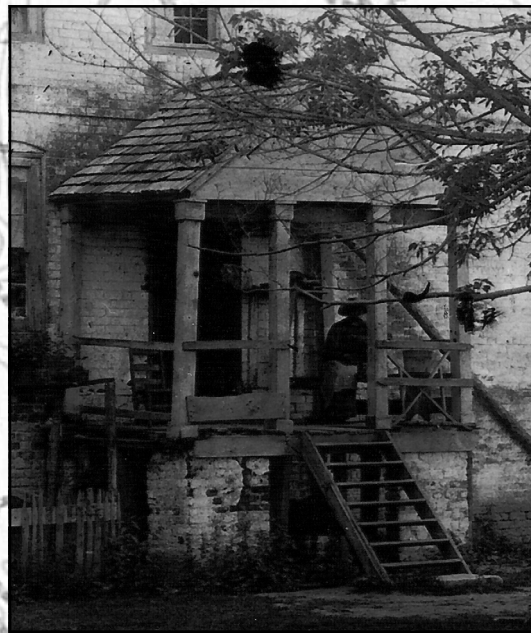
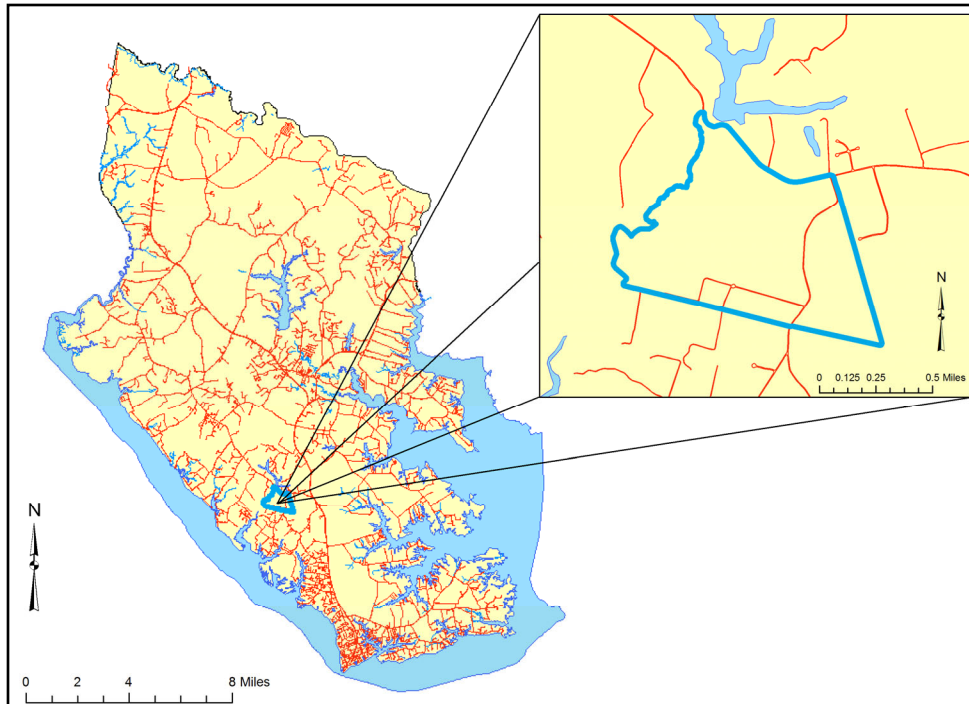


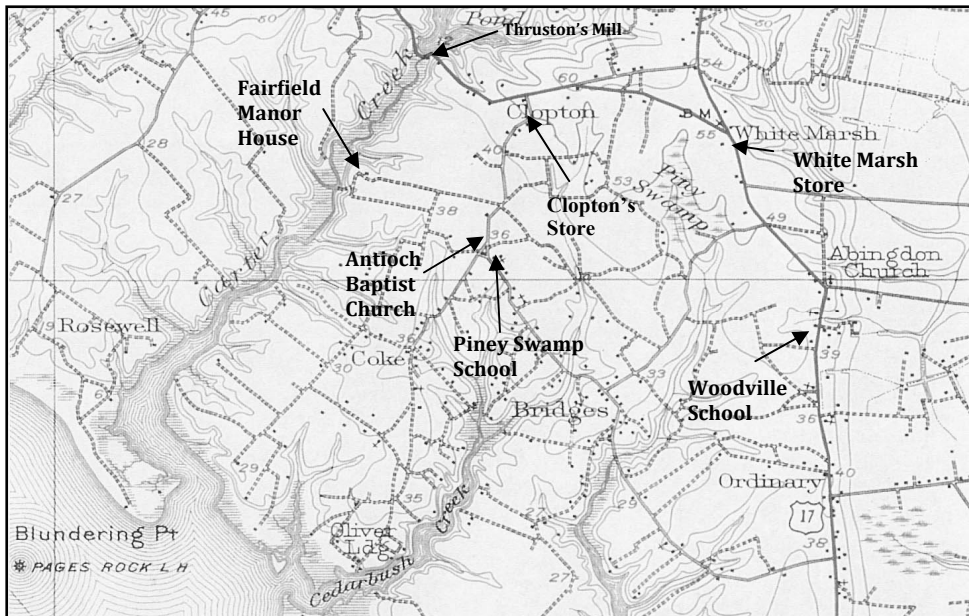
Fairfield Plantation
and the
Emergence of an
African-American
Community



The Fairfield Foundation
Updated 2020

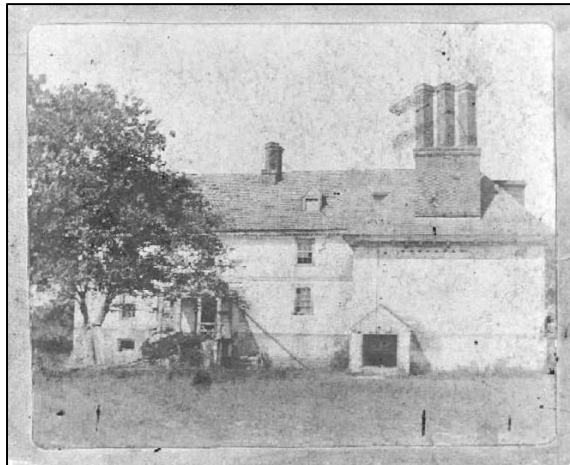


Gloucester County is located on the Middle Peninsula in southeastern Virginia. The project area includes a significant portion of Fairfield plantation, situated at the head of Carter Creek. The 1916 United States Geological Survey (USGS) map below includes the locations of other noteworthy sites associated with this study.



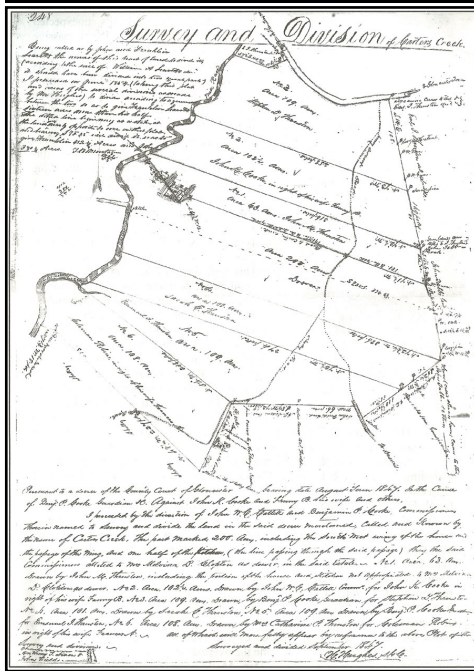
Introduction

Struggle, achievement, strife and reward are words that define the growth of African-American communities in late 19th-century Gloucester County, Virginia. On agricultural lands sloughed from the diminishing prominence of a grand colonial plantation, their history emerges from the uncertain aftermath of the Civil War, as Virginia began the initial process of rebuilding and healing. The importance of their story, however, is largely missing from our history books. Looking at the land and its people today, there is little visible trace of either epoch: the time of colonial power and ambition, or the time of quiet toil and hardship, as the newly free found solace in land, work and family. This booklet is a first step by the Fairfield Foundation to demonstrate how archaeology, history and community outreach can reveal much about the interwoven facets of life in late 19th-century Gloucester County, and how the land and its people evolved and adapted to changing times and seasons.



The Fairfield manor house in the late 19th century.

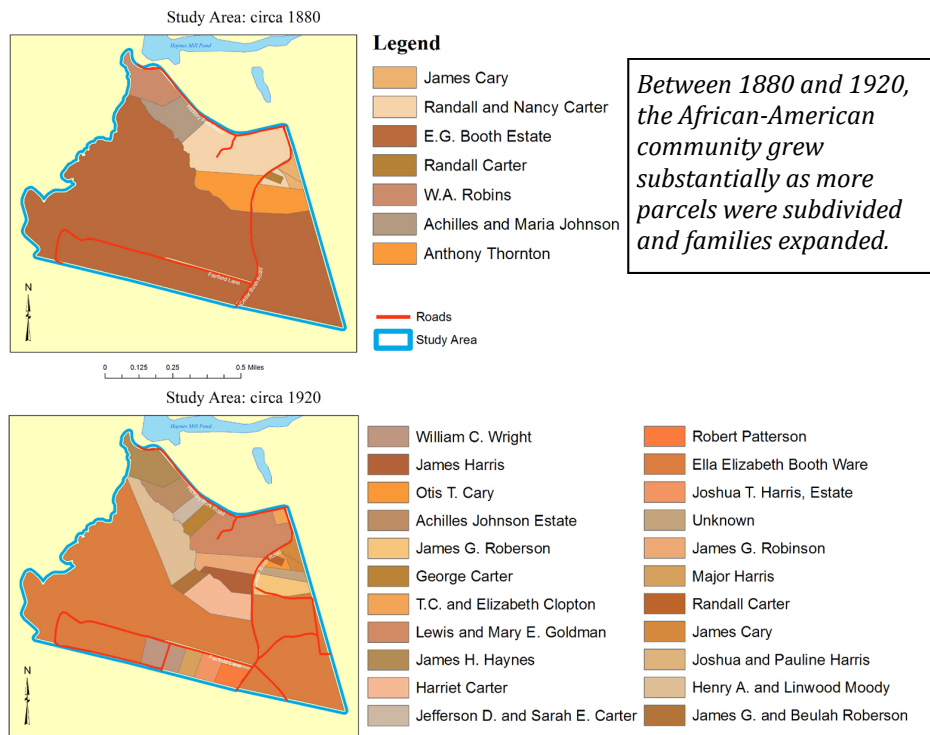
The goal of the Fairfield Foundation is to study and better understand this process in its entirety. This booklet summarizes the initial research into how the division of this massive, 7000-acre Fairfield plantation gave rise to a newly



Plat of Fairfield/Carter Creek Plantation in 1847, modified in 1853.

free African-American community after the Civil War, and how these remarkable individuals connect with the descendant communities that persist on the same lands today. The role of African Americans in late 19th-century Gloucester County is both understudied and undervalued, and the survival of the community today, and many others like it throughout the South, is at risk. Over the past three decades, as generations of community elders passed

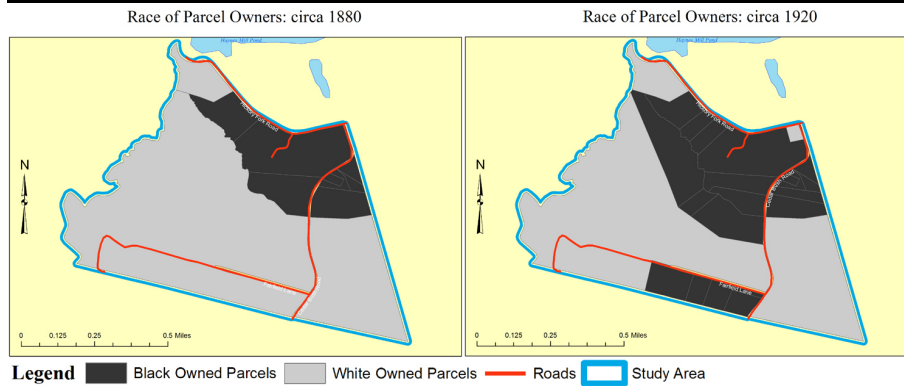
on and younger generations moved away, much of this land was subdivided and sold, breaking apart an intersecting network of family and friends, severing connections between the present and the past. Recording and reconnecting some of these threads is vital for recounting the full story of Gloucester's history - a history replete with famous names and sprawling brick manors, but equally significant for its struggling farmers and oystermen, small frame shacks, shifting agricultural landscapes, and people of different colors and different dreams who eked out a living on this bountiful land. This booklet helps document one small group of people at a very significant time in Virginia's history. It is intended to serve as a stepping stone for future research in the county and will help initiate a discussion with the surrounding community about how best to preserve and record this fragile past.



A Growing Community and Fairfield Plantation

From its initial patent in 1648, Fairfield was home to many people, both owners and workers, free and enslaved. The plantation’s population grew along with its acreage, peaking in 1782 at 7000 acres and 140 enslaved men, women, and children. After the American Revolution, the Burwell heirs subdivided and sold Fairfield. Two of the largest parcels included the 500-acre home tract, surrounding the manor house, and Millwood, a 304-acre farm at the north edge of the property. The Thruston family purchased both tracts in the late 18th century. These parcels comprise the current study area while the lands to the east and south, along Hickory Fork and Piney Swamp Roads, will be the subject of future research.

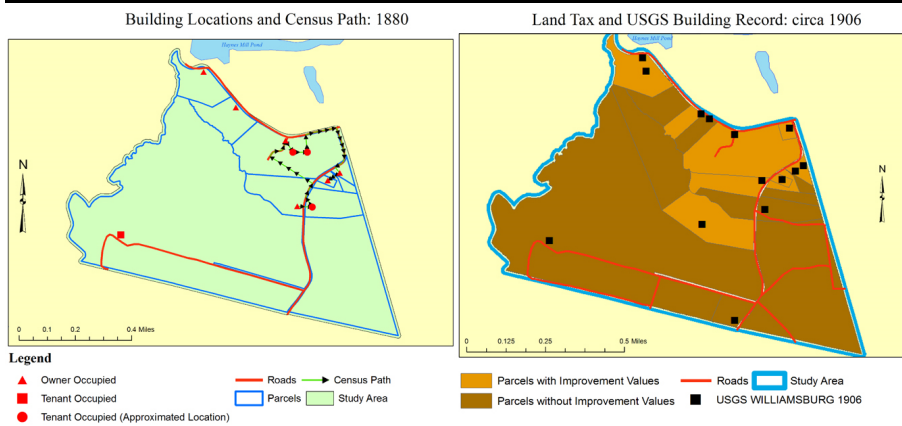
The Thruston family sold the core of Fairfield plantation and the manor house in 1850, but retained Millwood into the



After the Civil War, Fairfield was divided into increasingly smaller tracts purchased by freed slaves. Even the home tract, the largest in the study area, was farmed by freed slaves, although it was owned by whites, along with the property around Thruston's Mill and Clopton's Store.

early 20th century, albeit in a much reduced size after 1865. Fairfield passed through many families, including the Leavitts, the Cookes, and the Wares, from the 1840s until the house burned in 1897. For much of that time it was leased to both black and white tenants and referred to as Carter's Creek Farm. The dissolution of these two farms, particularly into parcels aligned with present-day U.S. Route 17, Hickory Fork Road, and Cedarbush Road, helped a thriving African-American community to develop. Similar new communities in the area were placed near stores and mills, occupying the often less productive farmland along roadways.

A productive and relatively profitable southern plantation relied on enslaved laborers to raise wheat, corn and other crops prior to the Civil War. At war's end, white landowners were confronted with both a new social reality and the need to find new ways to operate their farms. By selling, leasing, or gifting parcels of land to former slaves, they found ways to make amends, keep some of the laborers from moving to nearby cities, and allow their farms to survive. The Thrustons of Millwood took part in this process, dividing the eastern half of their property into numerous small lots for



The study combined aerial photographs, soils data, building values, and census information to reconstruct an emerging African-American community.

sale to African Americans. Shortly after the war, Randall and Nancy Carter purchased land at the corner of Cedar Bush and Hickory Fork Road from the Leavitts. By the census of 1880, they had no fewer than three additional families living on their land, connected by a series of dirt roads that persist to this day. Like so many others, these newly freed slaves joined together, through families, civic groups, and churches, pooling their money and resources to purchase land. After farming as a group, they often divided the parcels between the contributors, providing security for one another from malicious creditors and years of poor harvests. Randall and Nancy Carter later used their property as collateral for others in the community to secure loans and purchase property of their own. Those who pursued opportunities in urban areas would send money home, visit, and help ensure that the family retained the one undeniable representation of freedom in 19th-century Virginia: private property. The desire to acquire land was strong, serving as a symbol of freedom, a sense of security, and as a livelihood.

Sam Carter, once a slave at New Quarter Farm, across the creek from Fairfield plantation, acquired a relatively large

Statement of Settlement with Achilles Johnson
 due skins for him of boy 1868. 7.83
 " him " " " boy 1869. 50.49
 " by B. F. Heywood. 3.70
 \$62.02

Cr.
 balance of
 by (part of house & lot) 1867 \$65.
 " " " house & lot. 1868 30.00
 " " " house & lot. 1869 35.22
 Paid in money - 37
 \$62.02

Receipt of Emanuel J. Thruston regarding payments in 1868 and 1869 to Achilles Johnson who was formerly one of Thruston's slaves.

parcel with wages he earned and saved while a slave. Other former slaves of the Thruston family did the same. Often enslaved individuals with marketable skills, such as carpentry or blacksmithing, would lease their services on their own time, or raise crops and manufacture other items for sale in local markets. Surviving records of the Thruston family for Millwood include lease agreements for renting out their slaves to other plantation owners. Certain slaves were highly valued for their skills, and were leased for multiple, consecutive years, providing significant profit to their owner. Some of the same slaves, including Achilles Johnson, were among the first to purchase land nearby after the war. A relatively dense population of African Americans emerged from the tumultuous era of Reconstruction and built homesteads between Thruston's mill pond and the county's main thoroughfare (U.S. Route 17). Nearly all the residents of this area farmed to some degree, raising grains, vegetables, and chickens on their own plots while hiring out during the peak seasons on larger nearby farms. But many of the individuals in this growing community took on additional tasks working as watermen, making crafts for sale, doing laundry, mending clothes and operating the grain

mill. Anything to get by and, through hard work and a little luck, to get ahead.

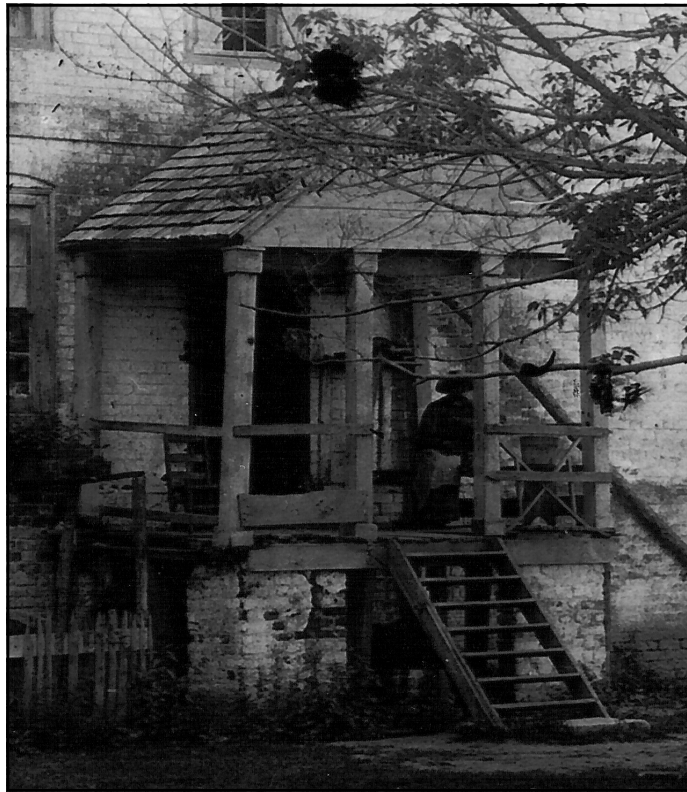
By itself, a list of occupations or a handful of land deeds do not adequately communicate the look and feel of the community, nor the hopes and aspirations of its residents. How did these people buy land and build their homes? What furnishings and other objects did they purchase to outfit their homes? What did owning land, or a house, or a horse mean to families of this “First Generation of Freedom”? How did they interact with neighboring white landowners, store owners and residents, both wealthy and poor? What were their aspirations, and their inspirations? Many of the answers to these questions are rooted in the growth of African-American churches and schools - symbols of spiritual health and growth, and the yearning for a life of better opportunities. Immediately before and in the years following the Civil War, the African-American community congregated at Providence Baptist Church, and later at First Baptist Church and nearby Antioch Baptist Church. They pooled their money and resources to help build schools for their children, including nearby Piney Swamp, Woodville and Smithfield Schools. As a group, they laid the foundations for the next generation and provided opportunities for their children. Few personal records survive from this era, but the locations of these buildings persist and some remain standing.

Another way to learn about this era is through



Antioch Baptist Church in 2009.

archaeology: the study of the physical remains of these families. Nearly two decades of excavation at Fairfield plantation is revealing deeper glimpses into this world. In particular, seemingly commonplace items, such as broken pots, bottles, and cans, illuminate the life of the last known resident of the Fairfield manor house: an African-American woman who lived in the community. Her story is representative of the larger process of cultural, social and economic change that occurred throughout the South following the Civil War.



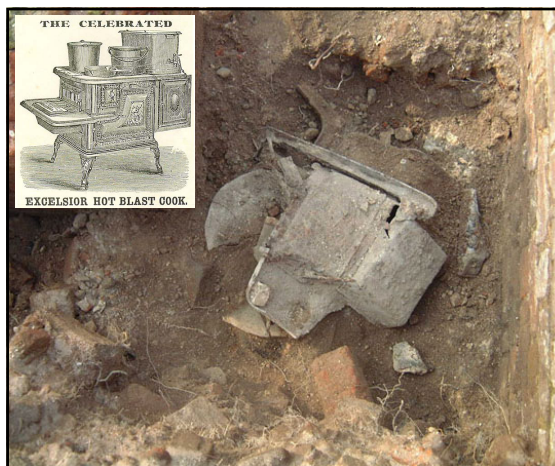
This image may show the African-American woman described by Cecil Wray Page Sr. during his visit in 1897.

It was about ten days before Fairfield went up in flames late in 1897- a young boy accompanied his father, the county sheriff, on a visit to Fairfield. They lived just down the road, but why did they call- advice, business, barter? The boy remembered walking up the steps of the porch and noticed a chicken tied there. They entered the house, and in the darkened interior, found the woman they were looking for, feeding corn tops into a blazing fire. Near the woman was a piano, and tied to one leg of the piano was another chicken. What did they talk about? Who was this woman? The boy only remembered a few of the details.

The Last Resident of Fairfield

Cecil Wray Page's memory of this event, experienced as a young boy, was passed to his son, Col. Cecil Wray Page, Jr. It is the only known "document" that speaks to the life of this woman, the last occupant of Fairfield. Did she live with her family, or alone? Did she farm the surrounding land, or merely scrape by with a small vegetable plot, some chickens and whatever other products her hands could fashion? These details are lost to history. What is known is that she

lived in a grand colonial manor, one of Virginia's finest, sadly faded with age and neglect. It may have been built by her ancestors, and perhaps lived in by her ancestors' owners. Certainly a memorable and ironic turn, she undoubtedly reflected on it during quiet moments by the fire.



Archaeologists found crushed beneath the fallen rubble an 1883 Excelsior Cook Blast Stove alongside remnants of household trash.



Doorknobs, tobacco pipes, and whiteware plates recovered from the house excavation show evidence of the fire.

At the time she lived there, the house still possessed grandeur, and an ability to impress. Sally Nelson Robins, who grew up nearby, remembered visiting the house after the Civil War and described a spacious ballroom, wide window seats, and marble mantels - visions of a romanticized youth. Robins' rosy view of the past cloaked the realities of her time and reduced the struggles inherent in the plantation system. To her the past was nostalgic. But what did the African-American woman living at Fairfield think of this stately brick building?

These stories, witnessed and passed on by adults who remembered childhood visits to Fairfield, move us inside this remarkable building, but they only tell part of the story. Archaeology is filling in the gaps and asking new questions. What is found within and near the house are the physical remains of everyday life, the material world of an African-American household during the last decades of the 19th century. They left behind dishes, shoes, cutlery, tools, food

An 1885 rental advertisement in the Gloucester Mail describes Fairfield as a "Desirable Farm... containing 300 acres of land, with a comfortable brick dwelling of eight rooms and all necessary out-buildings."



Turlington's Balsam of Life was a very popular cure for various ailments and represents some of the most frequently found bottles from the last residents of Fairfield, along with Bromo Seltzer bottles, Juniper Tar Compound, and Potter Parlin's Baking Powder.

waste and toys. Many of these items were recovered from a small space beneath the floor in the south wing of the manor house. This small space was accessible only from a trap door in the floor and occupants used it to dispose of fireplace ash and other household trash. Many of the bottles were melted beyond recognition, but the identifiable examples contained primarily medicine or chemicals and are contemporary with the house's final years.

These bottles provide us with insight into the daily lives of African Americans in Gloucester County. With inconsistent access to modern medicine, communities may have relied on folk medicine to treat both common and severe ailments. Linked with traditions from Africa, its principles were passed down to each generation and practiced by highly respected individuals. Many of the remedies had a root-based mixture, but unlike modern medicine, "root doctors" and their patients believed the problem was both physical and spiritual. A botanical medicine, one derived from animal parts, or a bottled patent medicine were prescribed to treat the physical symptoms, but a spiritual remedy was

needed to either break a curse or fight an attack by an evil spirit. This often involved writing spells on paper and throwing them in a river or wearing an amulet. Animal sacrifice was also employed, leaving portions of a chicken or other animal to please the spirit while eating the remainder.

Over time African folk medicine blended Christian, Native American, and African beliefs. During the 19th century, an increasing number of churches disapproved of many of its rituals, forcing practitioners to hide evidence of root doctoring. Could the woman at Fairfield have been a root doctor? Archaeology suggests that this older, freed slave was not wealthy and may have practiced folk medicine to generate income and be self sufficient. The presence of chickens in her living space, rather than outside, the relatively high concentration and variety of medicine bottles, and their disposal in a hidden space beneath the house are suggestive, but there could be other explanations. What other evidence might be found to confirm her role—and who among the community, both black and white, might she have helped with her efforts?



A Dialogue with the Descendant Community

The fascinating discoveries made at Fairfield rely on an inclusive approach to research and public outreach. It is essential that any approach to understanding why Randall and Nancy Carter supported other freedmen, or why Achilles Johnson continued to work with the Thruston family after the Civil War, involve the descendant community surrounding Fairfield. Not only does the community often possess vital elements of the past, such as family papers, photographs and genealogy, but they are the keepers of oral history and remembered tradition that provide a second avenue to understanding the past.

Equally important are their interests and questions concerning their ancestors and the historic landscape of Fairfield plantation. This booklet is intended to serve as a means for sharing knowledge with the community and to open a dialogue about our shared cultural heritage. The Fairfield Foundation's goal is to better understand the evolution of this plantation landscape through archaeology, from the time colonial settlers first claimed its forested lands, through its turbulent years of growth, war, and decline, to its dissolution in the 19th century. Its land gave rise to a vibrant African-American community, but the physical remains of this period are quickly disappearing during the present era of growth and displacement. Outreach and discussion with the descendant community is essential for guiding documentation and preservation efforts as research continues into the more recent past. It is hoped that the study of Fairfield will provide a forum for the continued sharing and exploration of this common past. Crucial to that mission is sharing the story of how so many people emerged hopeful from slavery, built their own communities, and forged new identities. This is a vital part of Gloucester's history that should be preserved and shared.



Fairfield Foundation

The Fairfield Foundation was founded in 2000 to undertake a long-term archaeological and historical investigation of Fairfield plantation, from its origins in the 1640s to its demise at the close of the 19th century. The foundation is documenting the complex history and landscape evolution of this major plantation and the individuals who lived there, while using this information and the archaeological process to engage with students, scholars and the general public in a meaningful and exciting dialog about the importance of our community's heritage. This work includes charting how the plantation grew, developed, and divided, and studying the people who lived and worked on the land from its beginnings as a tobacco plantation, through the plantation's post-Civil War division into small farms and an African-American community.

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