



REORDERING THE LANDSCAPE OF WYE HOUSE

NATURE, SPIRITUALITY, AND SOCIAL ORDER

ELIZABETH PRUITT

ARCHAEOLOGY • HISTORY

“Not since Frederick Douglass wrote about Wye House has there been an empirical account of the conditions of enslaved life there. Elizabeth Pruitt uses the entry point to the past provided by archaeology to describe the creative life of African American religion, medicine, and gardening at Wye House that Douglass avoided when his mission was to describe reality in such a way that he convinced people to abolish slavery. Contemporary African American descendants want to know of their ancestors’ spirituality, African traditions, skills, and culture. This book is a view into these areas for them and us.”

—**MARK P. LEONE**, University of Maryland, College Park

“Elizabeth Pruitt’s work at Wye House Plantation embodies the wonderful interdisciplinary nature of historical archaeology. This well-written work takes the reader from archaeology sites to archives and public history to pollen analysis, and stands as a testament to the contemporary directions of archaeological practice.”

—**CHRISTOPHER P. BARTON**, Francis Marion University

Reordering the Landscape of Wye House examines early European American and African American gardening practices, social order, and material culture at the Wye House plantation. Located on the eastern shore of Maryland, this plantation housed the Welsh Lloyd family and hundreds of enslaved Africans and African Americans, including Frederick Douglass. Pruitt examines the different possible interactions and understandings of nature at the Wye House and their impact on the dynamic, culturally-based, and entangled landscape of imposed and hidden meanings, colonization and resistance, and science and magic. This book is recommended for scholars interested in historical and public archeology, applied anthropology, American and African American history, and race studies.

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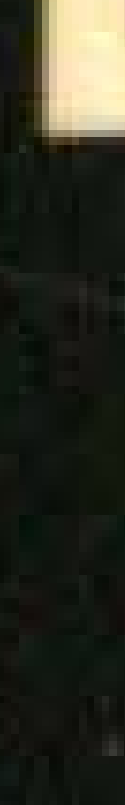
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Reordering the Landscape of Wye House

To those who labored at the Wye House Plantation.
Your lives matter. We will remember your legacy.

Introduction

The Wye House Plantation sits on the Wye River, at an intersection of land and water. On Maryland's Eastern Shore, the Wye River marks one of the boundaries of Talbot County at the center of the state. The waters flow from Lloyd Creek, which creeps into the plantation from the north, to the Wye River. From there, it moves into the Chesapeake Bay and then the greater Atlantic Ocean. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the river connected the plantation to the transatlantic world, the trade of people and goods, to the profit of some and the exploitation of others. This landscape became an intersection for multiple groups of people, entangled in differences of race, religion, and culture. Through this space, their identities formed and reformed.

This book is about those people, the landscape, and this process through a lens of historical archaeology. It is about science and spirits. It is about material culture and history, but it is not only about the past. Before and after Emancipation, freed African American laborers from Wye House founded and populated many of the nearby towns of Talbot County. Many of their descendants remain in several historically African American neighborhoods. The archaeological discoveries made at the Wye House Plantation demonstrate how their ancestors actively made places for themselves in a landscape that held them in subjugation, through the uses of plants, objects, and spirits. Through these practices and beliefs, there was a maintained connection to their West and West-Central African roots. The archaeological and archaeobotanical evidence at the plantation shows that there are alternative ways of looking at this landscape and alternative ways in which it was used. This book seeks to map this other landscape, make it visible on the surface, so that we can develop better methods to understand places as having multiple meanings. The Eastern Shore is still heavy with the weight of this history, and we are grappling with the experiences and consequences of it today. The United States as a whole still struggles to acknowledge that Black Lives

Matter. Despite the pain, many descendants look to this history with a sense of pride and a resilience to enact change.

There are many ways to enter the history of this place. One is the way Frederick Douglass came to it. The most widely known person to live at Wye House is Douglass, who was enslaved there as a boy. He understood his condition of slavery on that plantation and developed his disgust with its injustices that he carried into his career as an abolitionist after his escape. His autobiographies provide firsthand accounts of slavery there and add context and insight to archaeological discoveries. When Douglass was a young child, his grandmother, Betsey Bailey, took him from their home and walked him the twelve miles to Wye House. Through the woods the young Douglass imagined monsters around every tree trunk. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he writes:

Several old logs and stumps imposed upon me, and got themselves taken for wild beasts. I could see their legs, eyes, and ears, or I could see something like eyes, legs, and ears, till I got close enough to them to see that the eyes were knots, washed white with rain, and the legs were broken limbs, and the ears, only ears owing to the point from which they were seen. Thus early I learned that the point from which a thing is viewed is of some importance. (Douglass 1994 [1855]:148)

Once at the plantation, he encountered a new landscape and his older brothers and sisters, whom he had not met before. He discovered for the first time his “old master,” Aaron Anthony, and the concept of his own bondage. He entered through “the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery” (Douglass 1994 [1845]:18) and found sharp contrast with the beauty of the perfectly landscaped plantation. The places he describes are the everyday spaces of the enslaved workers, their homes and work buildings that formed the core of his world on the plantation. Douglass’s writing and experiences provide one way into those gates. In looking at the plantation today, it is important to follow his example in understanding how “the point from which a thing is viewed” changes how it appears.

While Douglass is the more world-renowned voice coming from the Wye House Plantation, for many on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, there are other paths into this landscape that are more well-worn. The plantation has been in the Lloyd family—immigrants from Wales—since the mid-seventeenth century. The gates through which the Lloyds entered their estate was a grander one. As an established and wealthy family, they had the means to form the landscape around them to their liking. They made and remade the land, using it for agricultural production, experimentation, leisure, and as a statement of their status. They surrounded their mansion with gardens that teemed with carefully chosen plant life.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Lloyds expressed their identity through “scientific gardening” and maintained connections to English trends of landscape architecture. Traditionally unnoticed in the gardens and landscapes at Wye House is the labor that went into shaping the landscape, running the greenhouse buildings, and tending the gardens. The ways that the enslaved people used the land for food, experimentation, and leisure are less explored. Even today, presentations of the landscape largely serve as a celebration of the Lloyds’s accomplishments, shying away from the difficult realities of race on the Eastern Shore.

The historical records of daily life at Wye House are dominated by the Lloyds. Their letters and accounts describe the business practices of the plantation. Where the enslaved laborers are mentioned at all it is as property. Douglass’s writings and other narratives of former slaves provide their perspectives, and archaeology and archaeobotany can supplement our knowledge about this significant portion of the plantation population. Archaeology looks to the created objects that past people discarded or left behind to tell their story. Similarly, archaeobotany studies the traces of plant materials from the past, including preserved pollen and plant fragments, to re-create the landscape. Both represent the material culture that, used together with historical documents and oral histories, can answer questions about the past. Material culture is the codified physical products of shared beliefs, knowledge, ideologies, and societal expectations.

Landscapes, as built environments, exist in both the physical and social realms. The origins of the English word “landscape” demonstrate this dual meaning and the way in which the concept is understood from a European perspective. The Dutch *landschap* or *landskip* is the prospect or depiction of land, a moment of two-dimensional scenery that can be captured through artistry (Hunt 2002:14). In this sense, the landscape is a picture detached from the observer and made to be experienced and valued through its physical aesthetics, like a landscape painting. The German *landschaft*, however, refers not to a geographical sight, but rather shared social or agricultural production practices and values (Cosgrove 2006:53–54; Stewart 2002:11). This brings a cultural dimension to the word. Although the landscape can, and is, studied in the physical sense, it is also what Stephen Daniels and Denis Cosgrove call a “cultural image, a pictorial way of representing, structuring, or symbolizing surroundings” (Cosgrove and Daniels 1989:1). Taken together, landscape is both the physical environment and also the cultural ways in which that environment is seen, understood, depicted, and altered.

On the plantation, both the Lloyd family and the enslaved people reconstructed their identities and altered their surroundings in ways that connected them to their respective homelands. They strengthened bonds between their groups and differentiated themselves from each

other. Different groups of people had different culturally based ways of interacting with and interpreting nature. One comes from the European American perspective of the Lloyds and the other comes from the African American perspective of the enslaved laborers. These traditions developed on American plantations alongside each other as entangled cultural practices. The model of this research is that these two traditions may become equally visible through the material culture of the plantation left behind during and soon after slavery.

Enslaved people throughout the Atlantic used objects and plants to maintain a sense of autonomy, healing, and defense in the face of their subjugation. This enduring connection through cultural practices and community is part of what is called the African diaspora. A diaspora is a theoretical concept that describes the processes of a rearranging of a community after separation from a homeland. This is a patterned process that scholars have recorded throughout the world and history, such as with the mass migrations of Jewish or Irish people. It begins with a traumatic disconnect from the homeland and massive migration to multiple other countries. Individuals in the hostland find themselves both alienated and racialized. At the same time—or as a result—they also actively maintain elements of a separated cultural identity (see Clifford 1994; Sheffer 2006; Tölölyan 1996). Through this separation, both voluntary and involuntary, multiple national identities have to be negotiated to form a new sense of community.

For our purposes here, the African diaspora describes the process of the trauma of the slave trade and the reconstitution of identities and cultural practices throughout the Atlantic. Although enslaved Africans came from many regions, with different languages, beliefs, and practices, they became racialized into a single group by their enslavers in the New World. The double consciousness described by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, being the “twoness” felt by African Americans who strived to be part of a national American identity while racialized as something “other,” describes well a similar sense of “multiple belongings” felt in any diasporic community (Du Bois 2008 [1904]; Tölölyan 1996:7–8). The European colonizers of the United States, though not constituting a diaspora in accordance with the accepted definition of a forced and painful expulsion, also maintained a transatlantic connection to their homeland and forged new identities in the New World. The enslaved laborers at Wye House were part of a diaspora, while the Lloyds were not.

A theory of the archaeology of diaspora relies on the premise that social identities are produced and seen in the creation, reproduction, and exchange of material culture. The collective history of the community creates a shared “language” that is used and recognized in symbols by other members of the diaspora, called cultural codes or authentic mark-

ers (Brighton 2009:22). This process has been variously called creolization, syncretization, hybridity, or “ethnogenic bricolage.” The latter, coined by Christopher Fennell, describes the way in which cultural agents in new locations combine and display material emblematic expressions or symbols from the homeland (Fennell 2007:9). Because identities are fluid and historically situated, archaeological research can draw conclusions about changes in relations between homelands, host countries, and international exchange networks based on artifacts that carry such codes. They can also understand how particular traditions adapted and endured. This research builds on interpretations set by previous archaeologists working on American plantations (Wilke 1995; Brown and Brown 1998), Maryland cities (Leone and Fry 1998), and elsewhere in the African diaspora (Reeves 1996).

In *African Gods and Catholic Saints in New World Negro Belief* (1937) and *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1990 [1941]), Melville Herskovits supported an “encounter model” to understanding African American heritage. He found that an “African culture” and a “European culture” came together in New World colonies and forged new customs, a process he called syncretization. He searched for similarities between the cultural codes of Africa and those in the United States as a way of disproving the “catastrophism” of scholars such as E. Franklin Frazier, who believed that such codes or symbols could not have survived the trauma of the Middle Passage and slavery. The cultural codes, African “survivals,” or “Africanisms” that Herskovits sought also became an objective of archaeologists, who wanted to understand how material culture manifested through patterns of syncretization in the New World.

One such pattern is in spiritual beliefs, and the ways in which African Americans—who were often forced to hide such beliefs in enslavement—used iconography and ways of understanding the spiritual realm. Archaeologists cannot study beliefs of past people directly, but we can find objects associated with those beliefs, historical records describing them, or similar beliefs or practices in descendants. As slave owners attempted to convert enslaved people to Christianity throughout the diaspora, the religious beliefs of both groups were changed. Andrew Apter (1991) expresses the “evolving synthesis” of African religious identities through Herskovits’s proposed syncretic paradigm, arguing that cultures in contact and conflict go through processes of resistance and revision in the formation of new dominant ideologies (Apter 1991:253). Building on Herskovits, but developing a more nuanced view, Apter cautions against conflating African religions and promotes an understanding of the variety and dynamism of spiritual beliefs as they crossed the Atlantic.

Depending on local conditions and trading routes, ships that carried enslaved people came from varying locations throughout time. These

trends can be accessed through the ships' manifests, which recorded passages throughout the Atlantic world (Emory University 2009). From this, we can begin to narrow down the regions from which the enslaved populations in the Chesapeake came. Rather than a monolith of enslaved Africans, we can begin to think in terms of certain cultures and practices. It is important to avoid homogenization.

It can be difficult to assign race or ethnicity to archaeological materials when the occupants of a space are unknown or varied, particularly since many practices of European American, African American, and Native American people overlapped or were adapted and combined throughout the Atlantic (Lucas 2014:106). British and Irish beliefs in witchcraft and popular magic traveled to the New World, and also imbued particular objects with the powers to protect, harm, or force certain outcomes in the future. These traditions likely influenced each other, and it is only by considering the full contexts of the finds that it may be possible to draw interpretations of identity or belief. Even still, it is important to acknowledge the multiple potential meanings of objects.

It can also be difficult to ascribe individual intention to archaeological materials. From the archeology, I argue that the enslaved laborers at Wye House hid objects of meaning in and around buildings on the plantation in order to influence the natural and spiritual worlds through practices that derived from West and West-Central Africa. In the New World, these practices were adapted to new environments and became a means through which to express a shared identity as enslaved people. Both the African American and European American residents of the plantation used the nature around them to perform identities and demonstrate a sense of control or resistance. Within a system where the Lloyds had overt control over the landscape, bodies, and lives of the enslaved people living there, resistance and subversion could take forms that were both visible and hidden. That is the conclusion here, based on multiple sources of evidence, but it is not the only possible interpretation.

Throughout the Atlantic slave trade, enslaved people rejected their bondage in physical and mental ways. Despite a social and legal system that attempted to strip enslaved people and even free people of color of their human rights, they refused commands, ran away, kept clandestine practices, and created spaces that were theirs. The same landscape, environment, and plants were understood and used in different—though overlapping—ways by the Lloyd family and the enslaved people on the plantation. This builds on research by other scholars such as Dell Upton (1984), who have examined multiple ways of viewing a plantation landscape.

Although this book spends much time discussing the spiritual practices of the enslaved people at Wye House, it is not the intention of this

research to further perpetuate the myth of the “Magical Negro.” The Magical Negro is a trope of fiction, in which a black, usually poor character enlightens and guides the protagonist using magical powers and folk wisdom. This research does discuss at length the systems of belief that enslaved people brought with them from West and West-Central Africa and those connections to landscapes, nature, and plants. However, it is not my intention to characterize African worldviews in a stereotypically spiritual or mystical way. Too often a scientific, rational-based model of nature is traditionally equated to Europeans and a spiritual, magic-based model of nature traditionally equated to Africans and African Americans. A European American understanding of nature brings with it religious and superstitious ideologies, and the uses of plants by African Americans lends itself equally to observation and experimentation. It is important to examine these tropes and false dichotomies as they play out not only in fiction, but in the histories we write so that the same tired characterizations do not dominate in the stories we tell.

Since 2005, archaeologists at the Wye House Plantation have focused on the archaeological and historical records to illuminate the lives of enslaved people. Wye House presented a unique opportunity for historical archaeology in multiple ways. The direct descendants of the Lloyd family, the Tilghmans, invited the Archaeology in Annapolis project to excavate on their property with particular emphasis on the lives of enslaved individuals. Since that time, archaeologists have excavated multiple buildings, including slave quarters, one greenhouse, and one hothouse. The property was home to hundreds of enslaved people over time. The Lloyds were one of the oldest and wealthiest families in the state, possessing vast acres of land and keeping the large labor force necessary to perform the work on that land. The long history and large population of enslaved people gave archaeologists the chance to examine multiple contexts of the places where they lived and worked on the plantation. The active descendant community brought opportunities to connect this past to the present.

As Archaeology in Annapolis graduate students, Benjamin Skolnik and I developed a tour that we gave to introduce our summer archaeology field school students, groups of descendant families, and other visitors to Wye House. There were tweaks and detours depending on the audience, but we always began on the Long Green. This was the center of the plantation for Frederick Douglass and for many of the enslaved people. We would describe what Douglass tells us about this space, and then move past the Captain’s Cottage, where the overseer Aaron Anthony would have lived and monitored the landscape. From there, we transitioned into the world the Lloyds would have known. We walked to the front of the mansion to see the view of the plantation from their front porch. It is expansive, symmetrical, and ordered, full of the landscaping expectations

of the European gentleman. We rotated to the back porch, where there is a view of the greenhouse front, also symmetrical and carefully cultivated in a way that perfectly mirrors the mansion architecture. From there it was important to show the back of the greenhouse, where there was a slave quarter. This is where all the inner-workings of the structure become apparent, if you point them out.

The contrast between what has been preserved on the plantation and what has not been preserved is stark. The Lloyd mansion, gardens, cemetery, greenhouse, smokehouse, stables, a “red overseer’s house” mentioned by Douglass, and the Captain’s Cottage are still standing and have found use in the present. The slave quarters on the Long Green, those across the cove near the agricultural fields, the blacksmith’s shop, the carpenter’s shop, and various storehouses are all gone. In the middle of one agricultural field, there is a congregation of trees that serve as a marker of the slave cemetery. The farmers who work the fields today till and plant around the grove to keep it intact, but this also obscures the space from view. Descendants of the enslaved people only know that this is where their ancestors are buried because the story has been passed on through the generations. That is what we wanted the visitors and students to take away from the tour: how this plantation worked and who worked it is not visible on the surface, and you need to look closer and know how to look at it.

To do that, I use the material culture excavated from Wye House between 2008 and 2014 by Archaeology in Annapolis researchers, which includes the artifacts, features, and fossilized pollen remains from a greenhouse, a hothouse, and three slave living contexts. I also use the landscape itself—the physically and culturally constructed environment of the plantation—historic photographs, historical records, and the agricultural texts from the Wye House library as evidence of the Lloyds’s gardening practices. The concealed objects placed throughout the landscape by the enslaved people demonstrate spiritual practices, knowledges, and needs that made alternative uses of this environment. Throughout this book, I use the autobiographies of Frederick Douglass and other first-hand accounts of African American life in Maryland and the American South to establish context. Douglass’s writing provides a unique perspective of the Wye House Plantation and realities of slavery there. From his descriptions, he provides an understanding of the constructed boundaries between whites and blacks on the plantation and the formation of these racial identities.

There are records that the Lloyds kept of the names of over 500 men, women, and children enslaved at Wye House between 1770 and 1834. Unlike Douglass, these are the names of people who did not write their histories down, but instead left their legacy in the ground, in objects, and