

Curles Plantation Archaeology Project Update

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Students digging Virginia's oldest known brick plantation house made a double discovery this summer. We set out this season to complete the excavation of the Thomas and Joane Harris House, the earliest of a series of manor houses constructed at Curles Plantation in Henrico County, Virginia. Last year's excavations had lead me to realize that this house is unusually elaborate and quite large for its period. It was built about 1635, a time period when most Virginians built small, temporary, wooden houses on their tobacco plantations. Even chimneys and foundations were typically built of wood. The Harris house had a full basement with brick floor, a brick-and-stone bread oven, and a large brick chimney. Construction is post-in-ground, with posts set sunk below the floor inside the basement, and the walls were brick nogged up to the plates. The end walls were apparently all brick (there are no corner posts or king posts). In many places the brick nogging has remained *in situ*, and in others, walls have fallen to the floor but remain well articulated.

This year's work--our 11th season of excavation at Curles--revealed a double surprise. Not only was the Harris House constructed with walls, chimneys, floor made of brick, but the house was actually twice as large as we believed it to be based on earlier work. An entire new wing was discovered towards the end of this season's digging. What's more, discovery of this wing helped to solve a lingering mystery. We had excavated the home of Nathaniel Bacon, Jr. --leader of Bacon's Rebellion of 1676-- at Curles back in 1988 and 1989. An inventory made in 1677 indicated that there was another building, called the "old hall," attached to Bacon's "new little brick house." This suggested that the Harris House might have remained standing during Bacon's tenure at Curles in the 1670s, but archaeological evidence did not support this. Instead, the Harris House clearly appeared to have burned down between 1655-60, long before Bacon arrived in Virginia. Discovery of the new wing not only has expanded the interpretation of the Harris House, it also has doubled the size of Bacon's, because this wing appears to have remained standing during Bacon's time.

Although we have seen only a glimpse of the new wing, it appears that Bacon re-roofed it with tiles identical to those he used on the new house. The "old hall" was connected to Bacon's House by a tunnel beneath the ground and, probably, by a covered walkway or colonnade above the ground. Excavating the Harris House cellar required leaving the massive brick foundations of a ca. 1700-1710 plantation house (later re-used as a kitchen) pedestalled in the earlier cellar. The

18th-century building was built on 1.5 m. of artificial terrace fill laid over the cellar and rubble of the Harris House. So, you can imagine the visual impact (and the excavation nightmare) of a large brick foundation on a huge pedestal of fill standing almost entirely within the cellar of an early 17th-c. brick house! Among the numerous interesting artifacts recovered this summer were lots of iron tools, pieces of armor, elaborately decorated hand-made tobacco pipes, including some with Joane Harris's initials on them, and an Elizabethan coin--a sixpence dated 1575.