

# Archaeology on Mulberry Row—A Little History: Part 2

by Fraser D. Neiman - July 8, 2011

As we saw last time (<https://www.monticello.org/exhibits-events/blog/archaeology-on-mulberry-row-a-little-history-part-1/>), Oriel Pi-Sunyer conducted the first serious archaeological fieldwork on Mulberry Row (<https://www.monticello.org/research-education/thomas-jefferson-encyclopedia/overview-mulberry-row/>) in 1957. He relied on an excavation method called cross trenching, whose main goal was finding and exposing masonry foundations.

Over 20 years later, William Kelso brought a different set of field techniques to his work on Mulberry Row. Kelso was trained by Ivor Noel Hume who served as chief archaeologist at Colonial Williamsburg (1957 to 1988). Unlike cross-trenching architects, whom he succeeded, Noel Hume was trained in England as an archaeologist, in the tradition of Sir Mortimer Wheeler, whose archaeological reputation rested on his excavations of Iron-age and Roman-period sites. By paying close attention to variation in sediment texture and color, Wheeler tried to distinguish individual layers or deposits, so he could excavate each one separately and know which artifacts came from which layer. Wheeler and Noel Hume used the “Wheeler Box” excavation technique, in which a site would be gridded into 8-foot excavation units, separated by a lattice of 2-foot wide unexcavated strips or baulks (<https://claspweb.org.uk/WHITEHALL/htmlfiles/blog12/blog12wk3.html>). The 8-foot squares were excavated first, leaving the baulks standing as a check on the site’s stratigraphy. Once the stratigraphic profiles in the baulks were drawn, the baulks could be removed.

This was the technique Kelso used in most of his work on Mulberry Row. As a disciple of Noel Hume, Kelso excavated stratgraphically, giving unique designations to each layer within each 8-foot square and the baulks between them. A beneficial, if unintended, consequence of the use of squares and baulks, is that we know not only the layer but also the square or baulk that each artifact came from. The Wheeler technique placed much greater stress on recovering artifacts, than cross trenching had. Artifact types whose dates of manufacture were known from documents could be used to estimate in absolute time the date after which each layer was deposited. The underlying assumption here was that the structures, layers, and the artifacts associated with them were to be understood as unique historical events, which could be made meaningful by fitting them into a historical narrative drawn from documentary sources.

The 1796 insurance plat (<http://www2.iath.virginia.edu/wilson/TJA/tja136.html>), was critical to Kelso's work, providing a map of where to dig. Using it, Kelso located the traces of three slave dwellings at the east end of Mulberry Row whose traces survived under the parking lot pavement (Buildings r, s, and t), and one slave house on the middle section of Mulberry Row (Building o). In addition, Kelso located the stone foundation for Jefferson's Building m, which consisted of two smoke houses, joined in the middle by a dairy. Kelso also located the remains of three slave houses that were not shown on the plat. Two of these, MRS-2 and a house that Jefferson referred to in the 1770's as "the Negro quarter" predated the plat, while the other, MRS-1, was built shortly after the 1809 stone house, just across Mulberry Row from it. ("MRS" stands for "Mulberry Row Structure", another term we use for a building not mentioned in Jefferson documents and therefore without a historically-attested name). Finally, adjacent to MRS-1, Kelso located the Dry Well, an underground cool-storage facility from the 1770's. Interpreting these finds depended on finding references to them in Jefferson's letters, drawings, and memoranda. Documents therefore provided the keys to making sense of the archaeological evidence.



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Kelso's excavations on Mulberry Row, looking east. Mulberry Row is on the left. Note the excavated 8 –foot squares and unexcavated 2-foot baulks on the left. The baulks have been removed from most of the excavation, revealing the remains of Building I (in the foreground) and a long rectangular stone foundation behind it, which represents Building m, the smokehouse-dairy. The partially standing walls of the 1809 stone house are visible in the top left.

During the two decades separating the Pi-Sunyer and Kelso excavations on Mulberry Row, a group of young archaeologists launched a movement called initially the “New Archaeology” and later “Processual Archaeology.” Led by Lewis Binford in the U.S. and David L. Clarke in Britain, their goal was to use archaeological evidence to explain how past societies and culture worked and why they changed – to understand cultural and historical processes (hence “processual”). And they hoped to do this in a way that produced conclusions about the past, based on archaeological evidence, that were scientifically credible. In the view of the new archaeologists, the archaeological record was to be understood not just as a chronicle of unique historical events, but rather as the outcome of socio-cultural systems interacting with their environments. This view radically altered the way in which scholars excavated, the recovery methods that they used, the kind of physical evidence that they recovered, and the methods they employed to interpret the results.

The innovations of the New Archaeology had some influence on Kelso's field methods. For example, Kelso's field crews systemically collected animal bones, in hopes of gaining insights into slave diets. And they strove to recover not only large sherds of ceramics vessels, but small ones as well, hoping that accurate quantitative measures of vessel frequency might illuminate variation in social status. But the New Archaeology's impact was limited. For example, Kelso's crews did not use screens, insuring that subsequent dietary studies would underestimate the importance of fish and small wild mammals.

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*To learn more...*

The Wikipedia entries on Mortimer Wheeler ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mortimer\\_Wheeler](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mortimer_Wheeler)), Lewis Binford ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lewis\\_Binford](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lewis_Binford)), and David Clarke ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David\\_L.\\_Clarke](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_L._Clarke)), offer synoptic overviews of these scholars' careers. *Matthew Johnson's Archaeological Theory: An Introduction*, Second Edition (2010) is a valuable introduction to the origins and diversity of theoretical perspectives in contemporary archaeology, although it is written from a decidedly post-

processual perspective. For a recent review of evolutionary approaches in archaeology, see Stephen Shennan's "Evolution in Archaeology", *Annual Review of Anthropology* Vol. 37: 75-91 (2008). Martin Carver's *Archaeological Investigation* (2009) offers an up-to-date and provocative introduction to archaeological field techniques.

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