

# Yard Space: Comparisons of General Activity Areas between Historic Period Social Groups

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1.

Yards around the North American houses of enslaved and free blacks have been associated with West African tradition and have been thought to hold particular meaning in African American cultures. It is suggested through oral accounts as well as period images that African Americans in the American south used outdoor spaces as extended living areas for production and recreation. Are the uses or meanings different from those of general activity areas observed cross-culturally?

A first step in examining the cultural significance of these spaces is to identify them archaeologically. Through the examination of spatial structure of artifact size, I have previously determined that we can interpret patterning consistent with a yard on one site occupied by enslaved African Americans, Monticello's Site 8. This poster makes a next step in comparing these patterns with those found on a Catawba site occupied at about the same time.



Does yard maintenance have particular significance as an African trait, or is it a common cross-cultural feature?

3.

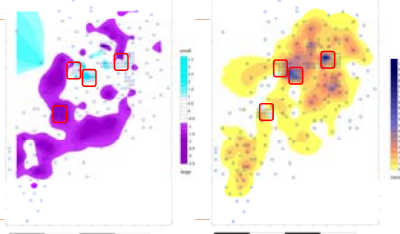
Measures of artifact size, such as ASI, provide a different picture of site spatial structure than do distributions of artifact count and weight, although they are related. The premise of the ASI study is that areas that are maintained free of trash should contain predominantly small artifacts as the result of differential collection in trash removal. Ethnoarchaeological research suggests that large trash should form an arc or arcs around the periphery of the maintained site spaces, which should show greater densities of small pieces of trash.

As suggested by historic drawings and photos, Catawba houses are directly comparable with houses of enslaved African Americans in the late 1700s.

4.

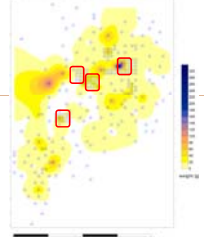
Monticello's Site 8 was occupied by enslaved field hands on the Monticello plantation from about 1770-1800. The houses were log dwellings with sill construction, and were likely less than 20 x 20 feet in plan. By this point in the late 1700s most enslaved plantation workers were living in family units rather than in the barracks-style housing common in previous periods.

Site 8 – Historic Ceramics ASI      Site 8 – Historic Ceramics Count



On Site 8, ASI and artifact count have a slight positive correlation. Areas around most houses are marked by high artifact densities.

Site 8 – Historic Ceramics Weight



ASI of Site 8 historic ceramics reveals larger trash ringing the site perimeter, and maintained site space around the identified dwellings. Interestingly, on Site 8 the ring of trash delimiting a maintained site space (yard) encompasses the three later houses (and overlying House 1 southwest of them), suggesting that the occupants of these houses shared their outside living space, rather than keeping individual yards for each house.

The distributions of ASI and count suggest that these are complementary measures of site structure. They have a slight positive correlation, with a Kendall's Tau of 0.22956 (p < .0001).

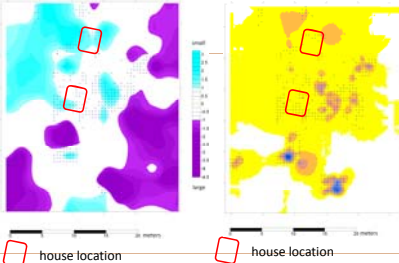
Weight data for Site 8 (total weight historic sherds per excavation square) share some similarities of spatial structure with the other two measures.

5.

Data from the Catawba New Town site in Lancaster County, South Carolina provide a comparison to Monticello's Site 8. New Town was occupied from the early 1790s until 1818 as the primary settlement of the Catawba Nation (Davis and Riggs 2004:15). The size and construction of Catawba dwellings is remarkably similar to those of the houses of the enslaved labor force at Monticello during the same time, with earthen floors, log walls, and in some cases, sub-floor pits for storage.

Interpolated ASI values show maintained site space along the western edge of the two cabins in Locus 4, and dumping away from the eastern edge of the dwelling and to the south and southwest of the southern house, Cabin 1. A distribution map of count shows very low artifact density across the occupation area. This might be interpreted as complete clearance of trash from an activity area. There is less correlation between ASI and count in the Catawba example, with a Kendall's Tau of -0.04669 (p < .1483). The ASI is a much more effective indicator of yard space than count in this case.

New Town Locus 4 Catawba Ceramics ASI      New Town Locus 4 Catawba Ceramics Count



At New Town Locus 4, ASI and artifact count are weakly negatively correlated. The more complete clearance of debris could be an indicator of sweeping.

New Town Locus 4 shows more complete yard clearance, which may indicate sweeping. Sweeping is often suggested as the means of yard upkeep on African-American sites, although of these two sites, there is more evidence for it at New Town than at Site 8. New Town is also the longer-occupied of the two, which according to ethnoarchaeological understanding of site maintenance, would require greater removal of trash from outdoor living spaces.



Speck, Frank G. Catawba Texts, 1921-1928. Manuscript No. 1777, Catawba. Smithsonian Anthropological Archives, Washington, D.C.



John M. Vlach, The Afro-American Tradition in Decorative Arts (Cleveland Museum of Art, 1978), fig. 62, p. 122; from Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs collection, as shown on www.slaveryimages.org, sponsored by the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities and the University of Virginia Library.

6.

The shared design and construction materials between historic African American houses and those of some Native Americans is evident in nineteenth and early twentieth century photographs. These images are later than the sites in question here, but surely resembled them. Our archaeological examples, the houses at New Town Locus 4 and Monticello's Site 8, overlapped in occupation dates and were probably constructed in the same ways, using similar building materials.



Sawston, John R. "Catawba Notes." Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences (1918) 8: 623-29.

ASI maps indicate that the use of yard space may also be similar between these groups. The patterns resemble maintained spaces seen ethnoarchaeologically, with trash removed from general activity areas, leaving the artifacts that are too small to bother with. These yards were bordered by larger trash.



While the meanings attached to such spaces by African Americans historically could very well be rooted in West African tradition, the maintenance and function of the spaces follows cross-cultural patterns. These general activity areas may be a common feature of groups whose house interiors were small, and poorly lit and ventilated.

As determined by ASI, residents of these small spaces kept outside spaces as activity areas.

2.

The artifact size index (ASI) is based on the departure in any given square from the site-wide mean proportion of small and large artifacts

$$ASI_i = \frac{(S_i - pN_i) \cdot (-5)}{\sqrt{N_i p(1-p)}}$$

where  $S_i$  is the number of small artifacts in the  $i$ th square, and  $N_i$  is the total number of artifacts in the  $i$ th square, and  $p$  is the proportion of small artifacts site-wide.

Data included here are restricted to excavation squares with samples sizes of five or more ceramics. ASI values are presented as interpolated surfaces (using Kriging) across the sites.

7.

This cross-cultural comparison shows that ASI can provide a different view of site structure than artifact distribution by count. At Monticello's Site 8, areas around three of the four houses are distinguished by high artifact densities. On the other hand, at New Town Locus 4, both house areas show low artifact densities, similar to the background artifact density across the site. Looking for yard space using artifact density would provide varied results at these two sites, while ASI succeeds in detecting site maintenance in both cases.

The ASI formula was developed with the statistical insight of Fraser Neiman, Monticello Department of Archaeology. New Town ceramic data were provided by Theresa McReynolds, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Her forthcoming dissertation includes the analysis of this and related data. I am grateful to these collaborators as well as many seasons of field school students and staff who collected data from Site 8.

Davis, R. P. S. and B. H. Riggs (2004) An Introduction to the Catawba Project. North Carolina Archaeology 53:1-41.