

L'hermitage plantation

Investigating a Landscape of Pain at Monocacy National Battlefield by Joe Baker



The young man takes a break from his excavation to show me what he's found. He takes a pull from a water bottle, then gently empties the contents of a brown paper bag on the top of an overturned plastic bucket. Taken together, the objects are singularly unimpressive. Brick fragments, hand-wrought nails, buttons, glass, crockery, the ordinary detritus of the late 18th and early 19th centuries here in the foothills of the Maryland Blue Ridge. Yet looks can be deceiving. The humble items are part of one of the more significant archeological collections in the Middle Atlantic, the evidence of important and surprising events. These things were left here by one of the largest populations of enslaved people in this part of antebellum Maryland.

Below: A Caribbean-style plantation in the Maryland piedmont.

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MONOCACY NATIONAL BATTLEFIELD, ON THE SOUTHERN OUTSKIRTS of Frederick, commemorates an encounter during the last incursion of the Confederate Army into the North in 1864. The battlefield was established by Congress in 1934, but land acquisition didn't begin until the 1980s. By then it was obvious that accelerating development was threatening the landscape. Currently, the battlefield preserves approximately 1,650 acres in federal ownership or easement.

Among the final acquisitions was the 274-acre Best Farm in 1993. Named for tenant farmer John Best, who lived here in the mid-19th century, the farm saw action on July 9, 1864, as the forces of Confederate General Jubal Early clashed with Union troops under the command of General Lew Wallace. The engagement was limited in size, but extremely important. While the Confederates carried the day, Wallace's spirited defense enabled reinforcements to arrive and prevent Early from attacking Washington.

Preservation law mandates that federal agencies inventory their historic sites and structures, and plan for their care. In 2001, Monocacy began to survey and inventory sites through a partnership that included the National Park Service National Capital Region Archeology Program and the University of Maryland Center for Heritage Resource Studies. As the work progressed at Best Farm, the chain of historic documents and land ownership records led surprised researchers worlds away from the Monocacy valley.

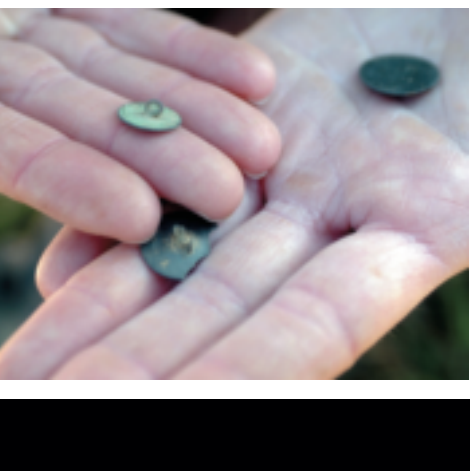
My visit with Joy Beasley, an archeologist and Monocacy's cultural resources program manager, begins in a field office where she and her crew of three archeologists are just finishing lunch. Joy has been directing the inventories since they began. Before our visit to the excavations, she introduces me to the farm's curious past.

“Best Farm has been occupied for a long time. We actually have a couple of prehistoric sites on the property,” Joy says. The Native American encampments document the earliest settlement of the area literally millennia ago. Euro-Americans reached the valley in the mid-18th century, with tracts surveyed and sold shortly thereafter.

The settlers were primarily from two places. German farmers came south from Pennsylvania, while Scots-Irish immigrants arrived through the port of Baltimore and struck out for arable land to the west. Both waves brought an agricultural tradition based on mostly modest-sized farms that produced cereal crops, livestock, fruit trees, vegetables, and some tobacco. This mixed farming, typical of the Piedmont and Appalachian regions of the middle and upper South, was distinct from the large-scale



TOP, ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT: © KATHERINE FREY



Clockwise from left: Buttons from the slave village; excavating the site; the University of Maryland's Mark Gallagher sifts for artifacts.

plantation agriculture of the coastal areas, deep South, and Caribbean, which relied on single cash crops like cotton, rice, tobacco, and sugar, and on large numbers of enslaved Africans.

In Maryland, substantial populations of enslaved people labored on the big Eastern Shore plantations along the Chesapeake Bay, where the economics of tobacco made large-scale slavery profitable. Big industries, especially iron furnaces, also employed significant numbers. In the more modest and diverse agricultural operations of the Monocacy River valley, slavery

was a smaller-scale proposition, and was far from universal. Many farmers in central and western Maryland had religious or moral objections, or simply couldn't afford slaves. This difference of opinion contributed to Maryland's divided loyalties during the Civil War.

Joy paints a picture of mostly small, mixed economy farms along the Monocacy south of Frederick, a generally homogeneous and self-contained little world at the end of the 18th century. "This was a pretty typical slice of the Maryland piedmont, until the arrival of the Vincendières," she says.



The late 1700s were not kind to the French aristocracy. The revolution and reign of terror led to the loss of titles, land, and, in many cases, life for the nobility. In 1791, émigré aristocrats in the Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue (modern Haiti) were swept up in a full-blown revolt by the island's thousands of enslaved people. The revolt, sparked in part by freed Saint-Dominguans who had participated in the American Revolution or in the later revolution in France, soon overwhelmed the plantation owners. As a result, a great wave of expatriate aristocrats emigrated to the United States.

Among the arrivals in the port of Baltimore in 1793 were Madame Marguerite Magnan de la Vincendière and most or all of her 10 children, including her 16-year-old unmarried daughter Victoire. Arriving with them was one Jean Payen de Boisneuf.

Boisneuf and the Vincendières were Saint-Dominguan planters, but the historical record is not entirely clear on their point of origin. They may have arrived directly from Saint-Domingue or from Paris. There may have been a familial connection between Boisneuf and Madame Vincendière (he may have been a cousin to Etienne de la Vincendière, her husband), but whatever their personal connection, historical documents indicate that they began acquiring land near Frederick in 1794 and 1795, eventually amassing some 748 acres at what is now Best Farm. They called the place L'Hermitage.

They erected a small house, then a larger house, and an impressive stone barn. These structures, all still standing, are an architectural hybrid of French Caribbean colonial and the local German and Scots-Irish vernacular.



Left: Stonework of the Vincendière barn—a hybrid of local and French Caribbean architecture—with farm fields beyond and expanding Frederick just past the treeline.

Joy explains that many things about Boisneuf and the Vincendières are poorly understood, and difficult or impossible to reconstruct from the historical record. “For example, the exact nature of Boisneuf’s and Madame Vincendière’s relationship is unclear,” she says. He may have been her husband’s cousin, but Etienne de la Vincendière lived in Charleston, never visited L’Hermitage, and did not treat her with much tenderness in his will. There appears to be some chance that Etienne did not father Marguerite’s last child, Héléne. This raises the possibility that Boisneuf and Madame Vincendière were romantically linked, although that’s impossible to confirm.

Most of the property was bought and held in the name of Victoire de la Vincendière. There are few 18th- or 19th-century precedents for an eldest daughter as the head of a household, but official records give the impression that this formidable and independent young woman was the owner of holdings that eventually grew to about 1,000 acres. That said, court records contain complaints and judgments against Payen de Boisneuf for failure to cover his debts, so it’s possible he put property in Victoire’s name to hide it from creditors.

Despite these unresolved and sometimes conflicting pictures of the owners of L’Hermitage, one fact is not in dispute. The Vincendières arrived with 12 slaves from Saint-Domingue. They began acquiring more as their land holdings grew, and by 1800 they owned 90 people, all in Victoire’s name, making them one of the largest slave owners in central Maryland.



Right: The plantation owners’ second residence, with subsequent additions.



Joy pulls a research manuscript from a bookshelf. One chapter, produced by Sara Rivers, a graduate student at the University of Maryland, summarizes what is known about the history of L’Hermitage and the Vincendières. “Sara actually came across an eyewitness account of the slave village at L’Hermitage,” Joy says. “It’s from a journal kept by a Polish writer and diplomat named Julian Niemcewicz in 1798. He was traveling by carriage from Washington up to Frederick, and was sitting up on the buckboard with the driver when he passed by L’Hermitage, so he got a good look at everything, including what we interpret as a reference to the slave compound.” She opens the manuscript and begins to read: “Four miles from the town we forded the river . . . On its banks one can see a row of wooden houses and one stone house with the upper storeys painted white. This is the residence of a Frenchman called Payant, who left San Domingo with a substantial sum and with it bought two or three thousand acres of land and a few hundred negroes whom he treats with the greatest tyranny. One can see on the home farm instruments of torture, stocks, wooden horses, whips, etc. Two or three negroes, crippled with torture have brought legal action against him, but the matter has not yet been settled. This man is 60 years old, without children or relatives; he keeps an old French woman with two daughters; she, in sweetness of humor, even surpasses him. This charming group has caused about 50 legal actions to be brought. They foam with rage, beat the negroes, complain and fight with each other. In these ways does this man use his wealth, and comforts his life in its descent toward the grave.”

Joy closes the volume. Save for the chirping of a cardinal in a tree outside, the office is absolutely silent.

J OY POINTS OUT THAT THE NIEMCEWICZ ACCOUNT, WITH ITS powerful depiction of brutality, is a very complex document. For example, Niemcewicz exaggerated the number of acres and slaves held by Boisneuf and the Vincendières. “It’s important to place this account in context, and check the facts,” she says.

The French Catholic Vincendières were, of course, very different from their neighbors, and Niemcewicz was getting some of his information from the carriage driver, a local German American. Those cultural differences may have engendered some hostility. It’s also true that Payen de Boisneuf’s habit of not paying his debts probably didn’t endear him or the Vincendières to the local populace. That said, Niemcewicz’s account accurately describes the house that still stands on the property, and Joy notes that his reference to legal actions provides another source of evidence. “We were able to corroborate at least part of his story in the county court records,” she says.

Indeed, there are six court records of complaints against Boisneuf, and one case against Victoire, for mistreating their slaves. None of these complaints was upheld; slavery was legal, the abuse of slaves not uncommon.

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—Joy Beasley,
archeologist,
Monocacy National
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Right above: Archeologist Joy Beasley. **Far right:** The stone barn with modern farm buildings in the background.





“Four miles from the town we forded the river . . . On its banks one can see a row of wooden houses and one stone house with the upper storeys painted white. This is the residence of a Frenchman called Payant . . . One can see on the home farm instruments of torture, stocks, wooden horses, whips, etc.” —from the journal of Julian Niemcewicz, Polish writer and diplomat, 1798

However the tensions between the owners and their neighbors may have tarnished the written record, it seems plain that the anonymous residents of the slave quarters faced some brutal and terrifying prospects.

Ultimately, it appears likely that the Vincendières couldn't make L'Hermitage profitable, at least in part because of their large slave population. Frederick was not Saint-Domingue, and the mixed cereal crop farms of the Monocacy valley were nothing like the high volume sugar operations of the Caribbean. They may have tried to rent their slaves out to other farms or to local iron furnaces or other industries, but by 1820, the Vincendières had reduced their slave population by half. By 1828 they had sold L'Hermitage. Almost all of their slaves were sold away to markets in Louisiana, including at least one woman who had been with their family since their arrival in Maryland. Their names and stories and ultimate fate are all lost to history.

THERE IS AN UNWRITTEN TENET AMONG ARCHEOLOGISTS, as old as the profession itself: “Your most spectacular discovery will be found on the last day of the project, probably in the last hour.” As we drive out to look at the farm, Joy tells me a little about discovering the slave village, and I'm not surprised when she tells me “it was the last thing we found!”

The inventory of the farm has proceeded over three years. Volunteers with metal detectors methodically swept the fields, followed by traditional excavations. The primary goal was the recovery of objects and ordinance from the Battle of Monocacy, as well as evidence of pre- and post-battle camps. An unexpected recovery interceded.

“The last field we tested produced a concentration of domestic and structural objects, kitchen utensils, a padlock, buttons, nails, ceramics, glass—the kinds of things you'd expect to find around a cluster of residences of some kind,” Joy says. While there was no map showing the slave quarters at L'Hermitage, the possibility of an association with the enslaved population certainly suggested itself. The objects all dated to the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th centuries, precisely matching the Vincendières' occupation of the property.

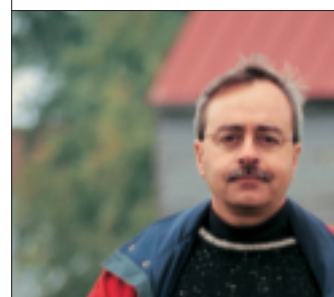
The ceramics and glass containers are, for the most part, of the most inexpensive and utilitarian varieties. When the Niemcewicz manuscript surfaced, archeologists realized that the concentration corresponded with his location of a “row of wooden houses.”

Since then, the area has been surveyed with a gradiometer to measure subsurface changes in the magnetic field, which identified several possible structural features hidden beneath the soil. Joy and her staff of two archeologists and one graduate student are engaged in limited excavations. With the site's boundaries better defined, the inventory of objects has grown and they've pinned down what appears to be the remains of the structures. Clearly, a record of life in the slave quarters is sealed below the surface.

When we arrive, Joy observes that “the basic inventory is winding down now, and we're not anticipating any further work here by our staff in the near future. Still, a larger-scale excavation would add a lot of missing and important pieces to this puzzle.”

I ask how she would measure the public value of the archeology at Best Farm. “Well, we're obviously adding to what's known about regional and local history. Several graduate students have conducted research toward their degrees here through our cooperative partnership [with the University of Maryland]. We're using the information to guide future development and interpretation in this part of the battlefield. Still, the greatest potential of this site lies in the missing information it might produce. The Vincendières' slaves are almost invisible in the historical record. Archeology is the only way their story can ever be told.”

Monocacy's Susan Trail is one of the few national park superintendents who started as an archeologist. When I speak with her about the excavations, her understanding and enthusiasm are immediately apparent. Still, as exciting as the discovery is, the tale of L'Hermitage is only a part of the story that set the stage for the Civil War conflict that remains the park's focus. Monocacy's primary mission is to interpret and preserve the history of the battle. Trail believes that



Top: The original house built by the Vincendières when they arrived from the Caribbean in 1793. **Bottom:** Archeologist Paul Shackel of the University of Maryland, a partner on the project. **Left:** View of the Vincendières' second house through the stone barn.

Best Farm plays a role in that mission. “Stories like the history and archeology of L’Hermitage help develop the context for Maryland’s role in the Civil War,” she says. “This was a divided border state, with deeply divergent and complex views about slavery.”

Ultimately, Trail sees the story of the Vincendières and their slaves as an important part of the history. “I would like to see future exhibits that focus on the cultural landscape at Monocacy, and that’s where the story of L’Hermitage would be fully developed.”

When I speak with Elizabeth Stewart, research historian with the Maryland Commission on African-American History and Culture, she agrees that there are “about a thousand reasons” why the work at Best Farm is critical to understanding African American history in Maryland and elsewhere. She notes that the 12 slaves who arrived from Saint-Domingue after the revolt brought with them the experience and ideas that led to the revolution. In her view, excavations at Best Farm could “tell us an awful lot about the spread of those ideas, and about how they failed or succeeded.”

She also notes that L’Hermitage, essentially an attempt to recreate a Caribbean plantation-style operation in the Maryland piedmont, was unprecedented and “merits further study on that basis alone.” For Stewart, there’s no doubt that the slave village could help fill in the details of day-to-day life for a population about which we know very little.

Stephen Potter has no doubts about the discovery either. Potter, an archeologist with the National Park Service National Capitol Region, is the co-principal investigator of the project with Paul Shackel of the University of Maryland. As we talk, he notes other excavated slave sites—at Monticello, at Carter’s Grove, and at least a dozen other places. But he is quick to say that “L’Hermitage is totally unique!”

That’s true on several counts. The site was the home of one of the largest slave populations in or near Frederick, which at the time was a busier commercial center than Baltimore. The enslaved people were likely a mix of Saint-Dominguans, Africans, and African Americans, with the potential for considerable cross-cultural influence and exchange. Unlike other excavations farther south, L’Hermitage is a post-colonial site.

Opposite:
A rusted hand-wrought nail and pipe from the excavation.

Below:
Archeologists Stephen Potter and Joy Beasley search the soil.



Left: War of 1812 button from the uniform of the American Third Rifle Regiment. It’s still a mystery how it found its way to the site.





But perhaps its most important archeological potential lies in the row of wooden houses that once stood here. As Potter observes, “L’Hermitage has the potential to produce not one but a number of separate and distinct residences. That means multiple features and distributions of objects that can be compared to each other.” In other words, this may be the very rare kind of site where specific relationships and exchanges of ideas, goods, and individuals among households are found and evaluated. In such a place we can come face-to-face with the former residents and the day-to-day realities of their lives.

AFTER I HAVE A LOOK AT THE ARTIFACTS, AND CAREFULLY put them back in the bag, I spend a few minutes with Joy and her crew, making the kind of small talk about the vagaries of field work that happens whenever archeologists get together. It is late afternoon, and time to close up for the day. The crew loads their vehicle; we all shake hands and go our separate ways. I have an hour-and-a-half drive home, so there is ample time for reflection. For a while, the technical complexities of the farm’s past absorb me: the gradiometer results, an unusual button just discovered that day, the need for additional research in Haiti and France. But larger considerations soon crowd out the minutiae.

In the end, archeology isn’t only about artifacts or soil profiles or report deadlines or databases or project budgets or surveying notes; it’s about people. Those broken pieces of pottery were once held by other hands, that odd-looking button once closed a man’s jacket against the cold. The small objects connect each of us directly to other lives. The real promise of the archeology at Best Farm is that one day these lives may be reconstructed. The Vincendière’s slaves were our countrymen and women. Their status as mere property leaves them with almost no written story, and the anonymity robs them of their voice. I imagine that voice could speak about determination, perseverance, and hope in conditions that might crumble the strongest among us. We are all diminished by their silence. Through the excavations at L’Hermitage, perhaps we will finally hear them.

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