

The Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery (DAACS)<https://www.daacs.org>*Reviewed by Noah Safari, University of South Carolina*

Among the tragedies of slavery was the forced removal of people from their homes, causing them to lose touch with much of their cultural heritage. Despite enslavers' efforts to suppress the cultures of enslaved peoples, enslaved people persevered and created their own unique cultural heritage by bringing aspects of home to their new environs. Those who were enslaved were marginalized and their lives were obscured by the historical record, but as James Deetz, one of the founding fathers of historical archaeology, remarked, it is through archaeology that we can understand "past people based on the things they left behind and the ways they left their imprint on the world."¹ Archaeologist Leland Ferguson poignantly noted this expression of culture in a groundbreaking, interdisciplinary discussion of the origins of so-called Colonoware pottery, products of syncretic adaptation based on the conditions enslaved people faced.²

This methodology of using material culture to gain insight has evolved since Deetz and Ferguson's time. Thanks to advances in technology and communication, we are entering a new era of investigation into the past, and the Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery (DAACS) has taken one of the foremost steps forward. DAACS is the product of a consortium between the Department of Archaeology at Monticello and several universities and research institutions throughout the Atlantic basin.³ Monticello's involvement in the project is fitting because it was both Thomas Jefferson's home and the site where he oversaw the

¹ James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life*, expanded and revised (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1996), 4.

² Colonoware is form of pottery considered endemic to the American colonies; for an exemplary treatment, see Leland G. Ferguson, *Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650–1800* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1992).

³ Universities associated with DAACS include the University of South Carolina; College of William and Mary; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; University of Mary Washington; University of Tennessee; Washington and Lee University; University of West Indies, Mona; University of Southampton; Northwestern University; Syracuse University; and Boston University. Other institutional partners involved with this project include Colonial Williamsburg; the Mount Vernon Ladies Association; the Corporation for Jefferson's Poplar Forest; Drayton Hall; James River Institute for Archaeology; Stratford Hall; Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory; the South Carolina Institute for Archaeology and Anthropology; the Hermitage; Jamaican National Heritage Trust; the Nevis Conservation and Historical Society; the International Slavery Museum/National Museums, Liverpool; and the Fairfield Foundation.

archaeological excavation of a Native American mound, employing methods that are still in use today.⁴ The goal of DAACS is to accessibly present data collected from a variety of archaeological sites throughout the Atlantic world to a broad audience, using systematic classification to promote comparative research and engagement with the past.

DAACS is a digital repository for archaeological information related to places involved with the triangular transatlantic slave trade economy.⁵ This includes such material culture items as beads, buckles, ceramics, glass vessels, pipes, utensils, and faunal material. The website has two main sections: individual pages for each archaeological site (Figure 1) and a database that compiles data about objects found at these sites (Figure 2).

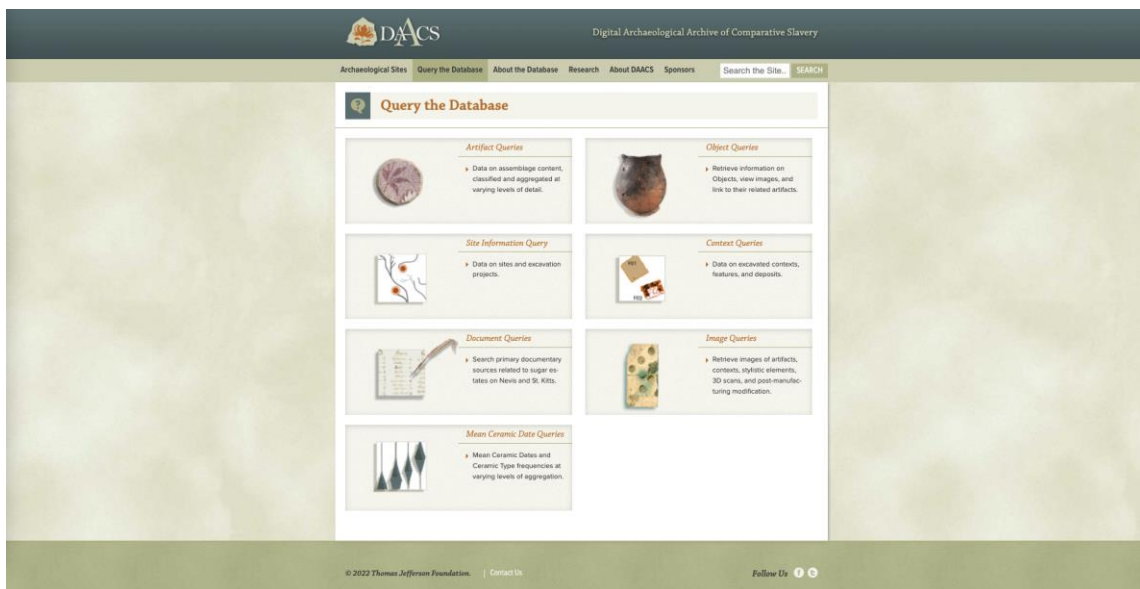


Figure 1. DAACS Query the Database page.

⁴ Jeffrey L. Hantman and Gary Dunham, "The Enlightened Archaeologist," *Archaeology* 46, no. 3 (1993): 44–49.

⁵ This refers to the Atlantic economic region consisting of the eastern seaboard of the United States (the source of raw materials), Western Europe (the source of manufactured goods), and the west coast of Africa (the source of enslaved Africans). A succinct resource is "Transatlantic Slave Trade," National Museums Liverpool, accessed April 7, 2022, <https://www.liverpoolmuseums.org.uk/history-of-slavery/transatlantic-slave-trade>.



Figure 2. DAACS Archaeological Sites page

The individual pages are organized by location: either in North America (Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee) or the Caribbean (Barbados, Dominica, Jamaica, Monserrat, and St. Kitts and Nevis). The pages feature maps and background information about each archaeological site, images of places and artifacts, links to research that has been performed using the information that DAACS offers, and a relevant bibliography for further reading. The database offers access to the archaeological data, with artifact cataloging manuals, image files, and instructions to aid in the adoption and use of the data. Queries can be performed based on artifact type, object type, background information about each archaeological site, context, document, image, and mean ceramic date.⁶ This data can be viewed in a browser or downloaded for use.

DAACS is significant because it provides a central data repository for archaeological data about enslaved people, is an open access program, and serves as a template for future endeavors related to the interconnection of data sets and collaboration between institutions. It thus promotes information sharing and standardization, allowing scholars to develop insights by making connections between data sets. The repository also streamlines the data collection process by providing a uniform digital-based procedure for documenting information about archaeological artifacts. DAACS provides fixed classification categories and a standardized measurement methodology across a range of material culture classes. This provides an opportunity to examine assemblages across sites and regions.

Additionally, DAACS connects researchers and the public with information about the material culture of enslaved people and encourages relationship building between

⁶ Mean ceramic date is a chronological measure of the ceramic assemblage at a site; by determining the mean age of the series, an occupation date can be surmised. For a detailed discussion, see Stanley A. South, *Method and Theory in Historical Archeology* (Clinton Corners, NY: Percheron Press, 2002).

researchers and descendant communities. It therefore draws attention to enslaved people's lives and enables a wider audience to learn more about them. The database also allows scholars and professionals to access a treasure trove of technical archaeological information, which can serve as a knowledge base for research endeavors and provide the resources necessary to promote heritage education opportunities. Research in the form of dissertations and theses, professional development opportunities like fellowships and training seminars, and public outreach are some of the outcomes of this project. The site also has a training platform known as DAACS Open Academy that provides opportunities to learn about artifact classification methods and how to use the site for research purposes, among other related subjects. Each year, developing archaeology professionals are provided with training and research opportunities at Monticello. Scholars and professionals can also complete a DAACS Cataloging Certification to qualify to contribute to the database and further its development. Collaborators have gone on to use DAACS for various academic projects and as a source for numerous academic publications.⁷

The material contained in DAACS provides a great starting point for learning about a past that has been historically overlooked. The involvement of a range of institutions provides a multidisciplinary depth to the research about the material culture of enslaved people. The unified presentation of multiple lines of archaeological data in one place and in a digital format provides an avenue for participation in archaeological and historical research into the pasts of enslaved people on a greater scale. An endemic issue within archaeology is that fieldwork results are generally considered to be privileged information that repositories only allow certain parties who are deemed qualified to access. The open-source nature of DAACS presents a more democratic paradigm.

DAACS is significant for archivists for several reasons. First, archives are replete with textual primary sources from the past, which often reflect a skewed perspective toward people of privilege; material culture provides a counterpoint by giving a voice to enslaved people. Archivists are therefore in a position to challenge dominant narratives by introducing researchers to DAACS and a new range of source material. Second, the way DAACS is organized serves as an interactive finding aid, which plays to a particular strength of the archives professional. Archivists understand categorization, the applications of technology to information, and intuitive ways to make information accessible, so they are in an excellent position to help researchers navigate the site. Third, DAACS offers archivists opportunities to incorporate compelling visual material, including three-dimensional scans, into public outreach programs and presentations. Material that once was only accessible within the stacks of curation facilities is being processed,

⁷ Under the research tab, there are a variety of links. These include Theses and Dissertations, which contains a chronological list of research that has used DAACS, and DAACS Sites, which contains a bibliography of publications that have used DAACS information.

described, and made available for public use. Fourth, DAACS presents information in a raw format that allows users to creatively control its interpretation rather than rely on the guiding hand of the archives professional. This epitomizes the shift away from an archival gatekeeping model and toward a user-centered one.

However, there are some drawbacks to DAACS. One is the project's limited regional scope. The southeastern United States and Caribbean are not the only places that have a history of slavery. Including archaeological data from Africa, Europe, and the northeastern and southwestern regions of the United States would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the past and provide a deeper awareness of how enslaved people coped with the pressures they faced. Another drawback to DAACS is the imposition of rigid criteria for qualifying and quantifying descriptive information about archaeological artifacts on a wide scale. As cataloguers and archivists know well, standardization is a good thing in theory, but it is no simple task to impose a monolithic classification criterion in a range of places with vastly different temporal and geographical characteristics. It is easy to apply a seriation pattern to products of a known producer, like factory-made ceramics, but applying this same methodology to handmade items such as Colonoware pottery will expose limitations due to the different cultural influences that are brought to bear by individual craftspeople.⁸ More flexibility in defining classification and measurement criteria would allow for the model that DAACS presents to have increased utility across subject areas. Also, adapting to the electronic data-capturing equipment that DAACS uses is something that will take time. Using paper and pencil to record information in the field is ingrained, highly economical, and infinitely adaptable to different conditions, but the costs of electronic data recording technology like tablets and computers will continue to go down, eventually leading to widespread adoption in the field.

DAACS is an evolutionary leap for archaeological data collection and management in this age of advanced technology. Archaeological work performed in the southeastern United States and Caribbean is now freely accessible by anyone. This access provides a starting point for a wider audience to learn about the material culture of enslaved people and can stimulate creative and exciting perspectives about the past.

⁸ Seriation is a methodology used in archaeology to arrange items from a particular category in order, usually in a chronological fashion.