

Is an Ethnographic Study Feasible?

Thus, in November of 1999, the author/researcher identified several elderly people who had lived in communities that were on the land taken by the Government. Sam Harris, Jr. had come to the arsenal to visit his former home, which still stands. She found his name in the phone book. When Dr. Elnora Clay Lanier called to inquire about permission to put a monument on her mother's grave, the CRM asked the researcher if she wanted to be the person to return the call since she was interested in meeting people who used to live on the arsenal. The researcher called Dr. Lanier, and they met for lunch. When Dr. Lanier mentioned elderly ladies who would enjoy visiting the cemetery, the researcher made arrangements to meet them and escort them to the cemetery. She later visited and interviewed the ladies she'd met, and gained additional names and phone numbers.

The first interviews she conducted were very rich in history. Mrs. Lizzie Ward was 99 years old (born in 1900) and remembered her grandmother, who was born a slave, still living in a house on what had been the Timmons plantation. Mrs. Pearl Horton Higginbotham, who kept notes about family history, discussed the community of Pond Beat that she remembered so well. Her grandfather, Yancy Horton, had been one of the pillars of the community.

The focus during the first interviews was on learning where the people had lived. The goal was to be able to tie the information about their home site to an archaeological site. Unfortunately, during some of the interviews, a large part of the time was taken with trying to ascertain where on the arsenal the subject had lived. The researcher had a Madison County highway map from the 1930's, which had some roads and houses shown. The women did not relate to maps, and so much construction and change had taken place on the land since the time they lived there, 60 years in the past, that the landmarks that would have identified neighborhoods and homes were gone. While specific locations of homes were not ascertained during these initial interviews, other aspects of daily and community life were revealed.

Eight of the interviews that are presented herein were conducted between November of 1999 and February 9, 2001. The interviewer was accompanied on five of those by a young archaeologist whom she had been asked to "show the ropes" about interviewing methods. On one interview she was accompanied by a young man who had been identified as having potential for learning to do interviewing; he did not return.

The Army Wrote a Scope of Work

Based on these initial interviews, an ethnographic research project was deemed feasible by the Cultural Resources team at RSA. It was the contention that a specific class of sites could be identified that could be best explained by ethnographic research, specifically tenant farmer and sharecropper houses. The Cultural Resources team could foresee an in-depth project that could provide information about the historic house sites that are so numerous on RSA. This project would have a number of facets. Alexander