The Rhetoric of Death: Parts 4 and 5

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Topography

- Lee County is westernmost county in Virginia
- 7,300 enslaved people there at the onset of Civil War (McKnight, 2006)
- Field stones on private, wooded land at the margins of a field
- Oral history supports the burial ground of enslaved people

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Context: History and Race

- African-American minority within cultural minority
- Written and oral histories largely exclude the African-American narrative
- “Racial innocence myth”-Elizabeth Catte
- 19th century wealth (and ownership of enslaved people) concentrated among the few
- 160,000 enslaved people throughout the central Appalachian region

The Space that "Excites and Troubles"

- bell hooks: "narratives of resistance…share an obsession with politics of space" (1995)
- Burial ground embodies a "rhetorical memory site for the disenfranchised" (Wright, 2005)
- Heterotopia: spaces that embody "crisis" and "deviation" (Foucault, 1984)
- Burial ground for enslaved were relegated to hidden spaces- removed from consciousness
- "Material site" (place) and "creation of practices" (spaces) (Wright)
- 19th century: a place of "mourning, remembrance, and continuation" (Rainville)
- 21st century: a cultural place for the living that inverts or "excites and "troubles" the conscience (Foucault, Wright)

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Methodology: Material Culture

- The study of signs via artifacts
- Poststructuralist approach: considering context in space and artifact creation, particularly when issues of power frame the creation

STEPS IN APPROACH (Prown, 2008)

1. Analysis of site's content (artifact, dimensions, materials)
2. Process of deduction about what the site is communicating
3. Use of "allied disciplines" to investigate and speculate

    -Consulted with archaeologists, physicist, textile expert, historians over the course of this research

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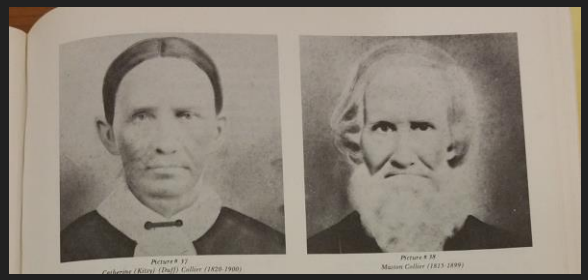
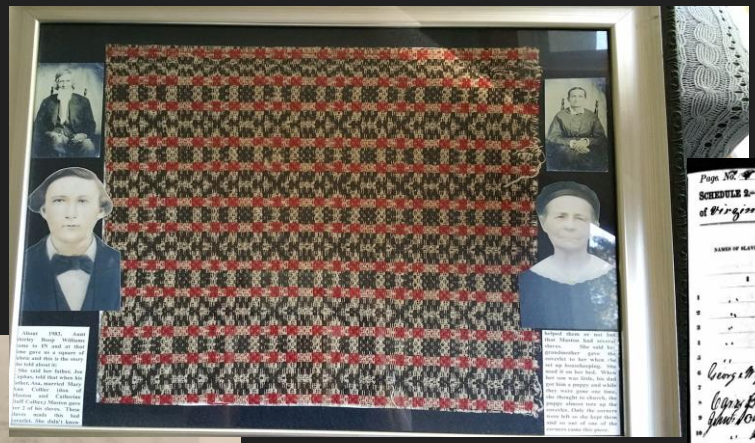
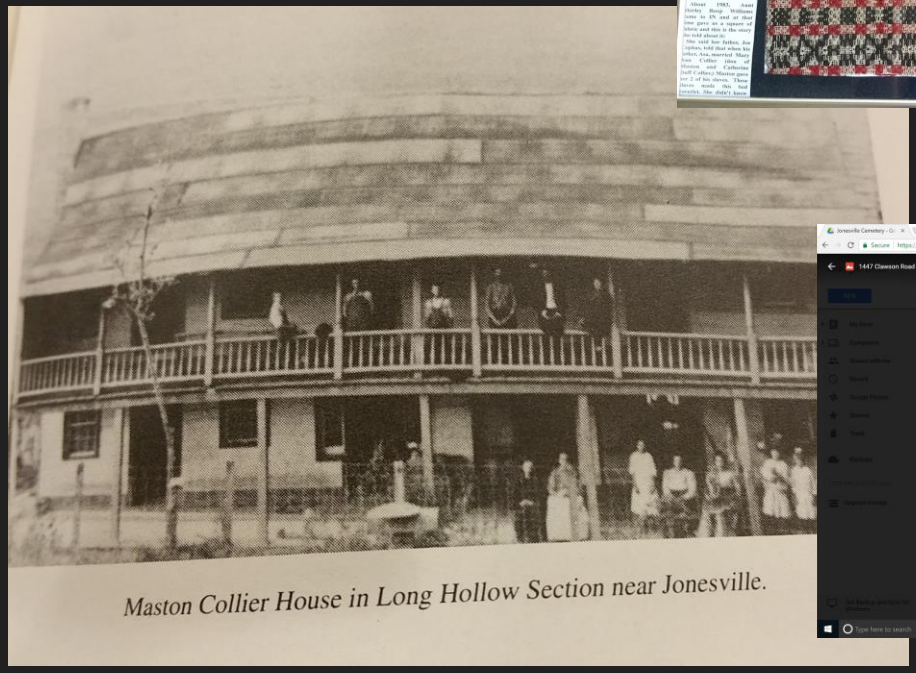
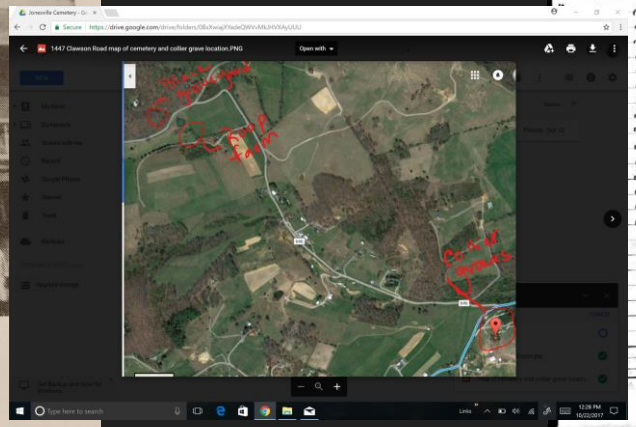
Connecting Oral History to Artifacts

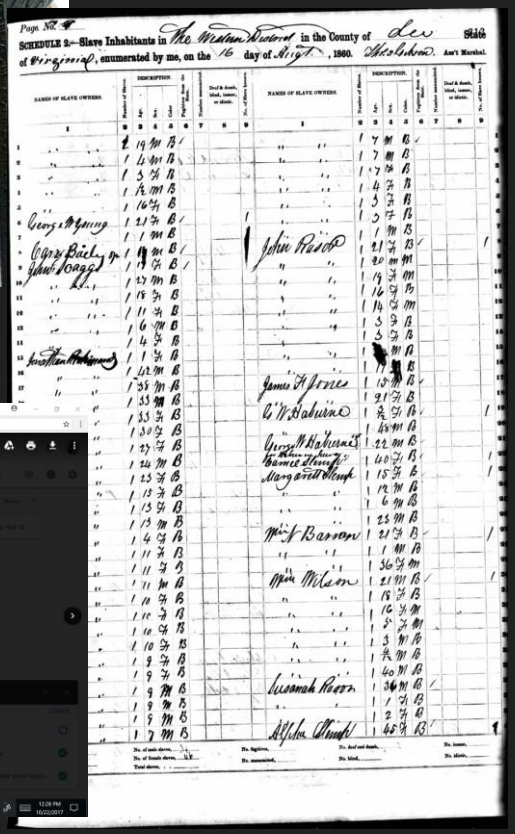






Maston Collier House in Long Hollow Section near Jonesville.





Site Profile Based on Rainville's 2014 Studies

- Site is segregated from traditional burial sites like churchyards and family cemeteries on the margins of crop land
- It is removed from the owners' home by several hundred yards
- It is located on a hill in the woods

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Coding Using the Semiotic Approach

- Symbols or codes govern how we make meaning
- Semiotic relationships
- Codes that enable people to process death and grief:
  - -the color black
  - -iconography and epitaph on gravestones
  - -rituals that govern the process of death and grie

- Codes are situated in time and space of creation, but
- Codes may be interpreted in differing contexts of time and space (Jim Crow era versus the era of #blacklivesmatter)

- A contextual understanding of the area and its history is necessary to “read” the material culture that expects social interaction

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Morphology

- Fieldstones (limestone, sandstone, soapstone)
- Lack of text (illiteracy)

Shape

Obelisk: enslaved African Americans using stone stele resembling Egyptian obelisks before whites (Rainville, 2014)

Shape	Number of Fieldstones
Square (<6 inches)	9
Square (>6 inches)	2
Tapered (mound) (< 6 inches)	3
Tapered (mound) (> 6 inches)	4
Tapered (pyramid) (< 6 inches)	2
Tapered (pyramid) (> 6 inches)	10
	N=30

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Size

- **Public cemeteries:** size indexes wealth as well as age
- **This site:** size indexes age (confirmed with GPR reading of length of remains)

Order and Direction

- Encodes messages about the afterlife
- Semiotic relationship between placement and direction
- Rows facing east: two symbolic possibilities
  1. Christian burial custom
  2. African custom: deceased rested facing Africa (Rainville, 2014)

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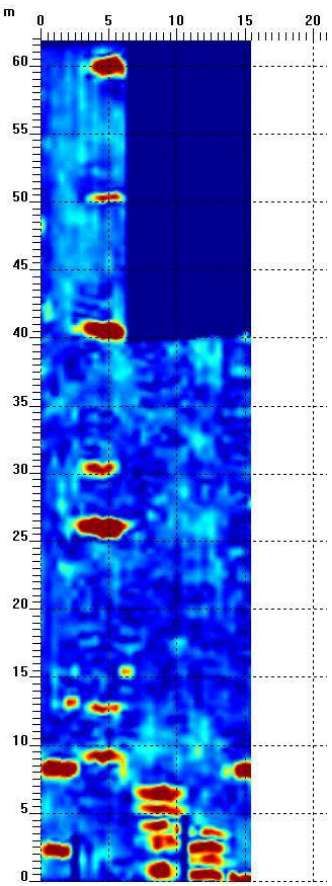
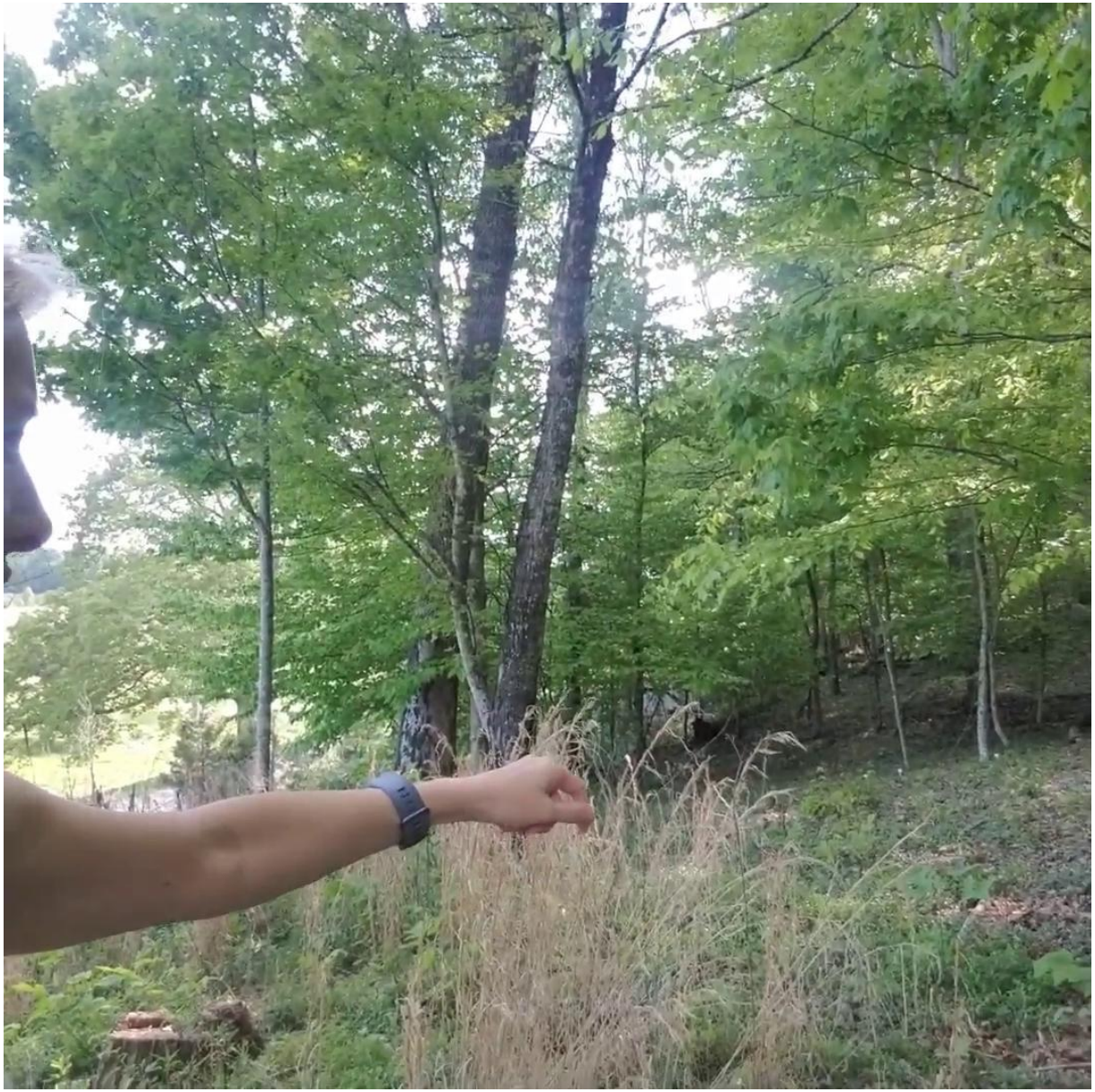
Digital Imaging



At the site, where I discuss the process of mapping and reading the order of burials under the soil



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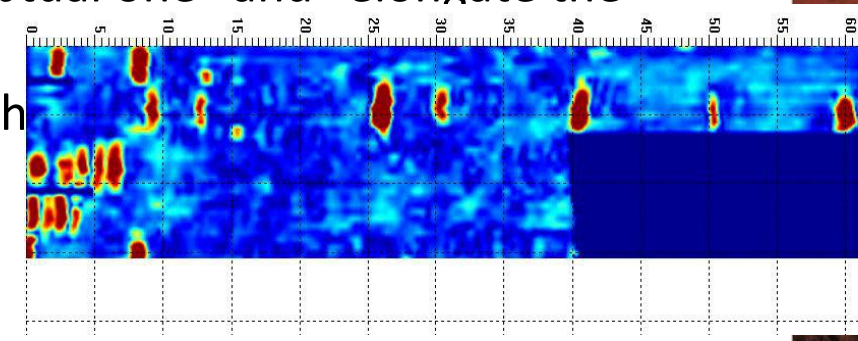
Digital Imaging

- Many stones uprooted by tree roots
- GPR confirmed order and direction of burials
- Abstract is given visual form
- Allows “conceptual world to enter perceptual one” and “elongate the indexical link” (Wolf, 1999.)
    1. Both adults and children buried th
    2. Bodies ordered east to west
    3. Purposeful clustering-family?



Discussion and Implications

- Communicating for survival, even in death
- Creates an everlasting cultural space signifying memory, family, and a history that may predate Christianity

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