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Construction history of the Deason House, Jones County, Mississippi

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ABSTRACT

The Deason House is located in the heart of the Piney Woods region in the town of Ellisville, Mississippi. During the American Civil War, the Deason House became the epicenter for an event that started a rebellion against the Confederate government. On 5 October 1863, a Confederate deserter named Newton Knight allegedly shot and killed Confederate Major Amos McLemore in the Deason House, which eventually led to the formation of the Free State of Jones. Despite the historical importance of the house, oral accounts and written documents have failed to provide accurate construction history of the structure. We coupled techniques of dendrochronology and geophysical survey to better understand the construction history of the Deason House and cultural activities of its inhabitants. We extracted 35 *Pinus palustris* (Mill.) timbers along the west-facing exterior weatherboards and from various logs within the second-floor attic, 25 of which were successfully crossdated against a *P. palustris* reference chronology located 15 km south in De Soto National Forest (1742–2013). The Deason House chronology anchored against the De Soto time series during the period 1742–1875 ($r=0.55$, $t=4.01$, $p<0.0001$) and extended the reference chronology back to the year 1680 CE. Clustering of cutting- and near-cutting dates from timbers revealed 3 possible stages of construction. First, the house likely existed as a single-pen structure built in the winter of 1835/1836, based on two timbers with wane/bark that were affixed to the original chimney made of clay bricks fired on the homestead. Second, based on the clustering of 1855 cutting dates, we suggest this was the most likely time the original structure was expanded with a vestibule, porch, and larger 4-room house. Finally, six timbers revealed a back addition was constructed in the year 1866. Ground penetrating radar (GPR) helped provide evidence mentioned in written records that the back addition (1866) existed as the detached kitchen then was affixed to the structure ca. 1890. The GPR data revealed geophysical anomalies that indicated the original sites of the detached kitchen, water well, livestock pen, privies, and trash pit. Through the use of dendrochronological analyses and geophysical survey, we were able to provide an updated history of the Deason House construction dynamics and cultural activities of its inhabitants beyond the historical record.

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1. Introduction

When documentary records fail to provide accurate information regarding the age of an historical structure, dendrochronological analyses (e.g. dendroarchaeology) can be used, provided all necessary requirements are met (e.g. preservation of timbers, species-specific reference chronology, number of growth rings accessible in timbers) (Grissino-Mayer, 2009; Stachowiak et al., 2016). Relative to the American Southwest, fewer dendroarchaeological studies have been conducted in the Southeast United States (US), especially within the Gulf Coast region of the US. Yet over the

past ca. 30 years, numerous structures have been dated using dendrochronology across Arkansas (Stahle, 1979; Therrell and Stahle, 2012), Florida (Grissino-Mayer et al., 2010; Garland et al., 2012), Tennessee (Grissino-Mayer and van de Gevel, 2007; Henderson et al., 2009; Mann et al., 2009; Slayton et al., 2009; Stachowiak et al., 2014), and Virginia (Grissino-Mayer et al., 2013). Despite an increase in dendroarchaeological studies over the past several decades, the Gulf Coast region of the US is underrepresented.

Historical landscapes are important because they afford people direct connections with the past. The study of the folk architecture used in rural Mississippi structures is understudied, with most attention focused on large mansion homes and plantations. Yet compared to mansion plantations, rural structures are more numerous, often of antebellum age, and characteristic of 19th century Mississippi architecture. Early 19th century settlers to the

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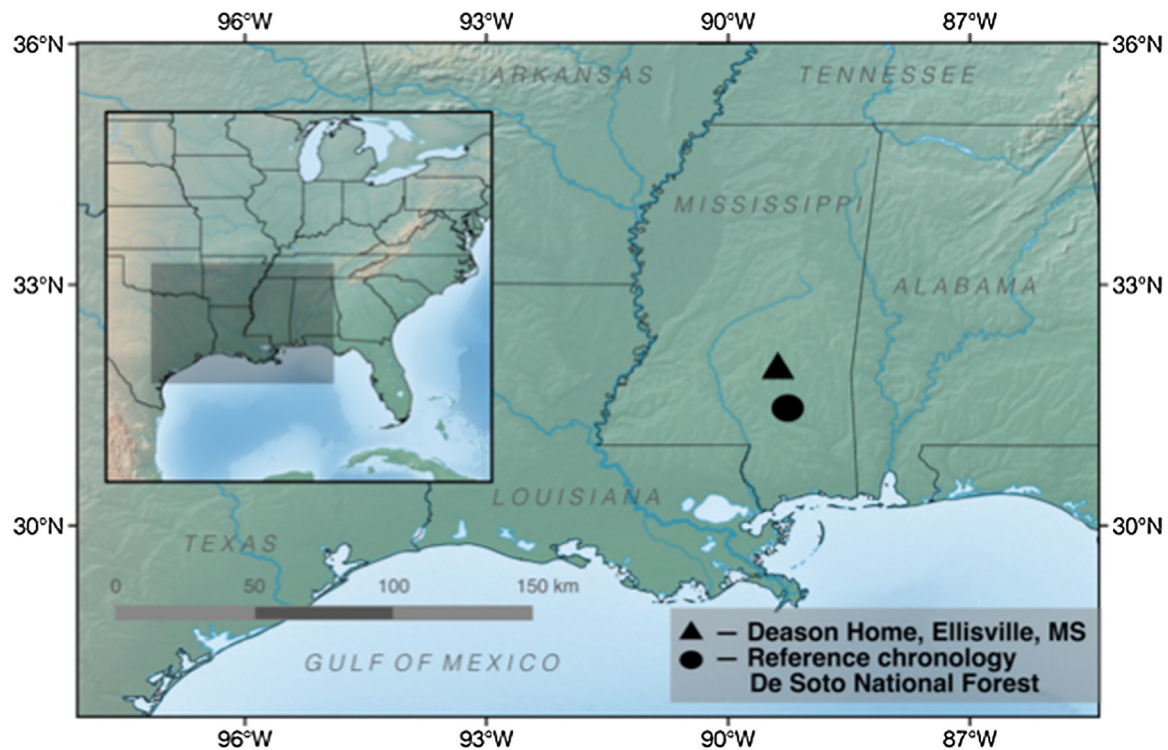


Fig. 1. Location of the Deason House relative to the De Soto National Forest reference chronology site in south-central Mississippi.

Piney Woods region of Mississippi, which were originally inhabited by the Choctaw Nation, came from poorer regions of Georgia and the Carolinas. J.F.H. Claiborne described the pre-settlement Piney Woods as

“...covered exclusively with the long-leaf pine [*Pinus palustris* Mill.]; not broken, but rolling like the waves in the middle of a great ocean. The grass grows three feet high and hill and valley are studded all over with flowers of every hue. (Claiborne 1906)”

In the heart of the Piney Woods region of Mississippi stands the Deason House, which is located in the city of Ellisville, Jones County (Figs. 1 and 2). Because of the events that took place during the American Civil War, few structures in the Gulf Coast region of the US contain the historical profile of the Deason House (Bynum, 2003). On 5 October 1863, Confederate Major Amos McLemore was fatally shot allegedly by Newton Knight, a Confederate Army deserter, in the home of State Representative Amos Deason (Hammond 2002a). Knight went on to lead a rebellion against the Confederate Army that resulted in a colloquial secession of the area from the Confederacy, known as the Free State of Jones. In addition to its pivotal role in Mississippi history during the American Civil War, the Deason House contains architectural features rarely found in the Piney Woods region.

The original house has three primary architectural features that are unique for the Piney Woods region during the middle 19th century. First, despite being constructed solely from southern yellow pine (most likely *Pinus palustris* Mill.), the exterior of the structure appears to be constructed from stone. Original builders employed a technique that George Washington used at Mount Vernon to transform wood to appear as stone (Fig. 3A). Second, no nails were used in affixing the heavy framework and 4 cm-thick weatherboards (siding); instead the house was pinned together with wooden pegs. Third, the front entrance is comprised of a rare hexagon-shaped vestibule with French doors opening on to the front porch (Fig. 2A–C), a rare architectural feature in the Gulf Coast region (Black, 1976; Latham, 1977; Hammond, 2002b).

Table 1

Oral history and documented ownership of the Deason House, Ellisville, Mississippi ca. 1845–Present (Hammond 2002b).

Owner	Date range
Amos Deason and wife Eleanor Baskin	1845–1888
Isaac Anderson Jr. and wife Sarah Rebecca	1890–1939
Welton Smith and wife Sara Anderson	1965–1991
Tallahala Chapter NSDAR Ellisville, MS	1991–Present

NSDAR = National Society Daughters of the American Revolution.

Original construction of the home was attributed to Ed Chapman, who started building the home out of hand-hewn *P. palustris* (longleaf pine) timbers harvested from the homestead ca. 1845. Chapman, however, died before completing the house. Oral histories attribute a man named Boyles McManus to completing the house at a later date (Hammond, 2002a,b). Thus, actual construction year(s) are currently unknown. Recently, a potential clue to the construction history was discovered in the form of an engraving on a front porch timber that reads “J.W.C. 1847 June” (Fig. 3B), but the official established date per the National Historic Landmark is ca. 1845. The first family to occupy the structure and 283-ha homestead is considered to be the family of Amos and Eleanor Deason starting ca. 1845. Amos Deason died in 1878, and the family continued to occupy the house until the death of Eleanor Deason in 1888. The house was then transferred to their eldest daughter, Sarah Rebecca and husband Isaac Anderson Jr., and remained in the Anderson Family until 1991 (Table 1). Members of the Anderson Family can be seen on the front porch of the Deason House as photographed in ca. 1900 (Fig. 2B). Currently, the house is owned and operated by the Tallahala Chapter of the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution (NSDAR).

Given the mystery of exact construction date(s) of the Deason House, and considering its historical importance during the Amer-

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