

# 5

## Housing Enslaved Cubans

On October 22, 1825, Cecilio Ayllon, governor of Matanzas jurisdiction, issued Reglamento Policia Rural [regulations for rural policing] four months after a major slave rebellion in the partido of Guamacaro. During this uprising, approximately 200 enslaved persons primarily from coffee plantations attacked 24 plantations and farms. Fifteen whites and 43 blacks lost their lives in the struggle (Barcia 2012:132, 160). According to Gloria García (2003a:84), this rebellion differed from those before and after it in the amount of bloodshed and in the destruction of property and crops.

The rebellion set in motion new policies and practices for the social control of enslaved peoples, including safeguarding slave quarters to contain slave movement. In Ayllon's reglamento under the section titled "Medidas de Seguridad" [security measures], article 14 required the following:

De esta fecha en tres años se habrá construido en toda finca, cuya dotación esceda [exceda] de treinta negros un edificio apropósito para que se recojan estos y reúnan bajo una llave, teniendo este los convenientes alojamientos á fin que estén divididos los estados y los sexos. En las fincas de menor dotación podrán reconcentrarse lo más posible los bojios [bohíos], poniéndose bajo una estacada espesa e cuatro á cinco varas de alto con su puerta y llave segura.

[Within a period of three years from today on every farm whose workforce exceeds 30 slaves a building must be constructed for the purpose of bringing them together and locking them up, it is advised accommodations should aim to divide them according to marital status and sex. On farms with less than 30 workers, put the (slave) bohíos together as much as possible, placing them behind a thick

palisade 4 or 5 *varas* (approximately 3.34 m or 11 ft or 4.18 m or 13.71 ft) high with a door and secured with a key.] (ANC GSC, leg. 1469, no. 57999)

Prior to this mandate, the 1789 *real cédula* [royal decree] on slavery contained few specifications for slave housing.<sup>1</sup> It only stipulated that slaveholders provide separate rooms or buildings protected from inclement weather and to designate separate rooms or buildings for unmarried and infirm slave men and women (García 2003b:57). The new policy of keeping workers under lock and key would be reiterated in later slave codes and proposed in planter essays.

Slaveholders in Cuba, like those throughout the Americas, notoriously ignored ordinances regulating slavery, particularly when they perceived such laws as infringements upon their efforts to maximize profits. Building new quarters or a palisade around existing houses was a capital expenditure many coffee planters could ill afford particularly when coffee prices drastically declined in the late 1820s. Moreover, lax enforcement of the 1825 ordinances (García 2003a:91) provided little incentive for coffee planters to invest in costly new slave housing.

Some planters, however, apparently did comply with the new regulation. Roura Álvarez and Angelbello Izquierdo (2012:75) cite Abiel Abbot's (1829:12–13) description of a slave quarter nearing completion at W. Taylor's Carolina sugar plantation in 1828 as an example that not only met the regulation but also was an early prototype of what became known as the *barracón de patio*. In a similar vein, both archaeological evidence and written description of the enclosed slave quarter settlement at Cafetal Biajacas indicate that it met all the criteria of Ayllon's mandate for plantations with bohíos. Ayllon, however, specified the construction of a palisade around slave houses on farms with fewer than 30 slave men and women, whereas the slave population at Cafetal Biajacas was over three times that number in 1822 (ANC GSC leg. 871, no. 29460).

The fact that the enclosed slave settlement so closely resembled the criteria of the 1825 ordinance raises the question of whether it was built following the 1825 rebellion or before that time. I have shown that the enclosure concealed, separated, and distanced the nearby planter residence

from the slave quarters while keeping the slave houses hidden and removed from the idyllic view of the plantation. Here I examine how the enclosed slave settlement fit within the broader planter discourse on slave housing in Cuba that began with Ayllon's reglamento in 1825 and continued through the early 1860s. An examination of the two main categories of slave housing, ordinances pertaining to slave housing, planter recommendations, and the housing practices for enslaved laborers as observed from written, visual, and archaeological sources are used to analyze and interpret the archaeological data of slave houses recovered from the enclosed slave settlement.

### Object Biographies of Slave House Forms

An object biography addresses questions concerning the origins, cultural influences, and transformation of an object in order to highlight its significance or to reveal characteristics that might otherwise remain obscure (Kopytoff [1986] 2000:379). This discussion briefly traces how the two broad categories of buildings became the dominant forms of Cuban slave quarters. First, the *bohío* was a detached house (comparable to the slave cabin of Anglophone America) usually with a thatched gable roof, sometimes a hipped roof, with walls made of reeds, *yaguas* [inner bark usually of the royal palm], mud, or wooden planks. Floors were either earthen or made of wooden planks raised on timber or stone piers. Second, the *barracón* was a single building used to house a large number of slaves, sometimes the entire slave population on a plantation. Some *barracónes* consisted of long rows of adjoining, contiguous rooms that shared common walls, like rowhouses; others were large buildings subdivided internally into rooms or cells. Prior to the 1830s, *barracónes* were constructed from various kinds of materials, but after that time, they were primarily masonry.

Both types of slave housing were used throughout the nineteenth century in Cuba, but some writers used the term *bohío* to refer to the individual rooms or cells of *barracónes*, whereas others consider a row of adjoining, contiguous rooms *bohíos conjuntos* [attached *bohíos*], not a *barracón* (Ortiz [1916] 1988:200). Additionally, because of its association with slavery, the word *barracón* was sometimes used, and it is still used today in Cuba, to refer to any type of slave quarter. These differences in the usage of the terms

make it unclear what kind of slave housing existed on a particular plantation when only the terms *bohío* or *barracón* are used without additional description. Despite this problem, bohíos were more commonplace than barracones for housing enslaved people throughout Cuba (R. Scott [1985] 2000:17; Roura Álvarez and Angelbello Izquierdo 2007:137; 2012:24). Unlike the barracón created solely for slave housing, the bohío has had a long presence in the Americas, becoming part of the vernacular architectural traditions of Latin America as a whole, particularly on the Spanish Antilles—Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico—where Europeans first encountered it.

### El Bohío Cubano within the Circum-Caribbean

The word *bohío* derived from the presumed Taino [an Arawak-speaking people] term *buhio*, meaning “house” (Jopling 1988:5), which entered into Spanish language and culture with the voyages of Christopher Columbus. Bartolomé de La Casas wrote in his *Historia de las Indias* Columbus’s description of the Taino dwellings: “[They] make their houses of wood and straw in the form of a bell. These are very high and spacious, such that ten or more persons lived in each one.” Las Casas goes on to say that the main posts were driven into the ground in the form of a circle and the roofs were covered with a sweet-smelling straw (Deagan and Cruxent 2002:33). Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdes, another sixteenth-century observer of aboriginal life in the Caribbean, in *La historia general y natural de las Indias* provides further details of aboriginal dwellings in illustrations that show two forms: one circular or polygonal, known as a *caney* and occupied by *caciques* [chiefs], and the other a four-sided structure (Jopling 1988:8–9) that resembles the bohío of the last five centuries.

Early Spaniards in the Americas quickly appropriated and modified the bohío to suit their own tastes. At La Isabela, the first European town in the Americas (1493–98) founded on the north coast of present-day Dominican Republic, most colonists lived in bohíos of wood and thatch. But they built them in sizes comparable to modest housing of late fifteenth-century Spain (Deagan and Cruxent 2002:129). Bohíos initially served as dwellings for the first Spanish settlers in Cuba, but affluent inhabitants of sixteenth-century Havana replaced the walls of yaguas with wooden boards

or mud construction and earthen floors with *hormigón*—a cementlike substance. Owners of wood-plank bohíos referred to them as “casas de tabla y guano” [wooden planked houses with palm roofs] and often used them as rental property in Havana (F. Pérez de la Riva 1952:333). As houses of stone, *mampostería* [a masonry product combining rough stone, lime, and other materials], and *tapias* [earthen construction] became more plentiful, the bohío was relegated to housing for the poorer classes of people. But the basic floor plan of the bohío was sometimes incorporated into the larger houses of wealthy classes of people in wings running lengthwise to the main structure built during the early centuries of colonial settlement (García Santana 1999:33).

In Havana, efforts began in the late sixteenth century to remove the bohío from the city limits because the thatch roof posed a fire hazard. The *cabildo* [town council] of Havana petitioned higher authorities in 1576 to prohibit building roofs with guano or straw (F. Pérez de la Riva 1952; García Santana 1999:15). Other towns eventually followed Havana’s lead, but the disappearance of thatched-roof bohíos from Cuban cities and towns was a long, slow process during which time several fires caused considerable damage. As late as the nineteenth century, fires in the towns of Batabanó in Mayabeque province and San Antonio de los Baños, Artemisa province in 1821, and in the city of Matanzas in 1845 were all attributed to fires initiated in bohíos (F. Pérez de la Riva 1952:336).

By the time large numbers of enslaved Africans arrived in Cuba to labor on plantations in the nineteenth century, the thatch-roof bohío had been banished to the countryside and primarily identified with white non-slaveholding subsistence farmers, pejoratively referred to as *monteros* or *guajiros*. Planters most likely utilized the bohío for slave quarters because it could be built quickly with inexpensive, readily available materials. But bohíos also carried the stigma of being associated with the lowest rungs of a hierarchical society and perhaps became another way of othering enslaved laborers.

The stereotypical slave bohío described and popularized in nineteenth-century Cuban fiction and other writings consisted of building materials similar to the aboriginal bohío framed with *cujes* [twigs, sticks, or similar plant materials comparable to wattle] and the walls filled in with *yaguas* rather than wooden boards or earthen construction.<sup>2</sup> Anselm Suárez y