

KAS RADIO - Episode 10

A Jessamine County Ancestor Shrine A *Think History* Radio Spot

Episode Transcript

Enslaved Kentuckians of central and west African descent assembled symbolic objects as shrines to honor the spirits of their ancestors.

In the ruins of the detached kitchen on one Jessamine County plantation, archaeologists found eleven ordinary objects covered by an old, broken Chinese porcelain saucer (shown in the image). These included iron nails, tin can fragments, a brass straight pin, an iron needle, a shell button, a bone button, and a complete freshwater snail shell. Because these objects occurred together in a small pit, the archaeologists interpreted them as an ancestor shrine.



The saucer fragment, snail shell, and shell button are white. In central and west African religions, white symbolizes purity and the Supreme Being. The snail shell represents water. Water separates the worlds. It is where the dead live temporarily as they wait to be reborn. The saucer - a circle - references the life cycle. Iron and brass are common metals found in African ancestor shrines.

Hidden from view, the shrine was a private space where the plantation's enslaved people could honor the spirits of their ancestors.

Objects that make up the ancestor shrine found at the Barkley Plantation (top), and a view of the objects as if beneath the saucer (bottom). Though unmodified, the freshwater snail, common to large rivers in Kentucky, does show signs of wear on its outside surface.

To Read More

A History of Blacks in Kentucky, Vol. 1, From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891,

by Marion B. Lucas (1992). Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort.

Traces the role of Blacks from the early exploration and settlement of Kentucky to 1891, when African Americans gained freedom only to be faced with a segregated society. Extensive use of primary sources: slave diaries, Freedmen's Bureau records, church minutes, personal papers.

Kentucky Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in Kentucky from Interviews with Former Slaves (1936-1938),

by the Federal Writers' Project, Works Progress Administration (2006). Library of Congress, Applewood Books, Bedford, MA.

First-person accounts of slavery and 500 black-and-white photographs of former slaves collected in the 1930s as part of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) of the Works Progress Administration, later renamed Work Projects Administration (WPA).

To learn more about **Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1938,** go to

<https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938/about-this-collection/>. Find the Kentucky Slave Narratives in Volume 7 here: <https://www.loc.gov/resource/mesn.070/?st=gallery>

Narrative of the Sufferings of Lewis Clarke, During a Captivity of More Than Twenty-Five Years, Among the Algerines of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of America, Dictated by Himself,

by Lewis Garrard Clarke (1845). David H. Ela, Printer, Boston, MA. Electronic Edition (1999), Academic Affairs Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill.

<https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/clarke/clarke.html>

Originally published in 1845, this was the first narrative to be copyrighted by a slave. Lewis Clarke, born in 1815 in Madison County, Kentucky, dictated his story to the abolitionist J. C. Lovejoy. It directly inspired Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel Uncle Tom's Cabin.

The Strength of These Arms by Raymond Bial (2000). HMH Books for Young Readers/ HoughtonMifflinHarcourt, Boston. Children's nonfiction book for ages 10-13/ grades 5-8.

The everyday life of plantation slaves is detailed in text and haunting photographs of recently excavated plantation sites, giving immediacy to the lives of enslaved Africans while paying tribute to the daily courage of a people who endured against all odds.

Uncovering the Lives of Kentucky's Enslaved People by M. Jay Stottman and Lori C. Stahlgren (2017). Heritage Spotlight 5, Kentucky Archaeological Survey, Lexington.

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From **Uncovering the Lives of Kentucky's Enslaved People** by M. Jay Stottman and Lori C. Stahlgren (2017), page 16. Heritage Spotlight 5, Kentucky Archaeological Survey, Lexington.

<https://www.kentuckyarchaeologicalsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Spotlight-No.5-Uncovering-the-Lives-of-Kentuckys-Enslaved-People.pdf>

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Summarizes archaeological research carried out at a typical early to late nineteenth century Kentucky plantation in central Kentucky. Focuses on the lifeways of the enslaved Blacks who lived and worked there.

“**Unearthing Magic**” by Julian Smith (2015). **American Archaeology** Volume 19, Number 2 (Summer), pages 19-23.

<https://www.archaeologicalconservancy.org/wpfb-file/19-2-sum-2015-singles-lr-pdf/>

Discusses archaeological evidence of private rituals of the enslaved, linked to African religious traditions and spirituality, and evidence of European immigrants' folk beliefs and medicinal remedies uncovered at sites in Maryland, Virginia, and New York.



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