

KAS RADIO - Episode 11

Superstition and Kentucky's Enslaved People A *Think History* Radio Spot

Episode Transcript

Enslaved blacks, like many nineteenth-century white Kentuckians, tended to be superstitious. They believed that people could be hexed, and they believed that everyday objects could be turned into symbolically charged charms and talismans that would provide the owner protection from evil spirits.



Left - a pierced 1857 half-dime from the African American refugee camp at Camp Nelson, Kentucky. Right – an 1833 Liberty Head penny from the Barkley Plantation, Jessamine County, Kentucky with several lightly scratched X's on its surface. These objects may have been personal charms kept in a pocket as protection and for luck or they may have held symbolic meaning for the enslaved.

They put charms in their shoes or wore them under their clothing for personal protection. Gertrude Vogler, a woman formerly enslaved in Wayne County, described this practice: “Every one of my children wears a silver dime on a string around their leg, to keep off the witches spell.”

Enslaved people chose objects for charms based on color or shape, or on the kind of material from which they were made. Sometimes, to enhance the object's symbolic meaning, they intentionally broke it, to let the spirits escape; or they closed it, to contain them.

Pewter spoon handle, circa 1850s, marked with an “X.” Archaeologists recovered it from the detached kitchen at Riverside, The Farnsley-Moremem Landing, outside Louisville.



Archaeologists working on several plantation sites have recovered pierced dimes or pennies with x's scratched into their surface. These were personal charms made to protect long-ago lives.

To Read More

Biography of London Ferrill, Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Colored Persons, Lexington, KY by Unknown (1854). A. W. Elder, Lexington, KY.

<https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/ferrill/menu.html>

London Ferrill (1789-1854) was the founder and longtime pastor of the First Baptist Church in Lexington. Born into slavery in Virginia, he moved to Kentucky after obtaining his freedom and provided religious instruction to Lexington's African American people. He instituted innovative practices in his ministry.

Image Credits

Pierced coin: "**Seizing Freedom: Archaeology of Escaped Slaves at Camp Nelson, Kentucky**," by W. Stephen McBride and Kim A. McBride (2011). **African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter** Vol. 14, Issue 1, Article 1, page 14.
<https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol14/is1/1>

X's on coin: **Uncovering the Lives of Kentucky's Enslaved People** by M. Jay Stottman and Lori C. Stahlgren (2017). Heritage Spotlight 5, Kentucky Archaeological Survey, Lexington, page 15.
<https://www.kentuckyarchaeologicalsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Spotlight-No.5-Uncovering-the-Lives-of-Kentucky-s-Enslaved-People.pdf>

X's on spoon handle:
<https://www.kentuckyarchaeologicalsurvey.org/the-culture-of-enslaved-people/>

"The Cross is a Magic Sign: Marks on 18th Century Bowls from South Carolina" by Leland G. Ferguson (1999). In **I, Too, Am America: Archaeological Studies of African-American Life**, edited by Theresa A. Singleton, pages 116-131. University Press of Virginia, Charlottesville.

An attempt to understand the ways in which ethnicity and African heritage are reflected in the archaeological record - in this case, ceramics. It demonstrates how difficult it can be to assign "ownership" to any one ethnic group in a creole society like seventeenth-century Virginia.

Crossroads and Cosmologies: Diasporas and Ethnogenesis in the New World by Christopher Fennell (2007). University of Florida Press, Gainesville, Florida.

Discusses ways that the earliest enslaved Africans preserved aspects of their traditions and identities in the New World, drawing from archaeology, history, and symbolic anthropology. Also examines some of the major cultural belief

systems of west and west-central Africa, symbols of the BaKongo and Yoruba cosmologies, and the development of African-American religious expressions in the Americas.

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.

The Kentucky African American Encyclopedia edited by Gerald L. Smith, Karen Cotton McDaniel and John A. Hardin (2015). University Press of Kentucky, Lexington.
An essential guide to the black experience in the Commonwealth, highlighting its diversity and history. Featuring entries on the individuals, events, places, organizations, movements, and institutions that have shaped the state's history since its origins, and topical essays.

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.

"Seizing Freedom: Archaeology of Escaped Slaves at Camp Nelson, Kentucky," by W. Stephen McBride and Kim A. McBride (2011). **African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter** Vol. 14, Issue 1, Article 1.

<https://scholarworks.umass.edu/adan/vol14/iss1/1>

Describes archaeological and documentary research carried out at the enslaved refugee encampment at Camp Nelson, a Civil War recruiting station, quartermasters depot, and center for U.S. Colored Troops.

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.

Uncommon Ground: Archaeology and Early African America, 1650-1800 by Leland G. Ferguson (1992). Smithsonian Books, Washington, D.C.

Takes a unique archaeological approach to examining early African American life through pre-Revolutionary period artifacts gathered from plantations and urban slave communities, Ferguson integrates folklore, history, and research to reveal how these enslaved people actually lived.

Uncovering the Lives of Kentucky's Enslaved People by M. Jay Stottman and Lori C. Stahlgren (2017). 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>

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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