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Beads, Coins, and Charms at a Poplar Forest Slave Cabin (1833-1858)

Lori Lee

Objects classified as personal adornment are often vested with meanings that reveal significant insight into their owners' lives because they are personal. The context in which objects are used is critical to understanding potential meanings. This essay considers the recontextualization of glass beads, a pierced coin, and a decorative, fist-shaped, metal-alloy clothing fastener used by enslaved laborers at antebellum Poplar Forest Plantation. The enslaved mobilized these forms of material culture in shared and idiosyncratic ways to assert varying degrees of control over elements of their daily lives, such as health, well-being, family life, and self-definition.

Les objets classés comme parures personnelles sont souvent investis de significations qui révèlent plusieurs caractéristiques de leurs propriétaires, puisqu'ils sont personnels. Le contexte dans lequel les objets sont utilisés est essentiel à la compréhension des significations potentielles. Cet article considère la re-contextualisation de perles de verre, d'une pièce de monnaie percée, et d'une fixation de vêtement décorative en forme de poing, utilisés par des ouvriers asservis de la plantation antebellum de Poplar Forest. Les esclaves ont mobilisé ces formes de culture matérielle de manière partagée et idiosyncrasique pour affirmer différents degrés de contrôle sur les éléments de leur vie quotidienne, comme la santé, le bien-être, la vie familiale, et l'autodéfinition.

Introduction

In archaeological analysis, personal adornment is a category used to classify artifacts worn on the body as ornament or decoration. While these artifacts were often worn in this way, many such objects also had additional uses and meanings. Interpreting the use and meaning of objects requires a contextual approach (Brown and Cooper 1990; Beaudry, Cook, and Mrozowski 1991; Yentsch 1995; Stine, Cabak, and Groover 1996; Wilkie 1997; Leone and Fry 1999; White 2005; Beaudry 2006; Samford 2007). A contextual approach emphasizes meaning within particular historical and cultural contexts (Beaudry, Cook, and Mrozowski 1991: 274). This case study uses a contextual approach to focus on three types of objects: glass beads; a pierced silver coin; and a decorative, metal-alloy, fist-shaped clothing fastener. Their potential uses and meanings are considered within the context of antebellum slavery at Poplar Forest Plantation in Bedford County, Virginia. Work Projects Administration (WPA) narratives, folklore, and archaeological contexts provide insight into how these objects were used by former slaves in the antebellum period and after emancipation (Durant 1941; Hudson 1941; Pope 1941; M. Smith 1941; Washington 1941; Puckett 1969; Baker and Baker 1996).

These narratives demonstrate that the uses and meanings of objects were fluid and contingent upon the cultural, historical, and idiosyncratic contexts of their use.

Recontextualization and Hidden Transcripts

My theoretical framework incorporates a contextual approach with Daniel Miller's concept of recontextualization and an adaptation of James Scott's "hidden transcripts" (Miller 1987: 174–176; Scott 1990: 4). Miller conceptualized recontextualization as a means of producing, maintaining, and expressing personal and social identity through creative redefinition of the symbolism of mass-produced goods (Miller 1987: 174–176; Mullins 2004: 207). James Scott's ideas about hidden transcripts were developed through analysis of the relationship between power and discourse (Scott 1990). Scott defined hidden transcripts as "discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation by powerholders" (Scott 1990: 4). He elaborated three characteristics of hidden transcripts: (1) they are specific to a given social site and a particular set of social actors; (2) they contain not only speech acts, but a whole range of practices; and (3) the frontier between public and hidden transcripts is a zone of struggle (Scott 1990: 14).

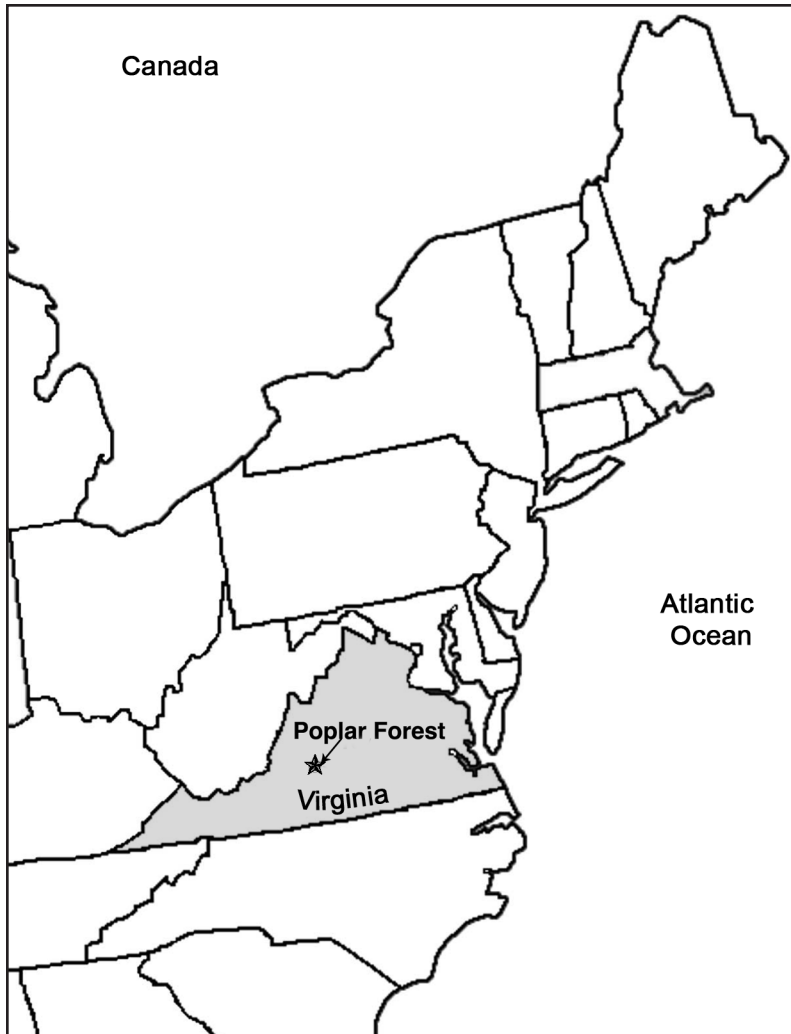


Figure 1. Map of the United States indicating the location of Poplar Forest in Bedford County, Virginia. (Map by Edgar Endress, 2013)

In his characterization of hidden transcripts, Scott extended the definition beyond discourse to include practice, indicating that hidden transcripts are or can be more than just verbal. Although he did not specifically address material culture in his work, his ideas are useful for illuminating nuances of recontextualization that are based on the situation(s) in which material culture is used. Scott captured situation in his first characteristic of hidden transcripts—that they are site specific and contingent on social relations. By situation, I refer not only to a given social site and set of social actors, but

also to particular circumstances that can shift the prioritization of one use or meaning of material culture over another. The situation in this sense is more immediate, at a smaller scale of analysis, than the historical or social context. Finally, artifacts themselves can be perceived as embodying public and hidden transcripts because of their multivalence. In these cases, hidden transcripts are not necessarily “beyond direct observation by powerholders” but, rather, outside their direct comprehension. This ambiguity was possible because the understanding and perception of the meanings of these objects was contingent upon historical, cultural, and personal context (White 2005: 9).

This contextual case study contributes to the understanding of the multivalence

of mass-produced objects used by enslaved laborers in mid-19th-century Virginia. This is accomplished through analysis of how three types of objects may have been used and understood differently by enslaved African Americans at antebellum Poplar Forest Plantation. The creation of meaning(s) entailed the recontextualization of these objects into African American systems of thought, the historical circumstances of enslavement in the antebellum period, and the particular situations that influenced individual choices and actions. I will first discuss the historical context of antebellum slavery in Bedford

County, Virginia. Because many of the selected objects are significant to the health and well-being of the owner, I will then discuss mortality in Bedford County, Virginia and at Poplar Forest in the late antebellum period. Then I will turn to an analysis of glass beads, a pierced Spanish half real, and a fist-shaped clothing fastener that archaeologists recovered from an antebellum slave cabin at Poplar Forest.

Historical Context

Poplar Forest is an historic plantation in Bedford County, Virginia, that Thomas Jefferson inherited from his father-in-law in 1773 (Heath and Gary 2012: 2) (FIG. 1). Jefferson died in 1826 and left part of the estate to his grandson Frances Eppes. Eppes inherited 1,074¾ ac. that included the main house (Chambers 1993: 167). He sold Poplar Forest to William Cobbs a few years later, in 1828 (Bedford County Deed Books 1828). William and Marian Cobbs's only child, Emma, married Edward Sixtus Hutter in 1840, and Hutter assumed management of the plantation in 1842 (Marmon 1991: 1.61). Each of these changes in property ownership and management directly impacted the lives of slaves who lived and labored at Poplar Forest Plantation.

Poplar Forest's enslaved community underwent a dramatic transformation with the sale of the property in 1828. Eppes took some of his slaves to Florida and sold the rest to pay off debts (Marmon 1991: 3.67–72). By 1829 Cobbs is listed as owner of 19 slaves at Poplar Forest (Marmon 1991). Oral history, substantiated by meager historical documentation, holds that Cobbs purchased "Aunt Katie," who was purported to be a former slave of Thomas Jefferson (Carter 1937). No other records suggest any continuity of people in the enslaved community in the transition from the Eppes to Cobbs residencies.

William and Marian Cobbs brought slaves of their own to Poplar Forest to work the land and serve their domestic needs (Bedford County Deed Books 1828–1829; Campbell County Will Books 1827–1831; Marmon 1991: 3.80). By the time William Cobbs acquired Poplar Forest in 1828, he was already a slave owner. William Cobbs married Marian Stanard Scott, the daughter of Major Samuel Scott. Upon Major

Scott's death in 1822, some of his slaves were transferred to Cobbs (Marmon 1991). Cobbs also received three slaves from his father during his father's lifetime, and five additional slaves from his father's estate in 1829.

In 1840 Cobbs owned 29 slaves (Bedford County Census 1840). Eleven of these individuals were children, five girls and six boys, under the age of ten. Nine young people, three male and six female, were between the ages of 10 and 23. Four women were aged 24 to 35 and two were aged 36 to 54. Three elderly slaves, one man and two women, were between the ages of 55 and 99 (Bedford County Census 1840). The gender ratio was nearly 2:1, comprised of 19 females and 10 males. By 1850 the number of enslaved people at Poplar Forest had risen to 41, despite numerous deaths and the sale of at least 5 people (Hutter Farm Journal [HFJ] 1844–1854). The gender ratio had changed; there were now 23 females and 18 males. By 1860 the gender ratio was exactly 1:1, 19 males and 19 females among 38 slaves (Bedford County Census 1860).

The total number of enslaved laborers at Poplar Forest between 1844 and 1854 ranged from approximately 35 to 45. These numbers represent the slaves Hutter recorded in his farm journal, which do not correspond precisely with the actual number of enslaved laborers at Poplar Forest in a given year. This discrepancy is a result of two factors: slaves who were hired out (prior to 1860), and superannuated slaves who were not always listed in the slave census. After 1854, Hutter no longer consistently recorded the names of slaves on the property, but some information about the growth and decline within the slave population is available in the 1860 census and the Bedford County Birth and Death registers that were initiated in 1853.

Health and Well-Being in Bedford County

The Cobbs/Hutter slave community was not characterized by substantial family growth, partially because of high slave mortality rates (Marmon 1991: 91). This was a common problem as revealed in the Bedford County records. The death ratio in the 1850s was 13:1,000 for the general population (Daniel 1985: 208). In 1846 alone, 5 of 45 enslaved laborers died at Poplar Forest resulting in a

high death ratio of 11:100 for the Poplar Forest slave community in that year. Four of these enslaved laborers were adults: Billy, Catherine, Lucy, and Rhoda. Daniel was two years old.

In the last decade of the antebellum era, approximately 46% of all deaths recorded in Bedford County were children under five years of age (Daniel 1985: 208). From 1853 to 1860, the death rate for African American children under age five was 13% higher than for white children in the same age bracket. The principal causes of death for all children, across racial lines, were croup, flux, whooping cough, bowel inflammation, scarlet fever, pneumonia, and various types of "fevers." However, scrofula (a type of tuberculosis), worms, and "smothering" were documented exclusively among African American infants and children (Daniel 1985: 128). Among older children and adults in Bedford County, scrofula was also documented as a cause of death for 65 African Americans and only 1 Caucasian.

Scrofula historically affected whites living in poverty, particularly children (Savitt 2002: 44). Therefore, its near absence among whites in Bedford County may indicate a low incidence of poverty among whites in Bedford County in the antebellum period; yet poverty prevailed among enslaved African Americans. Worms were a rampant problem in Virginia slave quarters because of poor sanitary conditions (Savitt 2002: 63–71, 128). Consequently, the high rates of scrofula and worms among enslaved blacks in antebellum Virginia were a result of poor living conditions created by slave owners. "Smothering" is a contestable cause of death. From 1850 to 1860, 21 enslaved infants in Bedford County died, according to records, from "smothering" or suffocation. The term "smothering" implies that the mother, intentionally or not, suffocated the child. The further implication of the term, and often the perception of the slave owners, was that this was an act of infanticide. However, these deaths were more likely the result of sudden infant death syndrome and accidents while co-sleeping, a sleeping practice all but necessitated by the imposed living conditions among antebellum slaves (Savitt 2002: 126–127; Lee 2012b).

Health and Well-Being at Poplar Forest

From 1844 to 1854, the years in which Hutter recorded this information, infant and child mortality at Poplar Forest was high among the enslaved (HFJ 1844–1854). When two-year-old Daniel died in 1846, he was one of 15 enslaved children at Poplar Forest. The next year Sandy, Daniel's two-year-old brother, died, followed shortly by his mother. In 1848, 3 among 12 enslaved children, Henry, Beverly, and Anthony, died. Three more infants, Mildred, Agnes, and Sandy, died in 1850. James, age four, died in 1853. Two-year-old Essex and four-year-old Elizabeth died in 1854 (HFJ 1844–1854).

To understand whether or not infant mortality directly impacted the family/families of the residents of the Site A antebellum cabin, it is important to consider who may have lived there (FIG. 2). Given the proximity of the Site A antebellum cabin to the main house, it was most likely occupied by a house servant or servants. In the period 1844–1854, Mima, Susan, Matilda, and Ellen (until her death in 1850) were the only women frequently assigned to work in the house (HFJ 1844–1854). Mima was an elderly woman born in ca. 1775. It is unclear whether she had any relatives among the slave community at Poplar Forest, although evidence suggests that she may have been Viney's mother and Lydia's grandmother (Bedford County Death Index 1854). Mima died in 1854. If she occupied the cabin at Site A, someone else moved in or continued to live in the cabin after her death and until the cabin was abandoned post-1858. Susan, Matilda, and Ellen all had children at Poplar Forest. Each of them also lost at least one child or grandchild during the antebellum period (HFJ 1844–1854). Lydia lost four children at Poplar Forest prior to emancipation.

In addition to poor living conditions that contributed to poor health, enslaved laborers were also subjected to many other practices that impacted their health and well-being, not the least of which was the oppression of being enslaved and the corresponding lack of control over many aspects of their lives. Cobbs and Hutter bought slaves, sold slaves, and hired them out for short and long periods,



Figure 2. Aerial view looking north of Poplar Forest from 1955, showing the location of the Site A antebellum slave cabin southeast of the main house and immediately south of a brick slave cabin (southern building) and brick overseer's home (northern building) which were built in 1857. (Courtesy of Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest.)

separating families and friends, and breaking local social networks in the process. At least once, Hutter paid to have a slave, Harriett, whipped. These are just a few instances of the hardships endured by enslaved laborers at Poplar Forest. Because their physical and mental health and well-being were so precarious, it is not surprising that enslaved laborers took measures to protect and maintain it. Evidence suggests that some objects of personal adornment recovered at Poplar Forest were used toward that end.

Personal Adornment at Site A

Archaeological evidence of the lives of slaves at antebellum Poplar Forest comes from the archaeological remains of a slave cabin that was occupied from ca. 1833 to 1858 (known as Site A). This cabin was located on an artificial terrace southeast of the main house at Poplar Forest and

immediately south of the location where a brick slave cabin was later built in ca. 1857 (Hutter Income and Expense Journal, April 6, 1857; Heath et al. 2004) (FIG. 2).

The archaeological assemblage from the antebellum cabin reveals the significance of small, personal items to the people who lived in the cabins. Numerous beads, four paste jewels, a decorative clothing fastener, three copper-alloy earrings, two agate rings, and a chalcedony brooch are examples of the extensive array of personal adornment items found at the cabin. Some of these objects were likely worn to enhance appearance and to express personality. Other objects, such as glass beads, may have played additional roles in promoting health and well-being rather than simply serving as personal adornment items (Russell 1997: 68–71; Wilkie 1997; Heath and Lee 2008; Lee 2008). Some of these objects likely served multiple purposes, situationally or simultaneously.

Adornment Items in the Context of Slavery: Glass Beads

"All sorts of purty gew gaws--red handkerchiefs, dress goods, beads, bells and trinkets in bright colors" (Baker and Baker 1996: 156)—these are the objects slave traders used to lure Della Fountain's African grandmother onto a boat, the final step in the process of her enslavement (Baker and Baker 1996: 156). Ms. Fountain shared this story with a WPA interviewer who sought her memories of American slavery. Martha King told a similar story about the capture of her African grandmother: "Men on the boat told them to come on board and they could have the pretty red handkerchiefs, red and blue beads, and big rings." (Baker and Baker 1996: 240). Prior to arriving at these ships, both of these women were likely subjected to the brutality and violence that were at the core of the African slave trade. Slave traders' attempt at encouragement through the lure of desirable goods in the final transition from the shore to the boat may have been a means of trying to avoid additional conflict. Traders carefully selected these goods, notably all adornment objects, because of their known appeal (Stine, Cabak, and Groover 1996: 56; Handler 2009: 5). Yet the multiple meanings that Africans associated with these objects were likely opaque to the slave traders. In these few examples, slave traders saw beads primarily as trade goods, Africans sought them for multiple purposes, and Della Fountain emphasized their aesthetic values. These examples reveal that from the outset of enslavement, adornment objects were multivalent, and their meanings were contingent upon vantage point and context.

Among the many types of small finds recovered at enslaved laborer sites, archaeologists have written most extensively about glass beads (Singleton 1991; Yentsch 1994, 1995; Stine, Cabak, and Groover 1996; Franklin 1997; Heath 1999). The debate over the significance of blue beads has been a particular emphasis (Adams 1987; Singleton 1991: 164; DeCorse 1999; Stine, Cabak, and Groover 1996). Stine, Cabak, and Groover stated that blue beads are significant for their potential to reveal insight into "the African American worldview that they embodied" and because of their significant

meanings to African Americans (Stine, Cabak, and Groover 1996: 49). Among archaeologists who question whether blue beads reflect worldview, DeCorse suggests that blue beads may reflect socioeconomic status rather than social or cultural affiliations or beliefs (DeCorse 1999: 144). Yet the presence of glass beads, if not blue glass beads, at so many enslaved-laborer sites suggests that use of these personal objects does reflect some sort of shared belief system or shared practices, although glass beads were certainly used in idiosyncratic ways.

Glass Beads at a Poplar Forest Antebellum Slave Cabin

Twenty-six black wound glass beads; two drawn, faceted black beads; one purple faceted glass bead; two white drawn beads; one bone bead; and 159 glass seed beads in various colors were recovered from the Site A cabin at Poplar Forest (FIG. 3). The predominant color of the seed beads was white (91), followed by turquoise (17), aqua (14), and red-and-white cased beads (8) (Heath and Lee 2008). Four seed beads were colorless, two were green, and there was one of each of the following colors: black, dark blue, dark green, purple, and light blue. The white beads account for 65% of the seed beads. Turquoise beads and aqua beads represent 12% and 10% of the assemblage, respectively. Red-and-white cased beads comprise 6%, and all other colors represent less than 3% of the seed-bead assemblage (Heath and Lee 2008).

If blue beads had cultural significance for some enslaved African Americans, it is not reflected among the large beads found at the antebellum assemblage from Poplar Forest. This suggests that if color were significant, this significance was contextual, personal, or idiosyncratic. Black beads, when considering larger beads, were preferred by or were more accessible to the individual(s) using beads in this time and location. Stine and her colleagues found an increase in the use of black beads at antebellum and postbellum African American domestic sites in Georgia and South Carolina (Stine, Cabak, and Groover 1996: 52). Therefore, the trend in popularity or availability of black beads may have been regional or temporal.



Figure 3. Representative glass beads from Site A. Row 1: drawn, faceted beads; rows 2 and 3: wound beads; row 5: drawn beads; and row 6: bone bead. (Photograph by the author, 2010. Courtesy of Corporation for Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest.)

Bead Uses: Adornment and Identity

Determining the precise uses of beads by enslaved African Americans at Poplar Forest and the meanings associated with the beads is difficult, if not impossible. However, some possibilities are suggested by the multiple uses of beads, among some enslaved African Americans in the antebellum period, established through WPA interviews (Rawick 1979). These interviews with former slaves revealed a range of bead uses in the antebellum period across the southern United States. Some women did, of course, wear beads to enhance their appearance. Carrie Hudson recalled that enslaved women wore beads, "but dey was just to look pretty" (Hudson 1941: 219). Within an enslaved community, peoples' group and self-identities struggled against the definitions of "slave," "house slave," and "field slave" that were imposed by slaveholders. The material correlates of this imposed identity were provisioned work clothing. Adornment thus served as a critical means for enslaved laborers to define themselves

according to their own perceptions or to shape their identities (Heath 1999).

Whether or not enhancing one's appearance was the primary goal of adornment to the wearer, others sometimes perceived it this way. Mary Smith recalled that her grandmother "was good looking. She wore purty beads, earrings and bracelets, and wrapped her head in a red cloth" (M. Smith 1941: 114). Because beads and other objects were often perceived as personal adornment objects by others, whether they were worn primarily for this purpose or not, enslaved people could likely wear them without fear of reprisal from white slave owners (Yentsch 1995: 48–49; Yentsch 1994: 191; Thomas and Thomas 2004: 111).

Based on period photographs, artwork, and archaeological evidence, glass beads were commonly used by African Americans in the antebellum period (Stine, Cabak, and Groover 1996; Foster 1997, 1998). Therefore, whites may have perceived beads as African or African American objects, further demarcating the otherness of those who wore them (Yentsch 1995: 48). Alternatively, glass beads may have

been perceived superficially, as mundane adornment objects. In this case, whites may not have felt threatened by African Americans wearing glass beads because, from their perspective, the beads were not expensive. Therefore, perhaps they did not symbolize status or ethnicity in a threatening way. Marinda Singleton, formerly enslaved in Virginia, recalled that slaves hid charms under their clothing to avoid detection by their masters who did not approve of charm use (Fett 2002: 96). Glass beads, which could be worn as personal adornment or personal charms, were an option that was probably overlooked by many masters who did not perceive their dual function. Period photographs, drawings, and paintings depict some enslaved women visibly wearing glass beads. Precisely because of their potential use as common personal-adornment objects, beads were ideal hidden transcripts (Scott 1990), conveying one meaning on the surface but layered with other meanings beneath this public display. This ambiguity was an important characteristic of some charms used by enslaved African Americans.

Bead Uses: Charms for Protection and Well-Being

Enslaved African Americans used charms for protection, to promote health and well-being, to protect from harm, or to influence the future. Charms are empowered rituals, objects, and groups of objects (Lee 2011: 104). African Americans fashioned charms from a diverse array of natural and cultural materials (Stine, Cabak, and Groover 1996: 60). Glass beads were sometimes used as personal charms (Stine, Cabak, and Groover 1996: 54, 60). Among former slaves who discussed beads with WPA interviewers, more described the use of beads for protection and well-being than for personal adornment. Rosa Washington recalled that her mother gave her a string of chinaberry beads to keep her well and protect her from "ghosts." Mrs. Washington elaborated that "[t]hey'd be pretty. I never had no other kind" (Washington 1941: 137). Therefore, she valued her beads for their aesthetic quality as well as protective qualities, and, possibly, because they were given to her by her mother.

Glass beads were commonly worn by enslaved infants and children according to Cicely Cawthon (Waters 2000: 55). Mrs. Cawthon was 78 years old when she was interviewed at her Georgia home in 1937 by WPA interviewer Annie Lee Newton. She recalled:

In them days darkies wore beads. Babies wore beads around their necks. You wouldn't see a baby without beads. They was made of glass and looked like diamonds. They had 'em in different colors too, white, blue, and red, little plaited strings of beads. When their necks got bigger, they wore another kind, on 'til they got grown. They trimmed hats with beads, ladies and chillun too (Waters 2000: 55).

Liza Smith, born in Richmond, Virginia, to African parents around the year 1847, also recalled that enslaved adults wore beads: "All de men and women wore charms, something like beads, and if dey was good or not I don't know, but we didn't have no bad diseases like after dey set us free" (Baker and Baker 1996: 389).

Alec Pope stated: "Some [slaves] wore some sort of beads 'round deir necks to keep sickness away and dat's all I calls to mind 'bout dat charm business" (Pope 1941: 176). Pope's statement, prompted in response to a question about the use of charms, suggests his reluctance to talk about them. In 1877, folklorist William Owens commented on the intersection of Christianity and African American "superstitions," which he felt resulted in "a horrible debasement of some of the highest and noblest doctrines of the Christian faith" (Chireau 2006: 14). By the 1930s, when the WPA interviews took place, some whites and blacks considered the use of charms a superstitious practice that was inconsistent with Christianity (Powdermaker 1968: 286). African Americans often chose to distance themselves from this practice—at least verbally, through denial of a hidden transcript in an interview with a government employee (who was often white)—if not also in actuality. Mollie Williams stated:

Lots o' folks carry lucky pieces. It can be a rabbit's foot, a buckeye, coin, or even a button. It all depends on how much faith you have in it. For my part I'd rather trust in the good Lord to keep me safe from harm den in all the lucky pieces in de world (Baker and Baker 1996: 449).

Unlike Ms. Williams, some former slaves did not perceive Christianity and the use of charms as incompatible (Wilkie 1997: 94). Betty Robinson recounted:

I been a good Christian ever since I was baptized, but I keep a charm here on my neck anyways, to keep me from having the nosebleed. Its got a buckeye and a lead bullet in it. I had a silver dime on it, too, but I took it off and got me a box of snuff (Baker and Baker 1996: 357).

Mrs. Robinson's act of transforming the dime from a charm back into money may indicate a change in her belief in the dime's value as a charm, or it may indicate situational prioritizing of an economic need.

Sylvia Durant discussed how her adornment practices and charm use changed in relation to her beliefs:

Hear talk dat some would wear [dimes] for luck en some tote dem to keep people from hurtin' dem. I got a silver dime in de house dere in my trunk right to dis same day dat I used to wear on a string of beads, but I took it off. No, ma'am, couldn' stand nothin' like that (Durant 1941: 346–47).

Mrs. Durant stopped wearing the coin and possibly the beads, yet she did not discard the coin or use it as money, so she did not completely distance herself from the practice. This change in the use and meaning of the coin reflects how beliefs and practices change over time.

Glass Beads as Teething Tools

Glass beads were also one type of object, among many, that was used by enslaved laborers to ease the teething of children. Narratives of many former slaves describe various remedies and stringing of all sorts of objects, of both natural and cultural origin, to aid children with the teething process. In the 1920s, folklorist Newbell Niles Puckett stated that this phenomenon was a reflection of the high rate of infant mortality among African Americans (Puckett 1969: 345). As discussed above, infant mortality was extremely high among enslaved African Americans in the antebellum period (Steckel 1988; Savitt 2002); the slave community at Poplar Forest was no exception.

Glass Beads in Burials (1850–1920)

Promoting health and well-being is central to the role of motherhood. Scholars have

demonstrated that beads are and were used by African and African American people in the past and present for medicinal and spiritual purposes. For example, blue faceted beads are presently used in Banda, Ghana, to cure chest illnesses, and black tubular beads are placed on the necks of infants to help the mother prevent illness in future-born children (Caton 1997: 32). The presence of similar types of beads on the same parts of the body in 19th-century African American infant burials suggest similar practices may have been implemented in antebellum south-central Virginia (Joseph et al. 2000). Perhaps the black tubular beads at Poplar Forest were used in a similar way.

Beads were also found in burials at Elko Switch Cemetery in Alabama, which was in use from 1850 to 1920. Only 2 of 56 burials contained beads. Significantly, one was the burial of a middle-aged woman who was interred between 1850 and 1870. She was wearing a necklace consisting of 33 black wound beads with a single blue, drawn, faceted bead in the center. The other burial was an infant who was interred in 1895. This infant was buried with 300 colorless glass beads, including 24 large beads and 176 seed beads (Stine, Cabak, and Groover 1996: 62).

In combination with the Elko Switch Cemetery burials, Wilson and Cabak analyzed the artifacts recovered at five additional African American cemeteries from 336 burials interred between 1850 and 1920 (Wilson and Cabak 2004). Among these additional burials, 11 beads associated with seven women were recovered. Beads were found most often with women over 35 years old. Wilson and Cabak interpreted this as evidence that these women were more likely to need “the protection and medicinal qualities afforded by the beads” (Wilson and Cabak 2004: 271).

Because mortality was high among African Americans in the 19th century, social practices that attempted to influence the unknown, to promote and maintain health and well-being, seem probable. Burials of women and infants with beads seem to support this hypothesis. Although it is not certain how glass beads were used, at least some of them may be evidence of child-care practices of enslaved mothers attempting to overcome the odds in a time of high infant and child mortality. This



Figure 4. Pierced Spanish real (17mm), bearing teeth marks, recovered at Site A (Photograph by the author, 2010. Courtesy of Corporation for Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest.)

case can be made more strongly for another "adornment" object found at the cabin.

Pierced Coins: Health and Well-Being

Pierced coins, particularly Spanish reales, are frequently recovered at 18th- and 19th-century archaeological sites associated with enslaved African Americans. Therefore, it was not surprising when a pierced Spanish half real was recovered at the Poplar Forest antebellum slave cabin (Heath et al. 2004: 15) (FIG. 4). The real was recovered in plowzone in the yard outside the cabin, immediately northwest of the chimney and within 15 ft. of the subfloor pit. Spanish reales were standard currency in Virginia from 1645, and they were legal tender in the United States from 1793 until 1857. Thus, the exchange value of the coin could be interpreted as its primary significance. But this coin was modified, indicating that the coin's value as an adornment object, and most likely a protective charm, was considered more significant to its owner than its economic value. Three additional pierced coins have been recovered at Poplar Forest at other sites associated with enslaved laborers; two of these are also Spanish half reales (Heath et al. 2004: 15) (FIG. 4). This suggests that enslaved laborers valued this particular type of coin for a reason or reasons beyond its obvious economic value.

The pierced Spanish half real found at Site A was produced in the 1780s during the reign of Charles III or Charles IV. It is heavily worn and bears two deep impressions that some dental experts have identified as probable teeth marks (Josh Binder 2012, pers. comm.). WPA narratives document that pierced and unpierced coins were worn by enslaved African Americans for protection or well-being (Baker and Baker 1996: 235). Sylvia Durant and Betty Robinson, mentioned above, recalled wearing a dime in earlier years (Durant 1941: 346–347). Elisha Garey recalled slaves engaging in this practice: "Slaves wore a nickel or copper on strings 'round deir necks to keep off sickness. Some few of 'em wore a dime; but dimes was hard to get" (Garey 1941: 7). Although Garey grew up in Georgia, his grandmother was from Virginia.

Stephen McCray, born into slavery in Alabama, recounted to an interviewer in Oklahoma: "A dime was put 'round a teething baby's neck to make it tooth easy and it sho' helped too. But today all folks done got 'bove that" (Baker and Baker 1996: 271). This practice may not have persisted in McCray's neighborhood in Oklahoma, but it continued in some areas, such as Texas and Mississippi (Puckett 1969; Davidson 2004: 40).

Folklorist Newbell Niles Puckett collected African American folklore in Mississippi in the 1920s (Puckett 1969). He documented the use of silver coins for good luck, for protection from conjuring, and as a general cure (Russell 1997: 68). He noted: "Perhaps silver, however, is the most universal preventative of conjuration. ... One Negro estimates that about half of the Negroes in Columbus, Miss., use silver coins for counter-charms, either tied about their ankles or put in their shoes" (Puckett 1969: 288). He also noted: "The silver coin, so effective in warding off conjuration, is equally effective in bringing good luck when tied around the leg or worn in a necklace about the neck" (Puckett 1969: 314). He also discussed uses of copper coins. One African American informant in Mississippi told Puckett that a penny worn around the neck served the seemingly mundane purpose of easing teething for young children (Puckett 1969: 346; Wilkie 1997: 86–87).

The teeth marks on the pierced real recovered at Site A may indicate that a young

child used the coin to ease teething. Easing teething may have been the primary reason that the coin was placed on the child. Alternatively, the coin may have been placed on the child because of its perceived protective qualities. It may have served both of these objectives, simultaneously maintaining well-being in two ways. Directing resources toward well-being was one way the enslaved attempted to protect themselves from the harsh realities of daily life (Edwards-Ingram 2001, 2005). These harsh realities included oppression, sickness, death, violence, conjure, and separation from family and friends.

A pierced 1847 Liberty Head penny was also found in association with the antebellum slave cabin at Poplar Forest. This coin was recovered in plowzone in the yard surrounding the cabin. It was located just outside the projected southwest corner of the cabin, within 15 ft. of the subfloor pit. Wilkie recovered a pierced 1855 Britannia penny at Oakland Plantation among the remains associated with Sylvia Freeman's home (Wilkie 1997: 101). Freeman was born in Virginia in 1855. Wilkie interpreted this coin as a birth coin that commemorated Freeman's birth year. She further interpreted the coin as an example of "the magical practice of using coins as protective devices ... quite literally brought by her from Virginia" (Wilkie 1997: 101). The potential past uses of the pierced 1847 penny are multiple. The modification of the coin, however, suggests that its primary function was not economic, and its meaning was recontextualized through modification.

Pierced Coins in Burials (1850–1920)

Five of the African American burials investigated by Wilson and Cabak, all women or children, contained pierced coins. As with the burials that contained glass beads, Wilson and Cabak also interpreted the pierced coins as serving a protective or medicinal purpose (Wilson and Cabak 2004: 274). In a rich contextual study, Davidson has thoroughly documented the continuation in Texas of African Americans using beads and coins as charms after emancipation (Davidson 2004). Davidson analyzed data recovered from 1,150 burials in Freedman's Cemetery in Dallas, Texas. Freedman's

Cemetery was in use from 1867 to 1907. Among the 1,150 excavated burials, 15 contained pierced-coin charms (Davidson 2004: 40). Of the individuals with discernible gender (7 of 15), all but one were female (Davidson 2004: 24). Three were adult women who ranged from 30 to 41 years of age, and the other four were girls from 6 months to 2 years old. Six infant burials contained only pierced coins placed around the child's neck (Davidson 2004: 40). Four of the burials also contained glass beads worn around the neck in addition to a pierced coin (Davidson 2004: 24). All the burials that contained glass beads and pierced coins were burials of infants between six months and just under two years old (Davidson 2004: 22, 39–40). This was both a critical time period for teething and an age of high infant mortality.

A pierced Spanish real was found near two black tubular beads at a mid-19th-century slave cabin at Ashland Belle-Helene Plantation in Louisiana (Yakubik and Mendez 1995: 27; Wilkie 1997: 100). Recall that Sylvia Durant of South Carolina described wearing beads with a pierced coin as a charm. In combination, evidence from these three locations indicates that wearing beads and coins was a regional practice that extended from the antebellum period to at least the first quarter of the 20th century.

Fist-shaped Fastener or Hand Charm?

Arguably the most intriguing personal adornment item found at the antebellum cabin is a tiny figurative eye element of a hook-and-eye fastener (FIG. 5). This stamped copper-alloy fastener has the form of a clenched right fist emerging from a shirt cuff. The fist is centered in a circle, with a loop above to receive the hook fastener. This fastener was recovered in fill on top of the ruins of the cabin's chimney base. Some ceramics sherds recovered from this same fill layer crossmend with ceramics recovered from the adjacent subfloor pit.

Archaeologists have recovered 11 other fist-shaped fasteners, similar and in most cases identical to the one found at Poplar Forest. They are all right hands. Four of these artifacts were recovered in Tennessee: two from slave quarters at Andrew Jackson's Hermitage in



Figure 5. Stamped, copper-alloy, fist-shaped eye section of a hook-and-eye fastener recovered at Site A. (Photograph by Keith Adams, 2007. Courtesy of Corporation for Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest.)

Davidson County, one from a slave cabin associated with the Hilderbrand House in Shelby County, and one from a slave cabin at Wynnewood Resort in Sumner County. Three fist-shaped fasteners have been recovered in Annapolis, Maryland: one from the Charles Calvert House and two from the Maynard-Burgess home occupied by free blacks. Most recently, archaeologists recovered four of these decorative fasteners in association with a slave cabin at Kingsley Plantation in Jacksonville, Florida (S. Smith 1987; Yentsch 1994; McKee 1995; Russell 1997; Fennell 2007, [2013]; Markus and Davidson 2011; James Davidson 2013, pers. comm.). With the exception of the Calvert House artifact, which was recovered from an urban household inhabited by black and white residents, these fasteners were all recovered from the living and working spaces of African Americans, with initial or primary occupation in the antebellum period (1820–1860).

The fasteners' nearly identical appearance, in combination with their widespread distribution,

suggests that they were mass-produced. Exactly where they were produced is presently unknown. Archaeologists disagree on how they were used and the meanings they held for those who used them. This may be because each of these objects, prior to the Kingsley artifacts, was discovered independently in remote locations or over long periods of time. The earliest ones that were recovered were broken or bent, and they were not found in sets, which obscured the fact that they were functionally hook-and-eye fasteners. It is only recently that enough of these fasteners have been recovered that, as a group, the patterns in their uses and meanings may be considered. Unlike glass beads and pierced coins, these objects currently do not have the comparatively rich context created through the interweaving of historical documents, burial evidence, and archaeological contexts. Consequently, more research is needed. Meanwhile, the archaeological context provides the contextual framework for interpretation.

Many archaeologists, following a precedent set early on, refer to these fist-shaped fasteners as charms (Russell 1997: 66; Wilkie 1997: 96; McKee 2000: 197; Thomas and Thomas 2004: 112; Lee 2012a: 177). For that reason, I will continue to refer to them as charms in the following discussion of how they have been interpreted, with the acknowledgment that their intended purpose, from the perspective of the manufacturer, was use as clothing fasteners.

Archaeologists have proposed various interpretations of the meaning of hand charms (S. Smith 1987; Singleton 1991: 162; Yentsch 1994: 33; McKee 1995: 40; Russell 1997: 67; Thomas and Thomas 2004: 124; Markus and Davidson 2011; Fennell 2007, [2013]; Bartoy 2009; Lee 2012a: 179). Yentsch stated that African Americans attributed to hand charms protective power against witchcraft (Yentsch 1994: 33). Samuel Smith suggested, and others concurred, that hand charms may have been appealing as a form of sympathetic magic because some antebellum African Americans used the term "hand," as evidenced in WPA narratives, to refer to protective charms (S. Smith 1987; McKee 1995: 40; Thomas and Thomas 2004: 112). Other archaeologists suggested that hand charms may have been appealing because of their similarity to *figas*

and Islamic Hand of Fatima symbols, both of which were used as protective charms in the Old and New Worlds (S. Smith 1987; Singleton 1991: 162; McKee 1995: 40).

The hand charms recovered at the Hermitage, Poplar Forest, and the Calvert House differ in form from *figas* and Hand of Fatima charms. *Figas* are also clenched-fist figures. However, the thumb is inserted between the first and second finger of a *figa*, which is not the case with the fist-shaped “charm” fasteners under discussion. People around the Mediterranean have used *figas* as protective charms for centuries (Fennell 2007: 22). The Spanish brought *figas* to the New World in the process of colonization. The Hand of Fatima symbol is an open right palm. People in the Middle East and North Africa have also used this symbol as a protective charm for centuries.

Hand symbolism was common in British jewelry and metal hardware in the Victorian era (1837–1901). Given the form, the manufacturing technique, and the time period associated with the fist-shaped fasteners, it seems likely that they were produced in England. However, further research into their production and distribution is necessary to reach any reliable conclusion about their origins.

Fennell argues that hand charms were likely perceived in a more abstract sense wherein the hand itself is not the only significant symbolic element. He argues that the circle and the horizontal crossbar within the circle also hold meaning. Fennell argues that meanings associated with each of these symbolic elements are found in the Bakongo belief system because of the structural similarity to the Bakongo cosmogram (Fennell 2007: 23–25). Fennell later expanded his analysis to include the possibility that hand charms may also or alternatively have been adopted by enslaved African Americans with Igbo cultural heritage (Fennell [2013]). Igbo ideology included a philosophical principle known as *ikenga* or “cult of the right hand” (Gomez 1998: 130; Fennell [2013]). This principal emphasizes personal achievement over ascribed qualities, a concept that would have gained new meaning within the context of enslavement (Gomez 1998: 130–131).

Historians have recently begun to trace the African origins of slaves trafficked to Virginia

during the Atlantic slave trade (Chambers 1999, 2000, 2005; Walsh 1999, 2001; Eltis and Richardson 2010). These studies suggest that the Igbo formed a significant part of the African slave population in central Virginia in the late 18th century (Chambers 1999; Walsh 1999, 2001; Samford 2007). Chambers argues that the presence of the Igbo in the interior tidewater and piedmont counties had a transformative impact on colonial and early national African American culture in Virginia (Chambers 2000; Samford 2007: 11). Perhaps this impact continued to be expressed through the use of material culture in the 19th century.

Bartoy argued that while interpretations of the hand charms offered by other archaeologists are each plausible, none can be proven without additional evidence (Bartoy 2009). Rather than focusing primarily on the meanings associated with the charms, Bartoy emphasized their context. Archaeologists have recovered hand charms of the type shown in Figure 5 only in Tennessee, Virginia, Maryland, and Florida. Writing before the recovery of the charms in Florida, Bartoy noted the significance of the location of three of these states in the Upper South, in the borderlands between slavery and freedom. He suggested that hand charms were used as “active signaling devices” to convey resistance or abolitionist ideas to “like-minded people.” If so, then hand charms were hidden transcripts.

Bartoy’s ideas about abolitionism or resistance may be supported by the discovery of a hand charm in a non-archaeological context in Connecticut. This charm was found inside the toolbox of a man who was reputed to be an abolitionist (Caleb Hutchins 2005, pers. comm.). Research into this charm and its context is incomplete, but it suggests at least the possibility that hand charms may have symbolized abolitionist ideas.

Whether or not hand charms symbolized resistance, the archaeological association of these objects with antebellum African American sites across three contiguous states and in Florida suggests shared African American understandings or meanings of this multivalent object. As Thomas and Thomas stated: “These charms were likely understood by slaves as signifiers of community values and solidarity in opposition to the planter-

imposed ideology of subservience" (Thomas and Thomas 2004: 124). This interpretation also suggests that hand charms were used as hidden transcripts. Their regional distribution at African American sites suggests the widespread transmission of a shared cultural practice, although their particular uses may have been idiosyncratic.

Significantly, archaeologists at the Hermitage in Nashville, Tennessee, recovered a hand charm with a different form in addition to the two stamped fist-shaped fasteners (McKee 1995; Russell 1997) (FIG. 6). That fist-shaped charm is hollow cast and is not encircled or attached to a crossbar. It had a looped wire pushed through it so that it could be suspended. The fact that three fist-shaped objects were found at the Hermitage, although manifested in two different forms, suggests that the hand figure was more significant than the framing element to the people who were using these objects. Further, archaeologists recovered a second decorative fastener, shaped like a scalloped shell, at the Calvert House (Yentsch 1994: 33). The fact that archaeologists have recovered only 1 shell-shaped fastener at various sites in contrast to 12 fist-shaped fasteners suggests a particular preference for the fist-shaped fastener, if access was not an issue.

Markus and Davidson questioned whether the fist-shaped fasteners served any purpose beyond the mundane purpose of fastening clothing because of the absence of historical documentation regarding their uses and because of the contexts in which archaeologists recovered them (Markus and Davidson 2011). Although no mention is made of this particular type of fist-shaped fastener in the WPA interviews with former slaves, folklorist Hyatt recorded the African American use of a stamped hand-shaped metal charm in Illinois in the 1930s (Russell 1997: 67).

Where the archaeological context of the fist-shaped fasteners is recorded, they are most commonly found in floor spaces, in yards, or in general middens. Because archaeologists have not documented finding any of these objects in deliberately buried caches, Markus and Davidson argued that identifying them as charms is very speculative (Markus and Davidson 2011). I agree that it is difficult to make a strong case for the use of fist-shaped



Figure 6. Hollow cast alloy fist-shaped adornment object recovered in Nashville, Tennessee in excavations of slave quarters at Andrew Jackson's Hermitage plantation. (DAACS 2013, Artifact Query 5. The Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery, <http://www.daacs.org/>).

fasteners as charms without supporting evidence from historical documents, burials, or other features. However, their archaeological contexts do not seem to preclude their use as personal charms, although it does suggest they were not significant as elements of household charms. Many personal charms were worn on the body, not buried in caches. This daily use

made them vulnerable to loss. If they were worn on the body as fasteners or charms and subsequently lost, it is not surprising that archaeologists recover them in and around the homes of those who wore them. The fist-shaped fastener was found in the same general location at Poplar Forest as the pierced coins and several of the large glass beads. The unanswered question is whether these objects were lost or discarded deliberately.

The low number of recovered fist-shaped fasteners, their general archaeological contexts, the lack of historical documentation about their uses, and the absence of information about their production, distribution, and acquisition all impede their interpretation. Enough contextual information to get a clear picture of how they were used is lacking. More research and additional discoveries are clearly needed.

The recent discovery of four of these fasteners at Kingsley Plantation, Florida, increasing the known number by one-third, is already impacting interpretation. Prior to this discovery, all archaeologically recovered fist-shaped fasteners were found in three contiguous states in the Upper South. A hook and eye pair was recovered at the Maynard-Burgess House and a hook and eye pair was recovered at the Hermitage, although the hook and eye were associated with different cabins in the latter case. Now two hook and eye pairs have been recovered in Kingsley; perhaps they were used primarily as fasteners there. Yet enslaved laborers at Kingsley had more agency than many slaves in terms of choices about their appearances and expression of spiritual beliefs (James Davidson 2013, pers. comm.). What was the appeal for them, and others, of fist-shaped fasteners over other types of decorative fasteners? And why are these fasteners found almost exclusively at African American sites of the late 18th and first half of the 19th centuries? These factors seem to suggest that they were particularly preferred or sought by African Americans in this era; or were they?

Are these fasteners so intriguing because they are unusual? Does this distract from seeing their mundane function? In his discussion of hoodoo practices, Puckett noted: "In fact, hoodoo beliefs derive much of their power from the fact that they represent the

unusual; something not clearly understood and used by everyone. Perhaps many 'signs' are products of the conjurer's imagination standardized by group usage" (Puckett 1969: 316). Puckett is not alone in documenting the significance of unusual and ambiguous objects in African American spiritual practices. I think that African Americans in the past would have found these tiny, brass, fist-shaped fasteners as intriguing as do the archaeologists who recover them. The widespread distribution of these objects suggests that their symbolism may have been standardized by group usage. Yet the complexity of hand symbolism in the past gives them an ambiguous hidden-transcript nature, 'something that may not have been clearly understood and used by everyone', and also suggests that their particular uses may have been idiosyncratic.

Conclusions

Objects classified as personal adornment are often vested with meanings that reveal significant insight into the identities of their owners because they are *personal*. The context in which material culture was used is crucial to understanding potential meanings. The broad context of the Poplar Forest artifacts is antebellum slavery. In that context, these objects cannot be understood without reference to the tension between slave owners and slaves over identity, status, and self-expression; belief systems; and the high incidence of mortality, particularly of infants and children, among enslaved African Americans.

Each of these factors impacted the recontextualization of glass beads, coins, stamped metal-alloy fist-shaped fasteners, and other objects of personal adornment at Poplar Forest. Historical and archaeological analysis reveals that at least some of the enslaved African Americans at Poplar Forest had greater access to material goods, including personal adornment items, in the antebellum period. Although this greater quantity of goods did not offer them control over their legal status, material culture was a significant means by which to mediate the realities of life and to assert varying degrees of control over their daily lives. They mobilized material culture to this end, perhaps by defining self through adornment, in contrast with the anonymous

definition imparted by provisioned work clothing, as an attempt to insure health and well-being, or as a means of engaging in shared African American cultural practices. The presence of glass beads and pierced coins at many enslaved African American sites indicates their cultural significance, and the discussions of these objects during WPA interviews reveals the retention of that significance over time. Yet their precise uses, their personal uses, were fluid depending on context.

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