New Perspectives from Old Collections

Potential Artifacts of African Spirituality at Couper Plantation, Georgia

James M. Davidson and Karen E. McIlvoy

Abstract  Charles Fairbanks advanced the field of plantation archaeology in 1968 in his pioneering excavation in the cabins of enslaved laborers at Kingsley Plantation, Florida, with a focus on identifying “Africanisms.” Failing to recognize elements of African cultures, Fairbanks and his students moved to St. Simons Island, the Couper Plantation and Cannon’s Point site, and focused instead upon socio-economic status patterns. Other archaeologists would later make the case for material evidence of African cultural retentions at sites in the United States. Using new interpretative frameworks, a reanalysis of the archaeological materials recovered in the Couper Plantation excavations in the 1970s reveals elements of possible African spirituality not originally identified.
The beginnings of a plantation archaeology that explored the perspective of the enslaved can be traced to 1968. At that time, Dr. Charles Fairbanks began to explore questions pertaining to the lifeways of enslaved laborers through archaeological investigations of slave cabins at Kingsley Plantation on Fort George Island, Florida. His goal was in part to aid architectural reconstruction, but primarily he sought evidence of “Africanisms.” Two decades later, Fairbanks (1984: 2) observed:

Kingsley had been a slave importer, with perhaps an unusually permissive attitude towards his charges. I had done what appeared to be an adequate amount of research to establish a number of things that I hoped to demonstrate. Among these were the search for Africanisms among the material artifacts of those newly arrived slaves, evidence of adaptation in housing, dress, behavior to the new situation, and data on lifestyle.

Although Fairbanks’ work at Kingsley Plantation was unprecedented archaeologically, his approach was informed by threads within cultural anthropology. Among other resources, Fairbanks was inspired by the work of Melville Herskovits, who in his 1941 book, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1990), persuasively argued against the long-held belief that people of African descent did not retain any coherent remnants of African cultures or beliefs. Herskovits coined the term Africanism to describe these retentions, and he and other analysts developed a cultural retention paradigm to be focused on different African diaspora groups and documented in dress, religion, naming practices, song, dance, and other aspects of daily living.

Fairbanks went to Kingsley Plantation in the summer of 1968 with this lofty goal, but the reality of a cultural retention paradigm was different when applied archaeologically and to the differential preservation and limitations of material culture generally (Du Bois 1903: 5; Herskovits 1946, 1990; Woodson 1936: 168–175). As Fairbanks (1984: 2) observed:

At Kingsley we studied much of two slave houses, both probably of slave drivers or foremen, identified a well, and found that most of our assumptions were false. No evidence of Africanisms was found, even though we were digging in the structures of an unusually permissive slave owner, dealing with newly imported slaves. Belatedly realizing that the slaves came naked and in chains, I still could not understand why they did not recreate some African artifacts.
Because Fairbanks failed to find what he recognized to be any elements of African culture, or so-called Africanisms, at Kingsley Plantation, the later research he pursued on plantations in the Sea Islands of Georgia, initially on Cumberland Island and later St. Simon’s Island, followed other research agendas (Ascher and Fairbanks 1971; Fairbanks 1984).

The most extensive work of Fairbanks and his students occurred on St. Simon’s Island as a series of archaeological field schools and grant-funded research between 1972 and 1975. These later efforts principally pursued a theoretical model formulated by Fairbanks’ doctoral student, John Solomon Otto, which emphasized socio-economic patterns and status differentiation, based largely on analyses of table ceramics (Otto 1975; 1980; 1984). The primary historic site was the Couper Plantation, located on the northern portion of St. Simon’s Island, an area known historically as Cannon’s Point, while additional work occurred elsewhere on the island in 1978 and 1979 (Figure 1; Moore 1981). The studies and resulting write-up of this work on the Couper Plantation were generated primarily as a master’s thesis and doctoral dissertation, written by Suzanne McFarlane (1975) and Otto (1975). Only Otto published extensively on this work as a 1984 Academic Press volume.

**Reexamining the Couper Plantation Archaeology in Search of African Spirituality**

Fairbanks’s “search for Africanisms,” although laudable in his initial 1968 work in the slave cabins at Kingsley Plantation, is admittedly a simplistic concept and goal, since—at least without elaboration—it assumes a static or timeless view of culture for those Africans and their descendants who were unfortunate enough to be caught up in the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Cole 1985; Kriger 2005: 266). Enslavement is often viewed as a singular event, but in fact it entailed a continuum of life-changing events played out over decades and over lifetimes. Bondage resulted in losses of cultural traditions, beliefs and rituals, with simultaneous reworking or rapid evolution of retained core traditions and beliefs as these elements of African cultures were passed down and invoked by African descendants (Howson 1990; Kriger 2005; Mintz and Price 1992; Perry and Paynter 1999). Merrick Posnansky (1984: 201) made this very point in the 1980s in addressing previous attempts to correlate African cultures to Afro-Caribbean groups:

One should be careful not to look for one-to-one parallels from Africa to the Caribbean. Changes have to have been made. The
ways that things are done, rather than the objects themselves, and
the spatial relations at the intrasite level will be the indication of
the African presence.

Within plantation archaeology, early material identifications of African
cultural derivation in the years immediately following Fairbanks’ work at
Kingsley Plantation included: colonoware ceramics (Ferguson 1980, 1992,
1999); foodways, based both in faunal remains and the ratio of bowls to plates
(Baker 1980; Otto 1980); and African architecture, such as dwellings un-
covered at the Yaughan and Curriboo Plantations in South Carolina (Wheaton

Many of the artifacts known ethnographically or inferred archaeologically to be imbued with religious or spiritual status are truly mundane objects with minimal or no modification. Examples include an iron horse shoe, or a concentration of broken whiteware ceramics, white bone buttons, and white clay pipe stems (Galke 2000). Accordingly, researchers typically rely on context and extensive historical or ethnographic comparatives to potentially identify the intention behind certain artifacts as spiritual in nature. Such an interpretation is undertaken with an eye towards the recognition of root African cultural metaphors and symbols that would have been retained from any of several West and Central African cultures and manifested in any number of different ways (e.g., Fennell 2007). With foreknowledge of how these beliefs and cultural practices took material form in the parent cultures in Africa in the eighteenth through early twentieth centuries, it may be possible to create a baseline or comparative data set to better recognize those similar elements or mutable metaphors that might be encountered archaeologically within analogous contexts (e.g., Leone and Fry 1999).

Between 2006 and 2012, James Davidson directed a series of summer archaeological field schools at Kingsley Plantation. In returning to Kingsley Plantation to answer new research questions, we have also revisited the original 1968 research of Fairbanks (1972), as well as the materials from the Couper Plantation (Cannon’s Point) field school excavations conducted by Fairbanks, Otto, and McFarlane, and housed in the Florida Museum of Natural History. Although the perspectives and insights outlined above were essentially absent
in the early 1970s when these materials were first recovered, we employed this new perspective in our reexamination of the 1970s Couper Plantation artifacts to explore the potential for discovering elements of possible African spirituality not originally identified. Such a reassessment of past excavations and data collections, employing new perspectives and interpretative frameworks, contributes to broader-scale efforts across multiple sites in the United States (Leone and Fry 1999).

**Historical Background on Cannon’s Point**

John Couper established a cotton and sugar plantation at Cannon’s Point on St. Simon’s Island in 1793, and built a large three-story planter’s house by 1804 (Figure 1). The plantation was taken over by his eldest son James Hamilton Couper (born in 1794) in 1850, the year that marked John’s death. After 1850, the Couper Plantation on St. Simon’s Island was used as a summer home for James and his family until the beginning of the Civil War (Bagwell 2000: 10, 14; Otto 1975: 1; 1984: 17). By 1862, Union troops occupied the island (Bagwell 2000: 163; Boyer 1963: 42–71; Otto 1984: 29).

With the main house looted and robbed of its window sashes and builder’s hardware during the Civil War, the property was essentially unoccupied during the late 1800s Reconstruction period, save for African-American caretakers. An elderly woman named “Old Rena,” who was a former house slave of the Coupers, served as caretaker of the property in 1873. In 1876, Colonel W. R. Shadman purchased Cannon’s Point. His son William and daughter-in-law Emma moved into the old plantation house and lived there until 1890, when a fire destroyed the house and the plantation was finally abandoned (Bagwell 2000: 169; Leigh 1883; Otto 1984: 29–31). Typical of most plantations, the Couper Plantation had a fine home for the planter and his family, a lesser dwelling for the white overseer, and a series of wooden slave cabins (long ago razed, with some piers and brick chimneys remaining) (Figure 1). There were two identified sets of slave cabins on the plantation; one set designated as the North Cabins was located near the main house, while approximately one mile south of these was a second grouping of cabins, referred to as the South Cabins (Otto 1984).

**Overview of Past Archaeology at Cannon’s Point**

Fairbanks and Otto’s research was in part funded by a National Science Foundation grant, as well as a grant from the Sea Island Company, which owned the
Cannon’s Point property. Fieldwork occurred in 1973 and 1974 in conjunction with University of Florida archaeological field schools (Milanich 1985). Otto placed excavation units within three different contexts: the planter’s house and detached kitchen; the white overseer’s house, well, and associated midden; and within selected slave cabins and an associated well and midden (Figure 1). Of the cabins of enslaved laborers, Otto focused his efforts on a structure called the Third Cabin within the North Cabins group (Figure 2). This structure consisted of a single room of wood frame construction with a red brick fireplace and chimney and a compacted dirt floor. Only the chimney remnants were extant above ground at the time of excavation. The estimated date range for occupation of the Third Cabin was the 1820s to its abandonment circa 1860 (Otto 1975: ii, 111–112).

The University of Florida excavated in and adjacent to the southernmost slave cabins in 1973 and 1974, which provided data that became the subject
of Suzanne McFarlane’s master’s thesis. At the time of excavation, the South Cabins presented surface remnants in the form of red brick chimney rubble, with four low mounds marking the locations of the four slave cabins (McFarlane 1975: 60–61). These South Cabins were duplex structures constructed of wood, with two attached rooms sharing a double fireplace and chimney (only the chimneys remained). As documented by McFarlane (1975), Cabins S-2, S-3, and S-4 were subjected to archaeological investigation and the most extensive investigations centered on the southern half of Cabins S-3 and S-4 (Figure 3).

Occupation of the South Cabins appears to have begun in the 1820s and continued at least intermittently after the Civil War, based on datable, diagnostic artifacts found in the associated midden (McFarlane 1975; Otto 1975: 99) and largely corresponded with the chronology of the North Cabin
established by Otto. Excavations were conducted within three-meter-square units using shovels within Cabin S-3. This fill was not screened, so many small objects were almost certainly missed. The rationale for this failure to screen was that they were interested in architectural details and not artifact recovery. Sediment excavated from associated yard space, middens, wells, and privy pits, however, were screened using mechanical shaker screens. Although not specifically described by McFarlane (1975), this same screen system was used at Kingsley Plantation in 1968 and described by Fairbanks (1972: 66) as: “a power sifter with diamond mesh” of three-quarters by three-eighths inches in size. Excavations were also conducted around Cabin S-4, and superficially within the interior space of the structure to expose its atypical brick piers, but otherwise no subsurface exploration of the interior of the cabin was conducted. The focus on midden deposits and comparatively less investigation or emphasis on interior domestic spaces were grounded in Fairbanks’ (1976) view that greater insight into past lifeways might be recovered from rubbish deposits and not from architectural details or interior spaces.

A site report was never completed for the Couper Plantation excavations. Otto’s dissertation (1975) and Academic Press volume (1984) and McFarlane’s master’s thesis (1975) provide the only detailed written accounts. Additionally, the artifacts and original field documentation are curated at the Florida Museum of Natural History, although some artifacts, maps, notes, and photographs are now missing. We have recently reanalyzed the extant materials, and many interesting revelations were uncovered in the process.

**African Cultural Heritage of Couper’s Enslaved Laborers**

There is no such thing as a monolithic African (or for that matter, African-American) identity, spirituality, or cosmology, but the destruction of social identities through enslavement, the distance of time, and the ambiguity and multivalence of material culture all conspire against us to obscure the unique worldviews of individuals or communities of Africans trapped within a plantation setting. Recognizing broad commonalities between major African cultures and African-American contexts can provide some insights when interpreting the archaeological record of plantation sites (e.g., Stine et al. 1996: 53). To attain more nuanced interpretations, however, we must attempt to ground our analyses within an examination of the ethnicities and geographic origins of members of the Cannon’s Point enslaved community. Although there is no detailed accounting of all of Couper’s enslaved laborers during the
period of occupation identified archaeologically, or of their cultural origins and language groups, some valuable lines of evidence do exist.

In 1798, the state legislature of Georgia outlawed the importation of slaves directly from Africa (Otto 1975: 370). Further, the slave trade was officially outlawed in the United States in 1807 through an act of Congress that took effect in 1808 (Peabody and Grinberg 2007: 79–80). Still, between 1811 and 1860 an estimated 50,000 to 250,000 captive Africans were illegally imported into the American South (Bergman 1969: 90; Du Bois 1896: 162–167, 178–187; Otto 1975: 370). Demonstrably, some African-born individuals were purchased and enslaved on the Couper Plantation after 1808.

In the late 1930s as part of the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) Federal Writers’ Project, field workers (almost exclusively white) collected stories and personal narratives from elderly men and women who had directly experienced slavery. In sum, over 2,000 ex-slave narratives were collected from 17 states (Rawick 1972-1979; Yetman 1984). In Georgia, the State Writers’ Project was particularly inspired to collect these accounts and in 1940 published *Drums and Shadows: Survival Studies among the Georgia Coastal Negroes*.

Several narratives were recorded on St. Simon’s Island, where most informants described men and women they had known who were African-born and enslaved on the Couper Plantation at Cannon’s Point (Table 1). In an effort to capture the language of the informants as accurately as possible, their speech was transcribed phonetically in dialect by the WPA interviewers. Although in part originally grounded in racist motivations, these dialect-written quotations will be provided here verbatim for the purpose of keeping the nuance and content as intact as possible.

Ryna Johnson, who believed she was approximately 85 years of age in 1937, was enslaved at Cannon’s Point. When asked whether she remembered any African-born slaves on the plantation, she replied in the affirmative (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 175): “Alexanduh, Jummy, an William, dey is all African. I membuh ole William well an he tell me lots bout times in Africa.” Ms. Johnson also remembered that William bore African tribal marks in the form of facial scarification: “He hab two leedle line mahk on he right cheek” (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 176).

Ben Sullivan, a resident of St. Simon’s Island interviewed in 1937, also remembered several African-born slaves on the Couper Plantation: Alexander (also noted above by Ryna Johnson), Okra, Gibson, Israel, Daphne, Hettie, and finally Dembo, who was possibly African-born (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 178–182; Table 1). Sullivan provided a rare insight into instances of African
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Plantation</th>
<th>Notes</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ryna Johnson, Charles Hunter, Ben Sullivan (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 175, 169, 177, 178–182)</td>
<td>Alexander Boyd</td>
<td>Couper</td>
<td>Conjurer; claimed ability to fly; wore a head cloth.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ben Sullivan (Georgia Writers’ Project Okra 1940: 178–182)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Couper</td>
<td>Built an African style hut on the plantation; crafted an African style drum.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ben Sullivan (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 178–182)</td>
<td>Gibson</td>
<td>Couper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben Sullivan (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 178–182)</td>
<td>Israel</td>
<td>Couper</td>
<td>Muslim; prayed with a book he kept hidden; used a prayer mat, and wore a head scarf; could make a hoe work by itself by speaking magical words over it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben Sullivan (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 178–182)</td>
<td>Dembo (possibly African)</td>
<td>Couper</td>
<td>Would beat a drum at funerals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben Sullivan (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 178–182)</td>
<td>Daphne</td>
<td>Couper</td>
<td>Muslim; wore white veil; wore ear ring to keep away the evil eye; light complexion; bowed during prayer.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryna Johnson (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 175)</td>
<td>Jummy</td>
<td>Couper</td>
<td>Had “country marks” (scarification; two small lines on right cheek); Commonly used African words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ryna Johnson (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 181)</td>
<td>William</td>
<td>Couper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben Sullivan (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 178)</td>
<td>Hettie</td>
<td>Couper</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora Peterson, Floyd White (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 182–183)</td>
<td>Tom Floyd</td>
<td>unk</td>
<td>Ibo (arrived as a slave in 1858 from Africa)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora Peterson (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 182–183)</td>
<td>Slaughtuh</td>
<td>unk</td>
<td>Ibo (was Tom Floyd’s brother)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Georgia Writers’ Project 1940:179; Otto 1975: 50)</td>
<td>Tom’ Salih Bilali</td>
<td>Couper</td>
<td>A Muslim Fullah herder from the Kingdom of Massina in the Niger River Valley of West Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma Hunter (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 178)</td>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>unk</td>
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cultural expressions on Couper Plantation during the period when the slave cabins were built and occupied, when an African-born laborer called Okra built an African-style house on the plantation (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 179),

Ole man Okra he say he wahn a place lak he hab in Africa so he buil im a hut. I membuh it well. It wuz bout twelve by føeteen feet an it hab dut flo an he buil duh side lak basket weave wid clay plastuh on it. It hab a flat roof wut he make frum bush an palmettuh an it hab one doe an no winduhs. But Massuh make im pull it down. He say he ain wahn no African hut on he place.

Sullivan also described an African named Israel, who was apparently a devout Muslim who possessed a book of prayer which he kept hidden from his white enslaver, employed a prayer mat, and wore a head scarf (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 179):

Ole Israel he pray a lot wid a book he hab wut he hide, an he take a lill mat an he say he prayuhs on it. He pray wen duh sun go up an wen duh sun go down. Dey ain none but ole Israel wut pray on a mat. He hab he own mat. Now ole man Israel he hab shahp feechuh an a long pointed beahd, an he wuz bery tall. He alluz tie he head up in a wite clawt, an seem he keep a lot uh clawt on han, fuh I membuh, yuh could see em hangin roun duh stable dryin.

Daphne, one of the African-born laborers described by Sullivan, was also Muslim and employed a head cloth, wore an earring to protect against the “evil eye,” and bowed several times during prayer (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 180):

He didn tie he head up lak ole man Israel. He weah loose wite veil on he head. He waz shahp-feechuh too an light uh complexion. He weah one ring in he eah fuh he eyes. I hab reference to it bein some kine uh pruhtection tuh he eyes. Wen he pray, he bow two aw tree times in duh middle uh duh prayuh.

Another famous Muslim slave owned by Couper was Tom Salih Bilali, “a Muslim Fullah herder from the Kingdom of Massina in the Niger River Valley of West Africa,” in what is now modern-day Mali (Austin 1997: 85–113; Otto 1975: 50).

Charles Hunter, an elderly African American who had been enslaved on the Couper Plantation, noted that one of the African-born slaves, Alexander, was a conjurer who claimed to have the ability to cure the sick and even fly (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 177–178):
Well, dey’s some belieb in cunjuh an some wut dohn. Dey’s lots wut say sickness ain natchul an somebody put sumpm down fuh yuh. I ain belieb in it much muhsef but dey’s curious tings happen. Now, wen I wuz a boy deah’s a root makuh wut lib yuh name Alexanduh. He wuz African an he say he kin do any kine uh cunjuh wut kin be done an he kin cuo any kine uh disease. He wuz a small man, slim an bery black. Alexanduh say he could fly. He say all his fambly in Africa could fly. I ain seen em fly muhsef but he say he could do it all right. We’s sked ub im wen we’s boys an use tuh run wen we see im come.

Although importation of slaves officially ended in the United States in 1808, slave ships routinely flouted the law up to the 1850s, with some of these illicit human cargos arriving at St. Simon’s Island. In 1858, Tom Floyd and his brother “Slaughtuh” arrived on the island from the slave ship the *Wanderer* (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 182–183). An infamous and very late example of the illegal importation of African slaves, the *Wanderer* brought in 420 individuals in chains and sold them in Georgia (Du Bois 1896: 181; Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 182–183; Spears 1907: 199–208). One informant, Floyd White, thought Tom was Ibo (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 183).

In sum, at least 13 African-born men and women were enslaved on the Couper Plantation at Cannon’s Point in the first half of the nineteenth century, and this is a bare minimum reflecting the end of the plantation’s antebellum history (Table 1). Although lacking specificity, we can also examine broad historic trends. Historian David Richardson (1989: 13) in his exhaustive study of slave exports from Africa between 1700 and 1810 noted that the greatest numbers were imported from the Bight of Biafra (43.8%), and would have included Ibo, Calabari, and related peoples.

Traditional African religions were carefully examined as a basis by which to reexamine and identify possible spiritual objects in the Couper Plantation materials. In addition, at least a handful of Couper’s African-born slaves were Islamic and continued practicing elements of their faith even on the island. Muslim African slaves were known historically throughout the reach of the trans-Atlantic slave trade (Allen 2009; Austin 1997; Gomez 1994). Many Islamic-influenced groups that were victims of the slave trade, such as the Susu of Southern Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, and the Hausa People of Northern Nigeria, practiced a mixture of traditional religion and elements of Islam in their daily lives (Gomez 1998: 88–89; Mouser 1973: 47; Thayer 1983: 119; Tremearne 1915). A noteworthy example dating to 1830, and
contemporaneous to the occupation of the Couper Plantation, can be found in Richard and John Lander’s (1854a: 203–204) account of their attempt to trace the source of the Niger River:

Yarro professes the Mohammedan faith, yet it is easy to perceive the very slender acquaintance he has obtained of the precepts of the Koran, by the confidence which he still places in the religion of his fathers, in placing fetishes to guard the entrance of his houses, and adorn their half-naked walls.

Northcote Thomas (1916) conducted an extensive study in the early twentieth century of the Timne and related cultures of Sierra Leone. He observed that “Mohammedanism doubtless modified profoundly in some directions the traditional belief and customs of the natives” (Thomas 1916: 29). However, he also found that it was still possible to chart the basic structures of traditional deities, beliefs, and customs, because even with the arrival of Islam elements of the traditional faith continued to be practiced (Thomas 1916: 29).

This blending of Islamic faith and traditional African religions was also noted by Dominique Zahan (1974) in a study of the Bambara people in the modern Mali Republic (middle valley of the Niger River). Zahan (1974: 1) observed that “Islam and Christianity have opened large breaches in the traditional religion of this race, but the great majority of them have remained attached to their ancestral beliefs.” Paul Stoller and Cheryl Olkes similarly described their experiences in studying life in two villages in the Republic of Niger. While the predominant religion in the country is Islam, Stoller apprenticed to a Songhay sorcerer, and learned and later employed a traditional, non-Islamic system of magic to heal the sick and curse the living (Stoller and Olkes 1987). Within such West African Islamic cultures, traditional beliefs can still hold sway even in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Historical data indicate that Islamic Africans comprised approximately 10-30% of all slave exports to the Americas (Zeleza 2009: 156). With a single faith accounted for in such numbers, plantations in the antebellum South had the potential to have one or more enslaved Africans or African Americans practicing at least some aspects of Islam.

Reexamining the Archaeological Record of Couper Plantation

Many rituals or other manifestations of religiosity and spiritual beliefs leave no archaeological signature—myriad actions and expressions with little or no ma-
ateriality. Possible exceptions to this lack of an archaeological signature would include charms or talismans, rituals associated with dedication of houses, wells, and other constructions, and acts of veneration or sacrifice. Using materials from the 1970s Couper Plantation excavations entails serious limitations, largely traceable to missing field notes, lack of detail in existing notes, rapid excavations with shovels, and the choice to not screen deposits from Cabin S-3 (McFarlane 1975: 66). The scope of the 1970s data was also impacted by the fact that excavators’ perspectives were not focused on the potential for discovering the hidden transcripts of spiritual beliefs.

Given the lack of a fine-grained context, the primary avenue left to us to aid in the identification of objects of possible spiritual or supernatural association must be grounded in their unique forms or materials, or their unusual locations within the greater spatial context of a slave cabin and yard. This identification is aided by the presence of similar or analogous objects in other excavated contexts, such as our work at Kingsley Plantation (Davidson 2006, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2011), archaeological examples from eighteenth-century sites in West Africa (e.g., Ogundiran 2007), and historical accounts of these objects from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from the myriad cultures of West and Central Africa and the American South. The following discussion will include objects from the North “Third Cabin” area documented by Otto (1975, 1984), as well as the southern set of duplex cabins, studied primarily by McFarlane (1975). What more might be revealed, by employing a more Afrocentric or contextualized approach?

In excavations in the Third Cabin and Couper’s Kitchen, Otto recovered numerous artifacts and described most (though not all) within his dissertation (1975). Otto’s dissertation contains sections on ceramics, glass containers, metal food containers, cutlery, clothing and ornaments, pipes and other tobacco-related objects, personal possessions, horse equipment, faunal remains, and food procurement tools. Of these materials, Otto (1975) placed particular emphasis on ceramics and faunal remains.

Otto also recovered highly unusual objects not mentioned in his dissertation, in the 1984 Academic Press volume, nor in any other writings on the subject. These include a piece of amethyst quartz recovered from under a tabby pier for the Third Cabin, and a large piece of petrified wood and a fossil concretion recovered in the water well associated with the slave-occupied North Cabins (Figure 2; Table 2).

In contrast to Otto, McFarlane in her 1975 master’s thesis described both mundane and unique objects in unusual contexts. She at times provided
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Loci</th>
<th>Specific Provenience</th>
<th>FSN</th>
<th>Artifact</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coin Charm</td>
<td>“Workshop” (used as Black residence after Emancipation)</td>
<td>Area S. of Joist Zone I (N100 E106)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Perforated 1877 Seated Liberty Quarter</td>
<td>personal charm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wells</td>
<td>Couper Well (North Slave Well)</td>
<td>well pit construction fill</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Petrified wood; concretion with fossilized shell; quartz</td>
<td>offering/dedication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South Slave Cabin Well</td>
<td>at very base of the well in sterile sand (Zone 12 A)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>Roman coin with elephant and man on a chariot (minted in Alexandria, Egypt, during the reign of Emperor Trajan - 98-117 AD)</td>
<td>offering/dedication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>unk</td>
<td></td>
<td>37</td>
<td>Smooth stone</td>
<td>offering/dedication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South Slave Cabin Well</td>
<td>Recovered at 3.70 meters below datum in well fill</td>
<td></td>
<td>Clear convex ground glass lens -- 16.25 cm diameter; engraved &quot;PATENT/GL/Hugh F. Grant/1829&quot;</td>
<td>unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>North Cabin (Cabinet 9ET1.2; tray 2, box 10)</td>
<td>Under Tabby Block - Zone I</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Amethyst quartz</td>
<td>Foundation offering/dedication or house charm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South Cabin S-4</td>
<td>In the construction pit excavated for the northwest corner brick pier</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Ancient coin with bearded male head in profile and a standing dancer (on the reverse)</td>
<td>Foundation offering/dedication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>South Cabin S-4</td>
<td>in brick chimney fall</td>
<td>37?</td>
<td>Coin silver spoon with initials “SDS” inhouse charm script, and GRIFFEN mark</td>
<td>Foundation offering/dedication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Context</td>
<td>Location</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Artifact</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous or poorly documented contexts</td>
<td>South Cabin S-4</td>
<td>in brick chimney fall</td>
<td>Brass shoe horn</td>
<td>house charm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McFarlane 1975: 108–109</td>
<td>South Cabin S-3</td>
<td>buried immediately outside west door</td>
<td>Iron eye hoe fragment (eye only)</td>
<td>house charm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McFarlane 1975: 158–160</td>
<td>South Cabin S-3</td>
<td>buried in floor of south hearth</td>
<td>Iron axe head</td>
<td>house charm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McFarlane 1975: 158–160</td>
<td>South Cabin S-3</td>
<td>buried outside south wall</td>
<td>iron axe head</td>
<td>house charm?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McFarlane 1975: 150–154; 157</td>
<td>South Cabin S-4</td>
<td>&quot;from the top of the habitation zone in front of S-4&quot;</td>
<td>17 ancient coin minted in Sicily between 344 and 317 BC; obverse has a portrait of Apollo, while the reverse has Pegasus</td>
<td>possible personal charm or domestic offering?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original field notes; collection FLMNH</td>
<td>South Cabin S-4</td>
<td>N107 E100 (west half)</td>
<td>smooth quartzite cobble (reddish orange and white)</td>
<td>House shrine or House charm?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original field notes; collection FLMNH</td>
<td>North Cabin (Cabinet 9ET1.2; tray 2, box )</td>
<td>N106 E106 (zone 1)</td>
<td>stone</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original field notes; collection FLMNH</td>
<td>North Cabin (Cabinet 9ET1.2; Feature 1 -- north of Fireplace (N101.7 E101.25)</td>
<td>tray 2, box 2)</td>
<td>stone</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original field notes; collection FLMNH</td>
<td>North Cabin - Feature 1 fireplace (Cabinet 9ET1.2; tray 2, box 3)</td>
<td>N100 E101</td>
<td>concretion stuck to shell</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original field notes; collection FLMNH</td>
<td>North Cabin - Zone 2 (Cabinet 103n 106e 9ET1.2, tray 2, box 6)</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>stone</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original field notes; collection FLMNH</td>
<td>North Cabin - (Cabinet 9ET1.3; tray 3, box 6)</td>
<td>area under joist (N100 E103)</td>
<td>stone/concretion</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Original field notes; collection FLMNH</td>
<td>Kitchen - (Cabinet 9ET7.4; tray Feature 1, Feature 2 (N103 6 E97)</td>
<td>quartz</td>
<td>unknown</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Beads at Couper Plantation (derived from Otto 1975:273-274)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Loci</th>
<th>Bead Type</th>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Size</th>
<th>#</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Third Cabin&quot;—slave cabin refuse</td>
<td>cornerless, hexagonal, monochrome</td>
<td>Turquoise</td>
<td>4 × 5mm</td>
<td>N=1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Third Cabin&quot;—slave cabin refuse</td>
<td>cornerless, hexagonal, monochrome</td>
<td>Turquoise</td>
<td>5 × 5mm</td>
<td>N=1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Third Cabin&quot;—slave cabin refuse</td>
<td>cornerless, hexagonal, monochrome</td>
<td>Brite Navy</td>
<td>4 × 5mm</td>
<td>N=1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Third Cabin&quot;—slave cabin refuse</td>
<td>cornerless, hexagonal, monochrome</td>
<td>Brite Navy</td>
<td>fragment</td>
<td>N=2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Third Cabin&quot;—slave cabin refuse</td>
<td>cornerless, hexagonal, monochrome</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>4 × 5mm</td>
<td>N=3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Third Cabin&quot;—Slave Cabin floor</td>
<td>cornerless, hexagonal, monochrome</td>
<td>Turquoise</td>
<td>4 × 5mm</td>
<td>N=1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Third Cabin&quot;—Slave Cabin floor</td>
<td>cornerless, hexagonal, monochrome</td>
<td>Turquoise</td>
<td>5 × 5mm</td>
<td>N=1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Third Cabin&quot;—Slave Cabin floor</td>
<td>cornerless, hexagonal, monochrome</td>
<td>Brite Navy</td>
<td>4 × 5mm</td>
<td>N=1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Third Cabin&quot;—Slave Cabin floor</td>
<td>cornerless, hexagonal, monochrome</td>
<td>Brite Navy</td>
<td>5 × 7mm</td>
<td>N=1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Third Cabin&quot;—Slave Cabin floor</td>
<td>cornerless, hexagonal, monochrome</td>
<td>Brite Navy</td>
<td>fragment</td>
<td>N=2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Third Cabin&quot;—Slave Cabin floor</td>
<td>cornerless, hexagonal, monochrome</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>4 × 5mm</td>
<td>N=3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couper’s Kitchen</td>
<td>cornerless, hexagonal, monochrome</td>
<td>Turquoise</td>
<td>5 × 6mm</td>
<td>N=1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couper’s Kitchen</td>
<td>cornerless, hexagonal, monochrome</td>
<td>Brite Navy</td>
<td>5 × 5mm</td>
<td>N=1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couper’s Kitchen</td>
<td>wire wound monochrome</td>
<td>Dark Palm Green</td>
<td>4 × 6mm</td>
<td>N=1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couper’s Kitchen</td>
<td>tube bead</td>
<td>Redwood/Apple Green</td>
<td>3 × 4mm</td>
<td>N=2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couper’s Kitchen</td>
<td>heavily patinated seed bead</td>
<td>unk</td>
<td>unk</td>
<td>N=1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couper’s Kitchen Refuse (Zones II-IV)</td>
<td>cornerless, hexagonal, monochrome</td>
<td>Turquoise</td>
<td>5 × 6mm</td>
<td>N=1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couper’s Kitchen Refuse (Zones II-IV)</td>
<td>cornerless, hexagonal, monochrome</td>
<td>Brite Navy</td>
<td>5 × 5mm</td>
<td>N=1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Couper’s Kitchen Refuse (Zones II-IV)</td>
<td>wire wound monochrome</td>
<td>Dark Palm Green</td>
<td>4 × 6mm</td>
<td>N=1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overseer’s House</td>
<td>monochrome tube</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>7mm</td>
<td>N=1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overseer’s refuse (Zones II-III)</td>
<td>monochrome tube</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>7mm</td>
<td>N=1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
interpretations that ascribed deliberate placements to explain the presence of particular artifacts, but did not attribute to them any spiritual or supernatural association (McFarlane 1975). Those artifacts include three ancient bronze coins, a silver spoon, a brass shoe horn, two folding pocket knives, a reddish-orange quartzite cobble, another water-worn quartzite cobble, an iron eye hoe fragment, a copper straight pin, and two iron axe heads (Figure 3; McFarlane 1975). Additionally, glass beads, predominantly blue colored, were recovered from various contexts. Tables 2 and 3 provide a complete accounting of those recovered objects and their potential spiritual or religious associations.

Such possible symbolic associations are based on their similarity in form or context (or both) to spiritual practices or objects identified in studies of cultures located in Central or West Africa, identified in accounts of similar objects used by African Americans in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, or identified in excavations of other plantations and African-American sites. These similarities in the forms and contexts of material culture identified in an array of historical, archaeological, and ethnographic studies provide a basis for formulating potential interpretations of the Couper Plantation artifacts based on analogical reasoning (see, e.g., Fennell 2007: 43–51). The sources for these analogues are relevant in substance to an interpretation of the Couper Plantation artifacts based on their connections to beliefs and practices within broadly pertinent African cultures. Due to the complexity of the multivalent objects and beliefs addressed in this study, and due to the limiting aspects of the curated collections from the Couper Plantation excavations, only the most obvious and least ambiguous objects and related interpretations will be discussed in detail below.

While historical accounts of pertinent African cultures contemporaneous to or predating the Couper Plantation occupation have been examined in detail for the purposes of this study, most lack any reference to religion or spiritual practices, or give only cursory and passing glimpses of generalized practices (Adams 1823; Atkins 1737; Bosman 1705; Campbell 1861; Falconbridge 1788; Kirby 1939; Lander and Lander 1854a, 1854b; Le Vaillant 1790; Moore 1738; Park 1800; Romer 2000; Smith 1745; Smith 1851). The most detailed and useful accounts instead date to the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but are admittedly decades removed from the events that occurred in the slave quarters on St. Simon’s Island. This temporal gap between observed cultural practices and archaeological features increases the potential for the core ritual within the parent culture to have evolved, for previous practices to have been abandoned, or for adoption of new rituals from other groups to have occurred.
Charms and Dedication Sacrifices

Broadly speaking, there are two types of physical charms that will be explored here: personal charms worn on the body; and house charms hung above or buried at doorways, enclosed in floors, walls, or chimneys, or placed immediately outside and adjacent to a structure. This discussion does not address spoken charms such as those analyzed in detail for the Fang people of Central Africa and the twentieth-century Ibo culture of Southern Nigeria (Arinze 1970: 21; Bennett 1899: 86). Dedication sacrifices, created during the initial construction of houses or wells, in addition to objects of later sacrifice or veneration, will also be considered here.

Personal Charms Among African Americans and African Cultures

Personal charms include talismans or amulets worn on the body to ward off disease or harm from supernatural forces. Such compositions can take any number of forms and can manifest as single objects or composite assemblages containing a wide variety of materials. Perishable or organic forms used in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and associated with African Americans have included a diversity of elements, such as vinegar, red pepper, various perfumes and colognes, salt, feathers, strings, red flannel cloth, animal bones (such as a rabbit’s foot), human bone and teeth, snake skins, frog skins and bones, hair, nail filings, turtle shell, egg shell, sweet potatoes, nutmeg, various grasses and leaves, acorns, and grave yard dirt. This is not an exhaustive list by any means. Durable or inorganic forms included several material types and charm compositions often incorporated anything made of metal, especially silver or copper, but also iron, steel, gold, brass, and lead. Specific forms of objects include coins, metal slugs or tokens, buttons, wire, straight pins, small nails, natural quartz crystals, glass or crystal chandelier elements, and beads (usually made of glass). Coins and other discoid items were often perforated for suspension by strings, while other elements were placed in charm bags. Locations for the placement of charms on the body included the neck, wrists, waist, fingers, ankles, and inside shoes, often with the aid of a string or more rarely a chain. Strings without other elements also served as charms (Anderson 2008; Anonymous 1896a; Anonymous 1896b; Bell 1980; Chireau 1997, 2003; Leone and Frye 2001; Hurston 1931; Pendleton 1890: 205–206; Puckett 1926; Saxon et al. 1945: 525–543).

West and Central African cultures have documented charm forms that include many of the objects listed above (Adams 1823: 70; Arinze 1970:...
20–21; Corry 1807: 48; Hutchinson 1858: 154; Offiong 1991: 46, 102; Parrinder 1961: 156–171; Smith and Dale 1920: 250–265; Willoughby 1928: 184, 191). Members of these cultures also utilized such unusual organic elements as a horn of a gazelle or the skin of a sloth in charm compositions, such as those used by the early twentieth-century Bavili or Fiote people of the Congo River (Dennett 1905: 380). Among many African Islamic-influenced groups, personal charms included written passages on paper that were folded and worn in a leather pouch around the neck or arm. Usually these consisted of passages from the Koran, but other examples are known. Such written compositions include examples from the Gambia in the 1730s (Moore 1738: 28), Sierra Leone in the late eighteenth century (Matthews 1788: 132), the Cross River people in Southern Nigeria in the nineteenth century (Oldfield 1837: 198), Sierra Leone and groups along the Niger River in the early to mid-nineteenth century (Duncan 1846: 157, Hutchinson 1855: 26, 48–49, 74), and the Ibo culture in the twentieth century (Arinze 1970: 20).

**Perforated Coin Charm** An 1877 Liberty Seated Quarter, perforated above the head of the Lady Liberty figure, was recovered in the North Cabins area of the Couper Plantation in Otto’s excavations (Figure 4). This coin was located in a workshop that was apparently turned into a residence for the family of an African-American servant associated with the occupation of the site by the European-American Shadman family. The Shadmans moved into the old plantation house in 1876 and lived there until 1890 (Otto 1975: 99). The exact provenience of the coin is not provided, but its modified form alone suggests its
potential as a spiritual charm composition. The coin was perforated and several parallel, shallow scratches were cut into the face of the coin to the right of the Liberty figure. A coin purposely modified by perforation represents a very likely personal charm form, one commonly but not exclusively associated with African Americans (such coin charms were also popular in the British Isles) and routinely recovered from both domestic and burial contexts in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Davidson 2004b). During the initial work in the 1970s, the perforated coin was the only object recognized by Otto (1975: 99) to be potentially associated with spiritual beliefs. However, he did not further associate the perforated coin and belief system behind it with African cultures. Perforated silver coins, worn on the body by the aid of a cotton thread, were common personal charms serving to protect the wearer against malevolence or natural illness, and with African Americans this arguably consisted of a syncretic and creolized practice (Davidson 2004b).

**Beads as Potential Charm Elements** While charms were very popular and diverse in forms among the cultures of Central and West Africa, one of the more common types of personal charms was composed of beads. Glass beads were recovered by Otto in several contexts in the archaeology of Couper Plantation: the main plantation house’s detached Kitchen; the overseer’s house; the Third Cabin in the North Cabin Complex; and the middens associated with each of these structures. The overseer’s house only had one example in the form of a black tubular bead. Another identical bead was recovered from the midden associated with the overseer’s house. In contrast, Otto recovered nine beads from a floor context in the slave-occupied Third Cabin (Figure 4). All nine were hexagonal and faceted in form; six (or 67%) were various shades of blue, while three (33%) were black. Eight beads were also recovered from the midden associated with the North Third Cabin. All were hexagonal and faceted, with five blue beads (62.5%), and three black beads (37.5%) (Figure 4; Table 3).

Finally, the detached Kitchen associated with the Couper main house had a mixed assemblage of beads from the floor of the structure and a related midden. This detached kitchen area likely served as a work and residential space for kitchen and house slaves and also would have seen daily interactions with white family members. Of the nine beads, four were various shades of blue (44%), four were shades of green (44%), and one was a heavily patinated bead of an unknown color (11.1%) (Table 3).

Unlike the perforated coin, the numerous beads recovered in the 1973-1974 excavations were not explicitly recognized at the time by Otto.
(1975: 268–275) as potential charms, although he did cite their presence in the Georgia WPA collection of ex-slave narratives (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940). McFarlane recovered only one small, tubular, clear glass bead in her 1973-1974 excavations (the exact provenience was not recorded). She also did not interpret it in any way beyond its possible function as an element of jewelry (McFarlane 1975: 141).

Many cultures throughout the world have held beliefs in the protective properties and healing power of beads. Romans wore beads of coral and amber to help children in teething as well as protect them from witchcraft and the “evil eye.” Similar beliefs were commonplace in Western Europe and the British Isles in the Middle Ages well into the twentieth century (Anonymous 1883; Britten 1881: 114–115, 203–204; Brockie 1886: 118; Gardner 1942: 98; Gregor 1881: 40; Henderson 1879: 8, 21; McPherson 1929: 220; Opie and Tatum 1989: 1, 95; Sciama and Eicher 1998).

Beads were recovered in slave cabin contexts at the very beginning of plantation archaeology. A “single pale blue glass bead of the faceted type” was found in the floor of Cabin W-1 at Kingsley Plantation in 1968 (Fairbanks 1972: 90). In collaboration with Robert Ascher, Fairbanks’s later work on Cumberland Island at the Rayfield Plantation in 1969 uncovered another blue, glass, faceted, hexagonal bead. Although of apparent European manufacture, Ascher and Fairbanks (1971) speculated that the bead uncovered at Rayfield was of African origin, given its resemblance to trade beads described and recovered from Africa and they cited three sources for this association (Laidler 1937; Schofield 1938; Sleen 1967: 40).

Fairbanks later backed away from this interpretation. In the report of the initial 1968 Kingsley excavations, Fairbanks (1972: 90) states that only a “single pale blue glass bead of the faceted type” was recovered from Cabin W-1. He cites the Ascher and Fairbanks 1971 article and expresses reservations as to this initial interpretation: “In another report . . . this was referred to as an ‘Ambassador Bead’ because it is of a type given that name in Africa during the same time period. I now have strong doubts that this can represent an item brought from the original home of the slaves” (Fairbanks 1972: 90).

Ten years later, Fairbanks addressed the apparent failure to find Africanisms in his 1968 work at Kingsley Plantation in an overview article on historical archaeology. In that article Fairbanks revisited the blue glass bead, describing it as a possible exception to this lack of African material culture, but later acknowledging that blue glass beads were “to be found in a number of other slave quarters, but I came to regard it as more a case of what was
cheaply available than any specific preference” (Fairbanks 1983: 23). These later occurrences addressed by Fairbanks included the Couper Plantation beads (discussed here and in Table 3) and the beads recovered from the Kings Bay, Georgia excavations led by William Adams (1987). Although Fairbanks (1972) in his work at Kingsley, and later Ascher and Fairbanks (1971) in their work at the Rayfield Plantation on Cumberland Island, recognized a possible African connection, they did not further attribute possible spiritual associations to such beads. Samuel Smith (1977) in his initial work at the Hermitage Plantation in Tennessee in the early 1970s was the first to note a possible pattern of color preferences for blue, although other bead colors and forms were also present at that site.

In his excavations of slave cabins at Kings Bay, Georgia, which dated in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, William Adams noted the common recovery of blue glass beads. Such beads ranged in frequencies among all beads recovered, consisting of 33% of the bead assemblage from King’s Bay plantation slave quarters and the Harmony Hall Plantation Kitchen, to 70.80% at the Harmony Hall slave cabins. Adams (1987: 204) speculated that the commonality of the color blue in the recovered beads might have been tied to a belief “in Islamic society to ward off the evil eye. Some slaves brought from Africa were Moslem.”

Adams provided no reference to support this statement about Islamic beliefs. Nonetheless, historical accounts report Islamic beliefs in the Mediterranean region, which includes North Africa and several predominately Muslim countries, that children were protected from the evil eye by the wearing of a single blue bead (Lykiardopoulos 1981: 226). Interestingly, this brief discussion of beads was contained within Adam’s chapter on “Health and Medical Care,” while beads are entirely lacking from Sarah Boling’s chapter on “Clothing and Personal Adornment” in the same monograph (Boling 1987). Such analytical contexts provide a strong indication that Adams interpreted all of the beads recovered from the slave quarters on two plantations not as simple jewelry, but as objects with spiritual associations.

A study of blue beads by Linda Stine, Melanie Cabak, and Mark Groover (1996) further pursued the hypothesis that the color blue had spiritual significance to numerous African cultures, and that this at least in part explained the commonality of blue beads on plantations. This interpretation has been viewed as problematic by some archaeologists (e.g., Good 1976). Yet, seven years of excavations conducted by the authors at Kingsley Plantation (in 2006-2012) and the overwhelming recovery of cobalt blue glass beads—in various forms
and with differing manufacturing techniques—from the Zephaniah Kingsley-era slave cabins (1814-1839) bolsters the arguments put forth by Adams (1987), Smith (1977), and Stine and her colleagues (1996). Some aspects of choice based on color (and not necessarily form) were likely expressed materially in those contexts.

The preliminary character of the interpretation advanced by Stine, Cabak, and Groover (1996) likely presented a significant hurdle to widespread acceptance of their arguments by archaeologists. Their article offered very few specific references to African uses of blue beads to bolster their interpretation of artifacts in New World plantation sites (Stine et al. 1996). Nonetheless, their observations were well-founded. Beads have been frequently perceived as objects of spiritual expression in many African cultures. The earliest recorded European reference to blue beads along the West coast of Africa dates to 1505 AD, where indigenous people referred to them as “coris” (Jeffreys 1959). Additional insights into the use and function of beads, and especially blue or blue-green beads, have been revealed in the work of historians and archaeologists excavating at historic sites in Africa.

It is possible to at times establish the historical trajectory, use, and value of blue glass beads within specific regions and different cultures of Africa. One pertinent example will be discussed here in brief, concerning the Yoruba people and related West African groups in modern day Nigeria and Benin. Through both archaeological and archival evidence Akinwumi Ogundiran (2002) has traced the use of beads and cowry shells in Yorubaland from the eleventh through seventeenth centuries. He finds that certain forms of glass beads that were blue or blue-green were introduced into the region in the period of 800-1000 AD. The Yoruba historically used 15 terms to describe beads in their culture. Six of these were directly associated with royalty or other high-ranking elite, and are “invested with authority by divine kingship powers” (Ogundiran 2002: 432). One form of royal bead consisted of a glass tubular shape, either blue or blue-green in color, which was called “segi” in the Yoruba lexicon.

During this early period of 800-1000 AD, blue glass beads were not coming directly from European contacts along the Atlantic coast, but rather overland through North Africa through distribution links operated by Arab traders (Ogundiran 2002). Even though Europeans directly introduced blue beads as trade items from the Atlantic coast, Ogundiran (2002) finds that six of the higher status beads, including the “segi” or blue and blue-green glass beads, were still viewed within Yoruba society as symbols of authority and conveyed
social and political capital. When cowries were introduced into Yorubaland by the early 1500s, they were not incorporated into this former hierarchy. Therefore, cowry shells could be used as a common economic medium of exchange and became a commonplace symbol that could be manipulated at any level of society. Blue glass beads, in contrast, were still held in high esteem as late as 1827, when the Lander brothers visited the capital of Benin (Ogundiran 2002: 436).

Other historic accounts describe the use of blue beads in the cultures of the Bight of Biafra (Southern and Coastal Nigeria) in the early nineteenth century. One traveler’s account in Iboland in 1832 recounted that “Muslim traders were observed selling Nupe mats, straw hats, ivory...slaves, locally made blue beads and cloth” (Northrup 1972: 222). In the mid-nineteenth century, Thomas Hutchinson on a journey up the Niger River and in “Kalabar” country noted that two chiefs wore both blue beads and beads of coral around their necks (Hutchinson 1855: 48; 1858: 132). A century later, references to blue beads in Nigeria included their use among the Igala tribe of Northern Nigeria. According to R. Sydney Seton (1930: 153) “if a family can afford it, necklaces of blue and other stones are buried with the body” in performing a mortuary ritual. In the first decade of the twentieth century among the Ababa people, a group of Ibos, Parkinson (1906a: 320) observed that young women dancing in one ceremony each wore “a string of blue beads below the knee and around the ankle.” Finally, a twentieth century reference to blue beads was documented by Charles K. Meek, in his extensive study of non-Muslim groups in Northern Nigeria in the 1920s. Among the Yendang culture, adult women participating in dances wore short, apron-like garments “decorated with white beads and suspended from a girdle of blue beads” (Meek 1931b: 487).

Within the modern Orisa religion originating among the Yoruba of Nigeria, but also practiced in varying forms in the Americas, certain orisa (or divinities) are symbolized in beadwork composed of different colors and substances. Various shades of blue beads can help denote Yemoja (goddess of all waters), or her son Olokun (Mason 1998). Thus, blue beads, just within a single geographic area and broad cultural group—in this instance the Yoruba and related groups of modern Nigeria and Benin—have a long and complicated history, and could mean many different things, depending upon the bead’s form, derivation, and time period.

Such lines of historical evidence provide analogous contexts in which blue beads were at times perceived as serving important social and ideological purposes. Direct introduction of blue glass beads into West Africa and espe-
cially among the Yoruba and related peoples, beginning in the 1500s by Eu-
ropeans, may have contributed to destabilizing existing social hierarchies and
distribution networks. This destabilization in supply and distribution likely
allowed non-elite members of those cultures to gain access to previously re-
stricted, high status items. Although this discussion of beads and especially
blue beads has focused on diachronic trends within Nigeria and the Yoruba
and related peoples, the same historical trends could be established for other
parts of Africa including regions of East, Central, and South Africa (L’Abbe et

While it is very difficult to link any preference for blue beads among the
individuals who lived as enslaved laborers on the Couper Plantation to a specific
African culture, it is credible to contend that the recovered beads held specific
cultural, and likely spiritual, significance. If blue glass beads were not the first
choice within any cultural group, substitution of the exact article with any ex-
pedient substitute, such as hexagonal blue beads, likely would have occurred.
Further, not all beads recovered archaeologically would necessarily have been
accidental losses or random discards. Rather, there are specific African cultural
practices that describe the deliberate placement or burial of beads, such as cer-
emonies among the Ibo people in the early twentieth century (Thomas 1917:
169–170). Because of the relatively general provenience of the beads recovered
by Otto in 1973 and 1974 (three-meter-square units excavated with shovels),
the ability to reconstruct or discern such deliberate placements is now very
difficult.

**Well Dedication Sacrifices and Offerings**

Two wells associated with the slave cabins and excavated by Otto and Mc-
Farlane contained unique objects that are difficult to interpret as the result
of merely mundane activities. First, a piece of petrified wood and a fossilized
shell were recovered from the well of the North Slave Cabin (Figure 5). St.
Simon’s Island is a sand barrier island (Figure 1), with no observable, naturally
occurring sources of stone. Although recovered in excavations under the di-
rection of Otto in 1973 and 1974, the petrified wood and fossil concretion
were not mentioned in Otto’s dissertation (1975) or Academic Press volume
(1984). We know of their existence only through the original field notes and
their presence in the collections at the Florida Museum of Natural History. The
record of provenience for the two objects is less than exact; they are described
in the field notes in association with one another under a single identification
number. Some notes indicate that they were recovered from the exterior fill surrounding the well’s wooden casing, suggesting that they were placed there and buried during the initial construction of the well (for a description of well construction methods on the plantation, see McFarlane 1975: 77–78).

Several objects were recovered in McFarlane’s excavations of the well associated with the South slave cabins, some quite unusual: a water-smoothed quartzite cobble (Figure 5); two identical folding pocket knives (recovered 1.5 meters below ground surface); and a single copper straight pin and an ancient bronze coin resting on the well bottom on sterile sand. The source of the most unusual objects—the fossilized shell, petrified wood, and ancient coins—was likely James Hamilton Couper, who was a naturalist and collector. He collected fossils and minerals, corresponded with universities and museums, and even donated some of his most rare finds to the London Geological Society and the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia (Bagwell 2000: 144–146).

Diary entries by Samuel Boyer provide an historical account as to the fate of Couper’s geological collection on St. Simon’s Island during the Civil War. A young Union Naval Surgeon, Boyer was stationed aboard the U.S.S. *Fernandina* during the war, which was given the task of blockading the Con-
federacy’s shipping off the Atlantic coast. While his ship was anchored offshore, Boyer visited St. Simon’s on several occasions and described the abandoned Couper Plantation house in 1863 in some detail: “In the basement large quantities of [fossil] bones and minerals of all sizes and kinds are scattered around the floor” (Boyer 1963: 57). Otto (1975: 97–98) was certainly aware of this reference, as he cited it in his dissertation. However, Otto did not describe the presence of unique minerals and rocks in the slave cabin or slave well in his dissertation or 1984 book, or further attribute their ultimate source to Couper’s geological collection.

Through these historical insights we can explain the original source of these unusual fossils on this sandy barrier island largely devoid of natural stone. Their placement in the well in association with the North slave cabins, however, is much more mysterious. One intriguing interpretation is that the petrified wood and fossilized shell may have been a dedication sacrifice, serving as a material expression within a performed ritual (Figure 5). As such, they would convey a symbolic invocation of the enslaved population’s attempt to appease either the earth spirits disturbed by the digging of the well or to bless and protect the water supply from harm. Such an invocation might also serve periodic use of the well as an altar or means to offer sacrifice or prayer to spirits of the water (e.g., Yemoja). These were all common beliefs and practices among numerous cultures of Central and West Africa.

For example, members of the West African Ibo, Yoruba, Ibibio, and Susu cultures (among other groups) maintained strong beliefs in spirits and their manifestations in stones or other natural objects (Adewale 1988: 2–7; Arinze 1970: 12; Jeffreys 1939: 96; Parkinson 1906b: 264–266; Simpson 1962: 1207; Talbot 1914: 257; 1923: 6, 10, 32; Thomas 1916: 40). In South Africa in the early twentieth century, the Bavenda utilized smooth, river-polished stones as symbols in veneration of the spirits (Stayt 1931: 243–245). Among the modern Ibo the earth itself is sacred and manifest in a goddess known as Ala or Ajala with the power to give “fertility in both family and crops” (Green 1964: 26; Ubah 1982: 95). Any disturbance of the earth would have been taken very seriously by people who rely on growing crops for survival (Green 1964: 33–35).

Among the Ibo in the early twentieth century, Basden (1921: 178) observed that “certain waters appear to be sacred.” Although Basden further suggested that this may have been due to the presence of fish, the sacredness of water generally was still relevant to this context of wells and stones as offerings. The use of stones in spiritual rituals within the context of water was fairly com-
monplace among cultures in West Africa. For example, among the Yoruba there was a widespread belief in the presence of spirits dwelling in all forms of water, including rivers, lakes and the seas (Adewale 1988). Maintaining good relations with these various spirits can provide direct recompense—each dependent upon the powers of individual spirits—in the form of greater fish yields, safety while sailing or canoeing, and even blessing barren women with fertility. While there are many lesser spirits associated with specific rivers or other bodies of water, the supreme goddess of all waters in the Yoruba religion is known by the name “Yemoja.” From her body all of the world’s rivers and oceans flow; her primary symbols are “river-worn pebbles and sixteen cowry shells” (Awolalu 1979: 46). The smooth, water-worn stone in the South Cabin well could be a direct correlation with Yemoja. While the petrified wood specimen is not a river-worn pebble, the fossilized shell concretion from the North slave cabin well would be an excellent representation of Yemoja as it combines both of her symbols. It is both a stone and a shell (albeit in a fossilized form), symbolic of water (Figure 5).

Maintaining good relations with Yemoja would have been of paramount concern for those Africans with such beliefs as they resided on St. Simon’s island, surrounded by water. Among the orisha of Yoruba traditional beliefs, the goddess Osun (also Oshun, Ochun) is another female water divinity. Osun is a goddess originally associated primarily with freshwater rivers, springs, and ponds (Murphy and Sanford 2001). The water-worn cobble in the South Cabin’s well, and the petrified wood and fossilized shell recovered from the North Cabin’s well, may have been deposited in each instance because they were vital fresh water sources, and therefore be more properly venerated in association with Osun (Figure 5). In our recent work at Kingsley Plantation, the excavation of a slave well in 2011 revealed only one object at its otherwise all but sterile sandy base: a smooth water-polished stone, very reminiscent of the stone from the South Cabins’ well at the Couper Plantation.

McFarlane did not assign any special significance to the smooth stone in the South Cabin well. She believed this artifact and examples found elsewhere were originally associated with the Native American occupation of the island, only later to have been picked up and used by enslaved Africans. However, McFarlane (1975: 77–78) contended that the ancient coin recovered from the sterile sand at the very bottom of the well was purposely deposited immediately after the well was dug and first in use. The design motif on one side of the coin was obliterated by wear, but the other side depicted “Greek lettering and an elephant pulling a chariot in which a driver with a raised arm and a whip, sword,
or baton in his hand is standing” (McFarlane 1975: 153). McFarlane was able to have the coin identified and dated to the Roman Empire, and minted in Alexandria, Egypt, during the reign of Emperor Trajan (98-117 AD). It is currently missing from the museum collections.

The minting or common use of coinage was unknown in the cultures of West and Central Africa during the trans-Atlantic slave trade. However, coins have been documented on both sides of the Atlantic as items employed as charms or otherwise associated with spiritual invocations by Africans and their descendants (Davidson 2004b; Field 1961: 121). The unusual nature of this coin and its antiquity may have made its use all but irresistible as a charm or offering to dedicate a new structure, such as a well. McFarlane mentioned the copper straight pin, which was also found at the base of the South Cabins’ well, only in passing, perhaps because of its mundane form. She assigned no special significance to it beyond a basic utilitarian function. As to the location of the straight pin, in contrast to the Roman coin, McFarlane (1975: 161) suggested that “due to its small size, it may have settled.”

The recovery of two completely intact and essentially identical folding pocketknives in the well associated with the slave-occupied South Cabins was also unusual. The presence of one might appear to have resulted from an accidental loss, but the two together suggest a deliberate deposition. McFarlane (1975: 154–155) proposed two scenarios to account for their presence in the well. They may have been thrown down the well by a white overseer discarding illegal contraband discovered among the enslaved laborers. They may have been accidental losses. Perhaps the two folding knives were inadvertently included in a bucket of shells that were tossed down the well at the time of its abandonment. The location of the two knives in the upper sediments of the well might suggest they were part of a terminal fill episode. However, their deposition in the well could also be accounted for in a West African system of sacrifice and veneration using metal objects, and perhaps the metaphor of blades as a means to “cut evil.”

Cuprous metals, like brass or bronze, were very popular in many cultures in Central and West Africa. Objects made of these materials were seen at times as both a symbol of high status and as material elements in religious or spiritual expressions. Indigenous copper working and an extensive trade network existed on the African continent before European contact and continued into the twentieth century (e.g., Hutchinson 1855: 68). Beginning in the sixteenth century Portuguese traders supplied copper and brass bracelets and other objects to West African populations, with later European interests following
suit (Adams 1823: 249; Handler and Lange 1978: 156). One early account by an English ship’s captain in 1694 remarked that the best goods (second only to cowry shells) for trading purposes were various forms of brass kettles, from which many Africans would make bracelets, anklets, and neck bands (Phillips 1746: 243, cited in Handler and Lange 1978: 156).

Bracelets and armbands composed of copper or brass were worn at times as protective elements within cultures in West and Central Africa in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For example, such belief and practices were conducted by culture groups located along the Niger River and in Old Calabar on the Nigerian coast (Hutchinson 1855: 146), by the Yauri people in Sokoto Province, Nigeria (Harris 1930: 294), and by the Ba-Yaka people of Central Africa (Torday and Joyce 1906: 41). Additional accounts of cultures in Sierra Leone and Ghana report comparable incorporation of metal objects into particular symbolic compositions (Field 1961; Mathews 1788). Similar beliefs and practices were known among enslaved and emancipated Africans and African Americans from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries in the Caribbean and the Southern United States (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 20–21; Handler and Lange 1978). African-American individuals interviewed in the Southern United States in the early twentieth century noted the use of brass rings and copper wire bracelets “to keep off” rheumatism, heart pains, and a malady called “the croup” (Puckett 1926: 361; Rawick 1972: Vol. 5, Part 4, 13; 1972: Vol. 7, Part 2, 7; 1977: Supplement Series 1, Vol. 3, Part 1, 324).

House Charms and Dedication Sacrifices in Foundations and Entryways

Historically it was commonplace in many Central and West African cultures to offer a dedication sacrifice in the construction of a new house or other building. Some of these items, often involving an animal sacrifice, would be buried in the building’s floor, foundation, or surrounding compound. Ethnographic accounts of such practices include practices among the twentieth century Yoruba (Awolalu 1973: 82; 1979: 138), the Susu and related peoples in early twentieth century Sierra Leone (Thomas 1916: 56), the Tshi-speaking peoples of the nineteenth-century Gold Coast, and modern day Ivory Coast and Ghana (Ellis 1964: 36). Additional evidence includes accounts of the Ewe speaking peoples during the nineteenth century in what is today modern Ghana, Togo, and Benin (Ellis 1965: 46), and among the Ovimbundu, who inhabited the Benguela highlands of early twentieth-century Angola (Hambly 1934: 166).
After an initial dedication of such a structure, one or more house charms could be employed to provide further protection for the house and its inhabitants. House charms could be composed of organic, perishable objects, durable materials, or a combination of both, and were typically placed at the loci of greatest vulnerability. Such locations included entryways into the structure—doorways, windows, and chimneys (Arinze 1970: 21; Ellis 1964: 103–104; Ogundiran 2007; Talbot 1923: 63–64). House charms can also be placed freestanding within a room, such as a mud pillar and porcupine quills placed in a sleeping chamber and used by members of the Jukun-speaking people of Northern Nigeria in the early twentieth century (Meek 1931a: 300). Several objects were recovered in the Couper Plantation excavations of the early 1970s that could be interpreted as elements of dedication or as house charms.

Quartz Crystal in a Foundation Context  A large piece of amethyst-colored, quartz crystal was recovered beneath a tabby block (a probable foundation pier) in the Third Cabin in the North Cabin complex (Figures 2, 5). This crystal may have been placed in that location during the initial construction of the cabin. Otto did not note its presence in his dissertation (1975) or later Academic Press volume (1984). However, it is briefly described in the field notes. The source of this quartz crystal was not as a naturally occurring object on the sandy barrier island, but was most likely as an item once curated in James Couper’s geological collection.

Ancient Coin in a Foundation Context  Another ancient coin was recovered by McFarlane in the construction pit for the northwest brick foundation pier of Cabin S-4, which was occupied by enslaved laborers (Figure 3). Similar to the Roman bronze coin discovered at the base of the South Cabins’ well, its presence in this context also does not appear to be accidental. McFarlane (1975: 151) described the bronze coin as depicting “a bearded male head in profile, facing right, on the obverse side, and a standing, skirted figure with left arm raised on the reverse.” The exact identification or minting date of the coin could not be determined by McFarlane. This artifact is currently missing from the museum collections.

A possible archaeological parallel to this coin was uncovered in another foundation context. In his innovative work at the Millwood Plantation in South Carolina, Orser (1988a) documented an unmodified 1876 Seated Liberty Quarter, located deep within the rubble base foundation of a chimney
associated with the white manager’s house. Although Orser did not specifically suggest a spiritual association for its presence, such a context could be suggestive of a dedication offering or house charm (Orser 1988a: 214–217).

**Silver Tablespoon and Brass Shoehorn in an Entryway** McFarlane (1975) in her excavations in Cabin S-4 recovered a silver tablespoon and an elaborate brass shoehorn within the rubble of the cabin’s red brick chimney fall (Figures 3, 6). The silver spoon was unique compared to the exclusively ferrous examples recovered from other slave contexts and had an engraved monogram of “SDS.” The monogram possibly stood for Sarah Dorothy Stevens, who lived on St. Simon’s island with her European-American family. McFarlane (1975: 109–110) speculated from the contexts that the silver spoon and brass shoehorn might have been stolen and deliberately hidden within the cabin’s chimney.

Given their locations within the chimney rubble and outside the structure, it seems likely they were hidden in the chimney. However, the interpretation that McFarlane outlines—that the enslaved were merely hiding property stolen from the white planter’s home in order to escape punishment—may be only half of the answer. Rather, it is possible that a spiritual association was the basis for their placement.

Due to the fact that formal fireplaces and chimneys were largely unknown in Central and West African architecture before European contact, there are no ethnographic references to charms in these exact contexts within such African culture groups. However, nineteenth-century archival references concerning African Americans describe chimney and fireplace charms. For example, one late nineteenth-century account of African-American conjure practices states that to ward off malevolent forces “a charm in the shape of a small rubber ball may be placed in the chimney corner” (Bacon 1967: 286). Another account from the WPA ex-slave narratives of the 1930s describes a malevolent charm that was buried in the floor of the fireplace (Rawick 1977: Supplement Series, Vol. 3, Part 1, 265).

Protective charms including elements of iron or silver could be placed in a chimney to prevent evil from entering the dwelling through the chimney. Such a spiritual invocation might also be intended to prevent harm befalling any of the food cooked in the fireplace (Rawick 1977: Supplement Series, Vol. 3, Part 1, 265). Although differing in form, the members of the Ibo culture commonly employed house charms that did exactly that in the early twentieth century (Basden 1921: 180): “Near the kitchen will be found the ekwu, little
There are other archaeological parallels, similar in location though not in form. At the nineteenth-century Fanthorp Inn site in Grimes County, Texas, investigators uncovered 17 quartz crystals from several contexts, including eight buried beneath the inn building itself. Further, a folded bundle of cloth containing small, folded paper packets filled with powder was discovered bricked up in the structure’s chimney (Sauer 1998: 82–86). The similarity between the location and form, with strange objects placed in a brick chimney, and quartz crystals beneath a house, are notable parallels to the Couper slave cabins. The owner and proprietor of the Inn, Henry Fanthorp, was a slave owner whose enslaved laborers most likely had access to both of those locales. Sandra Sauer (1998) attributed these artifacts to African Americans, and their presence within the realm of spiritual beliefs and an African-grounded cosmology. Laura Galke uncovered similar objects buried as an apparent cache in the fireplace of a structure associated with African Americans at the Nash site on the Manassas battlefield in Virginia (Sauer 1998: 82).
Iron Hoe Remnant and Iron Axe Head in an Entryway  Another example of a possible house charm, in the form of an iron axe head, was recovered from the interior of the firebox of Cabin S-3 of Couper Plantation (Figures 3, 6). An axe blade in a nineteenth-century habitation is not in and of itself particularly odd. However, it is the location of an axe buried in the base of the fireplace of the structure that warrants our attention.

Similarly, an iron eye hoe was found buried just outside a doorway of this same Cabin S-3 and another iron axe head was buried outside the south wall of that structure (Figures 3, 6; McFarlane 1975: 64–65). Both the axe blades and the hoe in these contexts are similar to the hoes and possible iron hatchet blade remnant found at the back doorways of three cabins excavated at Kingsley Plantation in 1968 and in the 2006-2008 field seasons (Davidson 2007, 2008; Fairbanks 1972). Yet, in evaluating the locations of these iron tools, McFarlane took an approach similar to Fairbanks (1972) in describing iron objects buried just below the ground surface at the back door of Cabin W-1 at Kingsley Plantation: “These three occurrences would tend to lend credence to the belief that slaves were indeed neglectful of their tools” (McFarlane 1975: 160).

Interpretations of Artifacts as Dedication and House Charms

Protective charms placed within domestic spaces, house compounds, and yards were common in many cultures of Central and West Africa. They could take many forms, only some of which would likely be recovered archaeologically. Such examples provide valuable ethnographic analogues from which an analyst can construct research questions and interpretative frameworks for particular types and contexts of artifacts. For example, the Ibibio people of twentieth-century Nigeria (a group related to the Ibo) commonly employed house charms to provide protection from any form of malevolence that might attempt entry into the home. According to Daniel Offiong (1991: 46–47) at the University of Calabar in Nigeria, “nobody builds a new house without first of all asking for the services of a magician or spiritualist to bury some protective charm in the ground.”

Among the Yoruba, house charms were also commonplace. J. Omosade Awolalu (1979: 77), a professor in African traditional religions, observes: “Many houses are protected by charms which are found hanging above the doorway or buried in the floor of the house or outside the building.” One common house charm form consisted of an iron object buried or located near a doorway, such as a length of iron chain laid across the entranceway (Parrinder 1961: 161–162).
Iron represents an elemental substance of significance in the symbolic systems of a number of West African cultures, especially the Ibo, Yoruba, and related cultures of the Bight of Biafra. As such, iron can comprise a very common and highly potent charm element. In Yoruba culture, iron was primarily associated with Ogun—a major divinity or orisha—whose attributes include hunting, iron working, and war (Njoku 1991; Parrinder 1961: 33–35). Onwuka Njoku (1991: 198), writing of metallurgy in pre-colonial Iboland, noted several deities with different names associated with iron working: “Every iron working community had its deity which ministered to the profession.”

The placement of an iron object at the doorway of Cabin S-4 at Couper Plantation would be potentially significant, but an iron hoe is of compelling interest. Specifically, iron hoes have been documented as serving a role within religious and spiritual beliefs. While the iron hoe could have been associated with the Yoruba god Ogun, it is also an agricultural tool and could further be associated with Oko, god of the farm. Both Oko and Ogun are deities associated with subsistence, and their interactions within Yoruba cosmology are well established. A house charm, in the form of a used hoe, in this context, could have served many constituencies and potentially protected against multiple malevolent forces (Pemberton 1977: 15–16).

There are several examples of attributing spiritual associations to iron hoes. Among the Ibo in the early twentieth century, hoes were commonly used as ritual paraphernalia in ceremonies dealing with the dead (Thomas 1917: 174–178). Among the non-Muslim peoples of Northern Nigeria in the early twentieth century, hoes were buried as a part of rituals to control evil spirits and end drought (Meek 1931c: 253, 316). With the Ibibio in the early twentieth century, hoes could be “magically charged” by witch-doctors, for use as protection against theft. If anyone tried to steal fruit or vegetables from one’s garden, “the magic hoe springs to his hand . . . bent down by a power there is no resisting, (the transgressor) . . . finds himself forced, against his will, to hoe and hoe” (Talbot 1923: 64). Finally, the Ga people in early twentieth-century Ghana also viewed the hoe as magically charged and commonly used them in rituals (Field 1961: 32, 44).

Similar beliefs have been recorded among African Americans in the Southern United States. According to stories collected among ex-slaves during the federal WPA project in the late 1930s, many African Americans in coastal Georgia believed that hoes could serve as part of protective charms (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 63, 79, 110, 137, 168). When asked by WPA interviewers about the magical properties of hoes, Ben Washington, an elderly
ex-slave in coastal Georgia, emphatically affirmed that capacity (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 137). Specifically, many believed that hoes could be conjured to work the garden without human supervision (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 63; Knight 2004: 8): “I have heard about a magic hoe that folks put in the gahden. They speak certain words tuh it; then the hoe goes ahead an cultivates the gahden without anyone touching it.”

_Spirits, Reflective Elements, and Countercharms_

Objects uncovered at Couper Plantation, like the amethyst quartz buried under a pier of the Third Cabin in the North Cabin complex, and the sterling silver spoon recovered from the interior of the chimney in the Cabin S-4, although of different materials, both exhibit at least one similar quality: they are shiny or reflective (Figures 5, 6). Such scintillating surfaces present a visual experience that can be interpreted as the “flash of the spirit” (Thompson 1984: 117–118, 130). Robert Farris Thompson (1984) employs this phrase to refer to a Kongolese (of West Central Africa) concept that naturally reflective objects hold the potential to attract, engage, and capture spirits. Such spirits can be malevolent. Thus, the placement of reflective objects in areas of vulnerability around a cabin could serve as potential traps for evil.

The fact that the quartz crystal and silver spoon, along with the associated brass shoehorn and ancient bronze coins, were likely “stolen” (or rather, obtained from the white planter) may have given these potential charms (or traps for evil) the ability to be imbued with even greater efficacy. They were European-American possessions appropriated for use within an African-American system of belief. The added, exotic nature of these objects may also have been especially alluring as elements reflective of the power of those from whom they were appropriated. Further, the greatest malevolence within the plantation context would come from the European-American planter and the oppression of slavery itself. A charm created from special objects taken from the planter might help mitigate evil from these same white oppressors. Such charm compositions would be using exotic elements of power robbed from the oppressors, enhancing the reflective elements of the charm with special abilities. Among members of the Ibo culture of West Africa, for example, a belief was recorded that when it comes to physical elements of a charm “as a rule, the farther the place of origin, the greater is the power ascribed to them” (Arinze 1970: 21).
Beliefs in the ability to charm another by obtaining a personal possession, element of clothing, or even something as intimate as hair or nail parings, are documented extensively. For example, Nannie Bradfield, an 85 year old African-American former slave interviewed in 1937, related that conjure doctors can “take yo’ garter or yo stockin’ top and drap it in runnin’ water and make you run de res’ of yo’ life” (Rawick 1972: Vol. 6, Alabama Narratives, 45). Julius Jones, who experienced slavery in Tennessee, stated that one old conjure man on the plantation took hair clippings from a younger man and used them to gain control over him (Rawick 1977: Supplement Series 1, Vol. 8, Mississippi Narratives, Part 3, 1219).

Demonstrating the ability to “trick” the master by using his own exotic possessions against him is also telling, at least in that it demonstrates ingenuity and bravery in obtaining these objects without being caught. Something possibly broadly analogous has been documented in the interviews conducted in the 1930s by the WPA of elderly men and women who had experienced slavery. In the ex-slave narratives, many informants described their beliefs and experiences with the supernatural, including charms, some of which were to prevent harsh punishments or otherwise control the behavior of the white master or overseer. One common practice was to take a stick and cut several notches into it, and then place it under the steps of the master’s house. Harre Quarls, who was 96 years old and residing in Texas when interviewed in 1937, stated that (Rawick 1972: Vol. 5, Part 3, 223): “Then us have the hoodooism to keep massa from bein’ mean. Us git de stick and notch so may notches on it and slip up to massa’s front steps, without him seein’ us, and drive it down one notch. By time de last notch down in de ground, it made massa good to us.” Identical accounts in the ex-slave narratives were provided by William Byrd and Mary Gaffney (Rawick 1979: Supplement Series 2, Vol. 2, Part 1, 578; 1979: Supplement Series 2, Vol. 5, Part 4, 1449–1450). Byrd also stated that some charms were placed about the house to prevent punishment from the white master: “Iffen we thought master was going to be mean to us that week we hang horse shoe over our door sos he would be good to us that week.”

**Possible Supernatural Objects in Ambiguous Domestic Contexts**

Other cobble-sized stones, smooth and river-polished, were recovered within the slave cabin contexts at Couper Plantation. Some were in foundation contexts, and may have been involved in dedication or as house charm, while others were found within the general provenience of the cabin floors and immediate exterior
spaces (Table 2). For example, although found just outside the wall of Cabin S-3, a river-worn quartzite cobble (the size of a large egg) may be significant. In her master’s thesis, McFarlane (1975: 65, 171–172) described it as a quartzite “pounder” and ascribed its original use as a Native American food processing tool, later possibly picked up by the enslaved on the island for some utility, albeit unknown from its context. River-worn stones do not exist naturally on the island, and would have to be transported there for some reason. Given the use of such smooth stones as spiritual objects within many Central and West African cultures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, its association with the slave cabin, even outside its walls, may suggest a use associated with spiritual beliefs. Such stones have a strong association with water, symbolic in the Yoruba religion for Yemoja, the orisha of all waters. Small cobble stones were also regarded as spiritual objects that promote human fertility, among other efficacies, because of their strong resemblance to eggs, the very symbol of fertility among many West African cultures (Awolalu 1979: 46).

A similar belief can be found among the related Ibibio people, as recorded in the early twentieth century by Talbot (1923: 12–13), where small rounded stones can be viewed as symbolic, so that “by honoring eggs and oval stones . . . the gift of fertility might be won.” A primary symbolic representation of the Ibibio fertility goddess Ndemm Orutin Asang’s is a small polished, egg-shaped stone (Talbot 1923: 31–33). Although not associated with the Yoruba orisa Yemoja or Osun, or the Ibibio goddess Ndemm, a similar spiritual association for these stones is seen among the early twentieth century Limba people of Sierra Leone (related to the Susu). The practice of collecting natural fieldstones was a commonplace ritual among the Limba to maintain or increase fertility of their agricultural yields. Specifically, in their homes, “Stones are kept in boxes and people cook for them; they say they take them that they may get good crops. Whenever they see a nice-looking stone, they take it” (Thomas 1916: 40).

Finally, one unusual object recovered from a more ambiguous domestic context was a third ancient bronze coin, found by McFarlane (1975: 150–154; 157) “from the top of the habitation zone in front of [cabin] S-4.” McFarlane identified it as a Greek coin minted in Sicily between 344 and 317 BC, and depicting a portrait of Apollo and Pegasus. Perhaps the coin was purposely buried as a house charm, or was worn in a charm bag as a personal charm. Alternatively, it may simply have been a curio in the cabin, lost when the habitation was abandoned. The multivalence of this ancient coin combined with its relatively poor spatial context precludes any confident interpretations.
European and European-American Cultural Analogues

Given the social context of these objects within the slave quarters at the Couper Plantation, African cultural analogues and interpretations have been emphasized here. However, there are also analogues from the cultures of the British Isles and Europe for all of the spiritual beliefs described above. The prosaic and multivalent character of such material culture presents challenges that underscore the fundamental importance of the historical and spatial contexts in the interpretation of particular artifacts and deposits.

Just as many Africans were able to retain elements of their traditions and beliefs, even after violent displacement and exposure to other disparate cultural traditions, including Christianity, the same is true for people of the British Isles. When the British were actively colonizing North America, they practiced a culture that had accepted Christianity as the dominant faith for several centuries. Despite this longevity of Christian traditions, however, a separate and parallel system of “pagan” beliefs was maintained, recognized, and practiced by many. Referred to as “folk-beliefs,” these traditions included beliefs in witches, spirits, and faeries, black and white magic, as well as personal and household charms to protect against malevolent forces, including the use of animal sacrifices, even into the twentieth century (e.g., Brockie 1886: 202; Cheney et al. 1971; Gardner 1942; Hartland 1892: 14–17, 22–24; Hodges 1899; Hole 1957; Hyatt 1935; Johnson 1912; Jolly 1996; Maclagan 1902; McNeill 1957; McPherson 1929; Merrifield 1988: 52–53, 126; Thomas 1971).

Metal Objects in Water Wells or Other Bodies of Water  In formulating an interpretation for the ancient Roman coin and the simple copper straight pin uncovered in the well associated with the slave-occupied South Cabins (Figure 3), one should recognize that there were identical and ancient customs in the British Isles, with objects offered to sacred (and healing) waters in the form of wells, springs, rivers, and lakes. Many of these offerings were in the form of metal objects and often consisted of coins and pins. At least by the Renaissance and later, practitioners believed that the greater antiquity of the coin or object used as an offering provided greater efficacy for the supplication and supernatural protection (Anonymous 1859: 202–203; Brockie 1886: 231–232; Brown 1964: 150–151; Davidson 2004b; Gregor 1881: 40, 42; Gurdon 1893: 167; Gutch 1912: 8–9; Hole 1940: 102–103, 127; Jones 1930: 117–118; Knowlson 1930: 193–204; Laing 1885: 62; McNeill 1957: 67–68; McPherson 1929: 258–259; Merrifield 1988: 22–57; Opie and Tatum 1989: 437–439; Woodward and Woodward 2004).
Veneration or Viewing of Stones as Spiritual Invocations  Attributing spiritual associations to round stones was not unique to the cultures of Africa, and was also well documented in Europe and the British Isles. In many European applications, stones were potent objects of spiritual invocations, especially when placed in pools so that “they impregnated the water and imparted to it magical powers” (McPherson 1929: 258). For example, “in 1674, Margaret Spence in Banff [Scotland] was convicted of casting…five stones into the sea in time for morning prayers. She protests ‘on her soul’s salvation,’ that she did it for preventing the fever.” As late as the middle of the nineteenth century at McDuff and Rosehearty in Scotland “it was a custom to throw into the water, before entering it, three stones of different sizes, beginning with the largest. . . . Any evil spirit lurking in the water would be received by the stones, and accordingly no hurt would come to the bather” (McPherson 1929: 224). In a practice eerily similar to that seen among the Susu and other groups in Africa, in specific “hill districts [in Scotland] the peasants used to preserve round stones, wash them every Thursday evening, and at certain times of the year steep them in ale that they might bring luck and comfort to the house” (McPherson 1929: 259).

British peoples historically also viewed identical objects in a similar manner to the Limba people of Sierra Leone, who collected natural field stones and kept them in their home (Thomas 1916: 40). For example, in an account of folk beliefs in Scotland in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, McPherson (1929: 261) states that: “A charm stone, an egg-shaped pebble of quartz, two inches in length by one and a half in diameter, was formerly used in Shetland as a cure for sterility.” In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the Northern counties of England and Scotland other river-worn pebbles and small stones were also seen as healing objects when they were placed in water (Gregor 1881: 40; Henderson 1879: 164–166; Laing 1885: 104; McNeill 1957: 90–92). Stones with naturally worn holes were hung about a house or barn as protection against witches (Balfour and Thomas 1904: 51–52; Britten 1881: 28; Brockie 1886: 32; Gutch & Peacock 1908: 99–100; Hole 1940: 108).

House Charms and Dedication Sacrifices  The placement of one or more coins under foundations or other architectural elements as a part of building dedication is well documented in the British Isles and dates back to the Roman period (Merrifield 1988: 52, 54). Such an activity would be identical in form to the placement of the ancient coin in the foundation pit of Cabin S-4 at Couper Plantation (Figure 3).
The employment of house charms, including some essentially identical in form to many African-American practices, were also commonplace in Western Europe and the British Isles (Garrad 1989; Gurdon 1893: 185; Hole 1940: 108; Merrifield 1988). On the Isle of Man, in the Irish Sea between Ireland and Scotland, prehistoric stone axes and other unique stones have been found buried in the foundations and walls of Iron Age and later structures, especially domestic spaces. One example consisted of a mill stone broken into four pieces, each buried in a corner of a room (Garrad 1989).

Placing objects in chimneys to prevent evil from entering the house was common in the British Isles. For example, a brief accounting of Dorset folk beliefs in the 1880s notes that (Foster 1888: 116): “Fairies come down the chimney and do a deal of harm if you don’t stop them. The way to keep them out is to hang a bullock’s heart in the chimney.” Another example of a very similar practice consisted of a heart figure stuck with pins and nails recovered from inside the fireplace mantle in an old house in England in 1890 (Hole 1940: 168).

Iron was also a well-regarded preventative of illness and evil in Western Europe and the British Isles: “The dislike of evil spirits to iron rendered it a useful safeguard to man” (McPherson 1929: 257). The most common example of this, with numerous archival accounts dating as early as the 1600s, was a horse shoe nailed above a doorway of a house or barn (Addy 1895: 71–73; Anonymous 1859: 65, 186; Britten 1881: 27, 104; Burne 1883: 164; Gurdon 1893: 169, 185; Gutch and Peacock 1908: 95, 162; Hardy 1895: 62; Hole 1940: 127; Jones 1930: 142; Lawrence 1896, 1898: 7; Moore 1892: 230; Nicholson 1890: 87). In nineteenth-century England a horse shoe could also be attached to the bow of a boat to protect the vessel at sea (Laing 1885: 73). Iron was also used to protect newborns from illness and evil in Scotland and England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (McPherson 1929: 110–111; Hole 1940: 7). Iron items were buried under a floor as a house charm in the seventeenth century (Garrad 1989: 111), while in the Western highlands of Scotland iron and water could protect someone from the evil eye (Maclagan 1902: 172–174).

Given the many similarities of African and British Isles cultural traditions, it is certainly possible that first-generation Africans and their descendants were at times exposed to aspects of some of these European practices, and those traditions may have bolstered or elaborated upon core facets of traditional African systems of belief.
Concluding Observations

In archaeology we enter the field with a notion of what we would expect to find to address some question, and we hope that we can additionally observe data of all past behaviors at a particular site through our exposure of the archaeological record. The questions we ask, however, direct the excavations in ways that preclude observing all past behaviors. Excavations directed towards the planter’s house may give us insight into the white elite, but deny us the ability to see the lifeways of the enslaved. Methodologies directed towards one set of questions can displace opportunities to explore other subjects.

When a field of inquiry is unprecedented, the pioneers that blaze the trail for others do not have a model or well-worn path to follow, so this essentially experimental archaeology is just that. Mistakes are made and dead ends are encountered, with the better way or the truer path visible only in retrospect. With the Couper Plantation materials we are reexamining a pioneering site, excavated with a largely experimental methodology and preliminary hypotheses. In addition, this reexamination is grounded in the accumulated insights gained over the past 37 years.

The documentary record clearly demonstrates an undeniable African cultural presence at Couper Plantation in the antebellum period. Otto in the final chapter of his dissertation discusses the African heritage known historically on St. Simon’s Island specifically and coastal Georgia generally. However, he could not reconcile the potential impacts of African cultural influences with the results of his archaeology at Couper Plantation, and stated simply that: “The artifacts and faunal remains, however, do not reveal the African heritage of the slaves” (Otto 1975: 362). McFarlane (1975), in her master’s thesis on the Couper plantation excavations, also fails to recognize or even acknowledge the potential for elements of African cultural beliefs and practices.

Within any field of research, it is useful to periodically reexamine one’s intellectual history. Although there are precursors and contemporaries (e.g., Bullen and Bullen 1945; Griffin 1996: 90–99), African diaspora archaeology arguably can be traced to 1968, and Fairbanks’s founding in that year a plantation archaeology focused on African-American lifeways. Fairbanks went to Kingsley Plantation that year looking for Africanisms, and failing to find them had by the early 1970s moved on to St. Simon’s Island. Through a series of summer field schools the focus at St. Simon’s shifted towards a Eurocentric, status-based paradigm based largely on analyses of table ceramics.

As originally articulated by Otto (1975, 1984), the ability to archaeo-
logically discern class or caste distinctions between the contexts of the planter, overseer, and enslaved laborers had some utility beyond the simple confirmation of historically well-established roles within the antebellum South. Otto’s work paralleled a tradition of quantification and artifact pattern modeling formulated most extensively by Stanley South (1977). Despite the growing sophistication of the methodological protocols used in identifying tablewares and calculating ceramic costs (e.g., Adams and Boling 1989), the entire approach came under heavy criticism by the early 1990s (Orser 1988b; Potter 1991).

The evidence presented here is intriguing but not definitive in making a case through archaeology for detecting expressions of African cultural influences, beliefs, and religiosity. There are no specificities here, no absolute correlation between a particular African culture, specific ritual act, and corresponding material object on St. Simon’s Island. The formerly intact web of relations between objects, space, and metaphor writ large over several cabins through the decades is simply too fragmentary in its current state to reconstruct with any precision.

However, a mundane or non-spiritual account to explain the presence of elements of James Hamilton Couper’s geological and ancient coin collections—in both slave cabin wells, and under slave cabin foundations—is also difficult to sustain. The pattern of occurrence of such unusual objects within these contexts is at least noteworthy. Consider the fact that no unusual objects, or even similar mundane objects in unusual contexts (e.g., an iron hoe in a doorway) were documented at the overseer’s house by Otto, save for a large ground convex glass lens, probably associated with a telescope and recovered from the overseer’s well (Table 2).

The iron objects, such as the hoe and axe blade, are clearly more mundane in character, but are also directly analogous in form and location to house charms for such major African cultures as the Ibo and Yoruba, whose citizenry were among some of the most commonly enslaved in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Richardson 1989). Members of those cultures were also documented as having been present on the Couper Plantation. Most of the named African cultures and geographies discussed in this study have at least some Islamic influence and several were arguably predominantly Muslim. This evidence also corresponds with the heritage of several known Africans living at the Couper Plantation during the occupation of the slave cabins.

But the simple search for Africanisms, or in a more nuanced approach, the exploration for evidence of African-based cosmologies or belief systems, can be just as limiting as the search for class and status proxies (Perry and
Paynter 1999). Once you can establish the case for a single object or a suite of materials as having likely served in a spiritual capacity, then what? Clearly it should not be an end goal, but a starting point, one step of many in gaining a greater understanding of those past lives and cultural experiences. Is the value of this recognition enhanced because it uncovers a hidden transcript, a fundamental form of resistance? Such past cultural practices also arguably comprised coping strategies, providing a psychological means of control over the unseen dangers and very real risks that abounded within a brutal system of coerced labor. The use of objects appropriated from James Couper’s geological specimens and antique coin collections also suggests a silent contest of wills, much like the historical account of the African named Okra who built a hut mimicking those of his former homeland, only to have it torn down by Couper (Georgia Writers’ Project 1940: 179). Those Africans enslaved at Cannon’s Point were, by using Couper’s own possessions, mediating a potential malvolence for which Couper was partially responsible.

Recognizing the potential for these active systems of belief, manifested in objects of dedication, sacrifice, and protection of houses and wells, and in personal charms worn on the body, opens up a number of hitherto unknown set of experiences and potentialities. The social settings within this plantation in the early nineteenth century provided a stage for multiple and competing cosmologies. Retentions of traditional African cultural beliefs apparently coexisted with Islamic traditions and attempts at Christian conversion of the enslaved (Fountain 1999; Raboteau 1980: 212).

The combined archaeological evidence suggests a much more widespread and active system of African-derived beliefs along several dimensions within greater domestic contexts. Both the broad similarities and the differences in the particular artifacts employed between the North and South Cabins may represent facets of disparate African ethnicities and traditional religions. Those diversities in composition may also represent an improvisational impetus within a shared African belief system, reflecting nimble adaptations to a new environment and limited access to traditional ritual materials. What is also unclear is the extent to which European systems of folk belief might be represented in some of these objects and associated ritual acts. Are the presence of an ancient bronze coin and copper straight pin at the base of the South Cabins well exclusively reflective of African belief, or are elements of non-Christian, British beliefs—of sacred wells and offerings or dedications of old coins and pins—at play here?

In asking new questions of old data, we are not negating the research that originally drove the excavations four decades ago. Rather, such reexami-
nations compliment and extend the value of those data and related interpretations and insights. The discovery made by Otto in his study of the ceramic assemblage from the Cannon’s Point slave quarters demonstrated a disproportionate number of bowls compared to plates. Otto suggested that the emphasis on liquid-based meals, in conjunction to the faunal assemblage (exhibiting chopped bone, as if for stews) was distinctive to African-American slaves, and implied a basis in an African foodway or cuisine (Otto 1984: 172–175). Faunal assemblages recovered from enslaved contexts in seventeenth and eighteenth century Virginia bolster this African-based interpretation (Samford 1996: 95–96). Now we can combine the knowledge of a retained African practices documented first at Cannon’s Point in the 1970s—and centered in seemingly every-day domestic routines such as cooking and foodways—with newly documented African systems of spiritual beliefs within this same domestic space.

In this study we demonstrate the value of using old collections and revisiting these foundational sites, despite all of the limitations in old methodologies, loss of knowledge through course-grained collection protocols, missing or vague field notes, and lost artifacts. To understand how enslaved people retained knowledge of their homeland, and how it was expressed through religion and cosmology, are fundamental goals. There are not unlimited numbers of slave cabins through which to explore such expressions of identities and beliefs. There will come a day when there will be no more archaeologically “intact” slave cabins left to excavate, and all of our new questions will be derived from old collections.

In this reanalysis, if we can still see potential patterns of objects, metaphors, and beliefs through the haze of some 37 years, incomplete notes, lost maps, poor provenience, and missing artifacts, just think what might have been apparent to a trained eye and an open mind at the time of the excavations. It is interesting to speculate that if Fairbanks had continued to look for his so-called Africanisms he would have eventually recognized them in his investigations. If he had made some of the same connections we are making here, back in 1972, the entire history of our discipline would be fundamentally different, likely for the better.

References


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