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Diggin' Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima: Battling Myth through Archaeology

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Diggin' Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima: Battling Myth through Archaeology

By Kelley Deetz*



Figure 1. Stereotypes in material culture (all images by author).

While slavery ended over 150 years ago, its legacy permeates our social, cognitive and material worlds. Boxes of Aunt Jemima Pancake mix and Uncle Ben's Rice stock our grocers' shelves, while using the image of enslaved cooks to authenticate their products (Fig. 1). This mythical cook is so engrained in America's culture and consciousness that we have neglected to interrogate this widely accepted memory. My dissertation redefines the mythical "slave cook" and has uncovered their rich and complex history and role in plantation culture. Archaeological data is critical in re-informing contemporary mythical ideas about enslaved cooks and their kitchens, and helps reshape their legacy in America's cultural history.

In order to understand the context of this study, it is important to define the myth of the "slave cook." During the nineteenth century, Abolitionist literature began presenting the horrors of Southern slavery, depicting a brutal and inhumane society. Southern planters, responding to this trend, argued that their slaves, especially those working in the house, were treated like

family, and in this romanticized moment, the iconic “slave cook” was born. As the twentieth century rolled in, advertisements using the “black cook” image proved successful as they helped sell premixed baking products, syrups, cereals and rice. Aunt Jemima became a household name along with Rastus and Uncle Ben. American consumers, eager for a quickly prepared meal, reached for these “slave in a box” products at alarming rates.¹

Alongside this grocery trend, the development and popularity of *Black Americana* material culture formed. Black-faced cooks were produced as statues, kitchenware and countless random forms that reinforced the racist and sexist memory of enslaved cooks. These material manifestations laid such a solid foundation in America’s memory, that until recently, even scholars hadn’t delved into this reservoir of institutionalized racism and misrepresentation. Americans are so used to the idea of a black cook that their history has been marginalized as if complete. Even in the early stages of my dissertation, I was met with doubt from scholars in other fields, that I had anything new to bring to the table. The *slave cook*, as a white-washed, Uncle Tom, or mammy is far from reality, and their stories are now unearthed by the material culture and historical records of Virginia’s plantation kitchens.

The kitchen quarter is unique in that it was always adjacent to the main house. This poses questions as to how their material culture compares to other enslaved groups and the white planters. Trash pits for the main house and kitchen are often indistinguishable; therefore what remains is the question of access. Enslaved cooks had access to the serving vessels, serving ware and glassware of the big house; however, they also had their own assemblages to eat with in the kitchen. Similarly, their faunal remains and botanical footprints are shared with the planter’s trash. This challenging task of interpreting the cooks’ remains from the planters is exactly what defines the cooks’ role on the plantation. They lived and worked within the white landscape, but as enslaved Blacks. Their world was not clear cut, nor was their diet, material culture or status. Instead of attempting to draw concrete lines in the archaeological data, this article shows the complexity of the cooks’ world as they constantly walked the line of both landscapes, while performing white domesticity and preserving their African roots.

The archaeological record sheds light into the private lives of Virginia’s plantation cooks and illustrates the centrality of their unique role in the plantation community. While historical

1. M.M. Manning, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima*, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, 1998.

records provide significant details and accounts of enslaved cooks, they are primarily from the mistresses' perspective. The kitchen was a stage, where both the mistress and enslaved cook performed domestic roles. It is also where the black cook walked between the front and back stage, in and out of racialized and gendered landscapes. The front stage was what visitors saw, the presentation of refined culinary and cultural ideals. The backstage, was what took place after dinner, in the mistresses' shadows, and behind the closed doors of the kitchen. The archaeological record taps into the cooks' backstage in ways not found in the historical record.

An example of this is seen in the Dixon Plantation archaeological collection, housed by the James River Institute for Archaeology (JRI), in Williamsburg, Virginia. Dixon Plantation is located in King and Queen County, Virginia. Dixon's archaeological remains represent a typical mid-late eighteenth century external plantation kitchen and reflect the uniqueness of the cooks' space in the larger mechanics of plantation culture.

Dixon Plantation Kitchen (44KQ127)

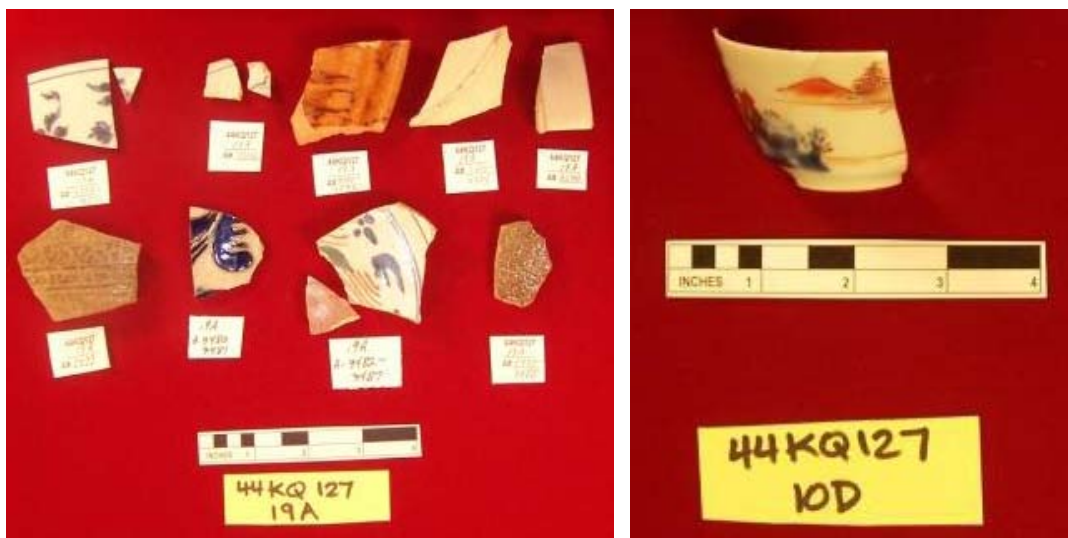
Dixon plantation was established sometime in the middle of the eighteenth century by William Dixon and his family. The external kitchen was built in suit with Virginia's architectural traditions, and sat adjacent to the house. In 2002, JRI was contracted by the current owner to excavate the remains of the eighteenth century kitchen that had burned sometime during the 1760s. When the kitchen burned, the occupants swept the remains into the cellar and adjacent trash pit. This short-term solution provided a long term value in that it captured the kitchen in a sort of a time capsule. Rarely are archaeologists able to uncover the entire material world of a past space. The Dixon kitchen is a perfect snapshot into mid eighteenth century kitchen life and provides a rich archaeological narrative.

The site was excavated by removing the topsoil with a backhoe, and hand shoveling the soil until prominent features appeared. A hearth and two features were mapped, and excavated in quadrants. The JRI uncovered the remains of a hearth, large root cellar and external; trash pit. The kitchen remains consisted of the base of a chimney, constructed of stone, bog iron, and brick, that measured 11'6'' by 6'0'' with an 8'9'' wide firebox. The subfloor pit measured 5' by 8' filled with refuse dating it to no later than the 1760s. The root cellar contained everything from swords to ceramics and its richness exemplifies the cooks' prestige within the plantation community.

The kitchen was the heart of the plantation. This unique space brought together both black and white, slave and free, and acted as a socially safe space for the plantation community to congregate. The written record shows that enslaved cooks often hosted slave wedding receptions, catered balls for the plantation owners, and cooked for other countless occasions.² The archaeology not only supports this, but adds the textures of daily life that long escaped the written documents. Since the fire caused a rapid fill of the cellar and trash pit, the contexts of the artifacts are less critical to the interpretation. This time capsule tells a story of European elites sharing space with newly enslaved Africans, all within the confines of the kitchen space.

Findings

The ceramic assemblage is typical of early to middle eighteenth-century Virginia plantation home. A variety of Jackfield, stonewares, and imported porcelains and the absence of creamware and pearlware tighten the deposit date to pre-1760 (Figs. 2 and 3). In addition, there are significant counts of carved and engraved glassware and crystal, as well as medicine bottles.



Figures 2 and 3

Eighteenth and nineteenth century cookbooks contained a mixture of recipes and remedies. The cook was responsible for not only feeding the planter's family, but for creating serums for

2. See Richard Eppes papers, Deans Family papers, Mary Lee Custis papers, and Holladay Family papers. Virginia Historical Society, Manuscript Collection.

sickness. This complex role was common in the Chesapeake and the concentration of crucibles and medicine bottles prove this trend. This responsibility suggests the inherent agency that cooks maintained throughout their enslavement. With this access and knowledge of medicine and food, cooks could easily poison their masters. While there were ways of insuring safety in this dynamic, the cook nonetheless had an unrecorded power within her/his skill, and this silent potential influenced their relationships with their enslavers.

In addition to an abundance of classic eighteenth century imported ceramics, there was a large colonoware pot sherd, which was excavated from the external kitchen trash pit (Fig. 4). The presence within the kitchen, where pots and pans were readily furnished from the white residents, shows the representation of Black culture within a white space. Whether this colonoware pot was made on the plantation, or given to the cook as a gift from the quarter folk, is debatable. However, its context, as an African derived cooking vessel, locally made by enslaved Africans, shows that the cook, while living in a white landscape, flavored his or her space with material that represented their heritage.



Figures 4 and 5

Cooks often worked as seamstresses, launderers and kitchen maids, and many kitchens were also used as laundries. This allowed for one building to have two hearths on opposite sides of the dwelling. The Dixon kitchen was disturbed, and the second half of it was unrecordable. However, the presence of thimbles and pins suggest the kitchen was a laundry as well (Fig. 5).

As mentioned before, the kitchen was often used for celebrations, where both the enslaved and white population mingled. The kitchen as a black domain within a larger white landscape was a socially “safe space” for the greater plantation community to gather together. This middle ground witnessed slave wedding receptions, high volume catering, and black and white worlds congregating at particular moments. On multiple occasions, nineteenth century Virginia planter Richard Eppes would supply candy, cake and bread for slave wedding receptions held in the kitchen. The cooks provided their home and workspace for such moments, offering the colonial equivalent of a rented hall. The archaeological record supports this notion with an abundance of unique artifacts within an even more exceptional context.

With food at the center of the kitchen, and white and Black worlds co-existing within this space, little bits of evidence fell through the cracks. Below is a picture of an emerald ring, a pile of fish scales, and a modified African cowry shell (Fig. 6). These artifacts represent the elite European Americans socially mixing with enslaved Africans, all within the world of a plantation kitchen.



Figure 6

The following artifacts represent both African religious traditions and adornment. These assortments of modified cowry shells, African glass beads and a pierced English coin, all worn as necklaces, pendants and bracelets reminded enslaved Africans of home. The array of materials is representative of the ways in which enslaved Africans were able to keep some of

their material goods through the horrors of the slave ship. In addition, the coin, while not African, was modified in an African way. The piercing allows for the coin to become a pendant. These pendants were very likely used for protection from evil spirits and as religious expressions.³ The resourcefulness of enslaved Africans, cooks included, speaks to their perseverance throughout enslavement, and illustrates their drive to keep their culture intact in a new and changing world, and more importantly, within the confines of the white landscape.



Figure 7

The kitchen environment was complex, and its liminal nature created a cultural crossroads. The items below demonstrate the intersections of cook and mistress, black and white, and personal aesthetics (Figs. 8 and 9). The top row of Figure 8 consists of an emerald ring, a blue painted jewel, a green glass ring, a mother of pearl button, and two pace jewels. The bottom row of Figure 8 represents African aesthetic adornments; cowry shells, blue, white and red beads, and an English coin turned African by the puncture of a hole.



Figures 8 and 9

3. Mark P. Leone and Gladys Marie Fry. Conjuring in the Big House Kitchen. *Journal of American Folklore* 112(445): 372-403 (1999). Also see Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution in the American South*, Oxford University Press, 1980.

The kitchen was more than a venue for food production and laundry. As mentioned before, enslaved cooks used this unique space to host lively receptions, large gatherings and nightly socials for the rest of the enslaved community. Games were a significant part of eighteenth century culture, and were prevalent within the kitchen quarter. With the knowledge of the cooks' active social agenda, it is easy to assess the variety of gaming materials found in the Dixon kitchen. Assortments of marbles, unidentified glass objects and obviously manipulated marble pieces show the variety of games that filled the kitchen walls (Fig. 10).



Figure 10

Below is a picture of a broken clay marble (Fig. 11). Its fracture is rough and natural with the consistency of the clay and its porous nature allows for an uneven split. In contrast, the marbles on the right are perfectly split, creating two different sized pieces (Fig. 12). The wear on the broken pieces show clear cut marks, and post break wear. It is clear that marbles were being played in the kitchen, but it also appears that the marbles were used for other games as well. The traditional West African game of mancala or wari is prevalent throughout the Diaspora, and calls for small rounded, partially flat gaming pieces and the board is simply fourteen holes, carved in the earth or on a board. Below are unidentified glass pieces that highly resemble contemporary mancala pieces, but were most likely from button inlets, due to their fake four-hole indentation (Fig. 13). This does not rule them out as gaming pieces, but rather suggests that they might have been used as such after falling off of a garment.



Figures 11 and 12



Figure 13

So what does this all mean and how does archaeology debunk the myth of the slave cook? By thinking about the cook's individual position, rather than a nameless resident of the kitchen, helps set up questions that push the idea of enslaved cooks being in a unique role and location within the plantation community. Accepting the more prevalent mythical Aunt Jemima as a gendered, racialized and white-washed being, diverts the attention from all the male cooks, who made up close to a quarter of Virginia's cooks, and the tangled relationships that were the web of Virginia's plantation culture.

Scholarship on foodways has successfully laid out the ways in which enslaved cooks manipulated food and created a creolized cuisine. This study, in conjunction with historical research on foodways, enslavement and plantation history, pulls the individual's voice from the records. The written record shows the whole stage, front, back and in between, and illustrates this picture of a vibrant social space, within the dreads of slavery and excruciating labor demands. The archaeology uncovers the tangible ways in which these cooks actively remembered their past, helped themselves and others survive the horrors of chattel slavery, and continued to own their identity as people of African heritage. They, unlike the field hands, were part of the white landscape, and had to partake in a particular performance of white domesticity. In all of this, they were and are more complex than the myth suggests. If, in fact, a small

percentage of Aunt Jemima pancake mix was served with a side of contempt, or Rastus' *Cream of Wheat* came with a Sankofa shaped spoon, or even better, if Uncle Ben's rice had trace amounts of poison in it, we would be closer to reality.



Note

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