

HERITAGE SPOTLIGHT



Kentucky Transportation Cabinet



SPOTLIGHT NO. 5

UNCOVERING THE LIVES OF KENTUCKY'S ENSLAVED PEOPLE

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WHAT Archaeological Site (the domestic nucleus of a typical Kentucky plantation).

WHERE Jessamine County in Central Kentucky.

WHEN Early to late nineteenth century (Kentucky's Antebellum period).

SUBJECT Summary of archaeological research on plantation layout and on the lifeways of enslaved African Americans.

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By the early to mid-1800s, Kentucky had left her frontier roots behind. The cities of Lexington and Louisville were bustling places of commerce and culture. Still, the fifteenth state was mainly rural, and most Kentuckians were farmers.

About 20 percent of Kentucky's residents at this time were enslaved people of African descent. These people cleared and worked the land. They built elegant houses. They were accomplished carpenters and seamstresses. But they did not own the land they worked, did not realize the profits from their labor, and did not call those elegant houses "home."

They were called slaves.

Much is known about Kentucky's wealthy, white, male, landowners of the Antebellum period. Their names and faces

commonly appear in our history books and art museums. We know much less about the enslaved people who worked for them; and what we do know is too often told from the slaveholders' perspective.

Historical archaeologists are working to change that.

Historical Archaeology

To learn about how European American and African American people lived in Kentucky long ago, historical archaeologists study *artifacts* (objects made or modified by people). They study *artifact disposal patterns* (where artifacts are found and what they are found with) for the clues they hold. They also study oral histories and documents – like maps, diaries, letters, books, wills, and tax records.



Above African *slave*. *Enslaved* African. Do labels make that much difference? They can, because labels encode subtle messages. Throughout this Spotlight, “enslaved” is used instead of “slave.”

The written record is very limited for poor people and for enslaved people. These groups are almost invisible in Kentucky history, and when they do appear, history offers a narrow and biased view of their lives. Therefore, the artifacts they left behind and the patterns of those artifacts at the places they lived and worked must tell their stories.

In 2002, the Kentucky Department of Transportation planned to widen U.S. Highway 68 in northern Jessamine County. This project gave historical archaeologists the opportunity to research Mason Barkley’s plantation – a typical nineteenth-century Kentucky plantation owned by a white man – and the enslaved black men, women, and children who lived and worked there. This spotlight presents what historical archaeologists learned as a result of this research. It offers a richer and more inclusive perspective on Kentucky’s past.

Plantations in Kentucky

In the late 1700s, the younger sons of wealthy white East Coast planters, dreaming of establishing their own farms, had little hope for success if they stayed near home and kin. Central Kentucky presented a remarkable opportunity. These men joined the flood of immigrants moving

west. They brought with them the plantation system, a system founded on slavery.

In time, this system became the model for Kentucky agriculture. Owning enslaved people became an integral part of Kentucky culture and its agricultural economy.

The term “plantation system” brings to mind expansive Antebellum cotton-producing operations owned by wealthy white families living in lavish mansions. It suggests an image of hundreds of enslaved Africans brought against their will to work in the cotton fields of America’s Deep South – Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Louisiana.

This is a stereotype. It does little to help us understand the South’s large plantations or central Kentucky’s much smaller ones.

The topography, soils, and climate in central Kentucky were not suitable for growing cotton, rice, or sugar cane. Therefore, farmers in the region grew corn, wheat, oats, barley, and hay. In addition, they raised vegetables and fruits, and tended livestock, like cattle, pigs, sheep, and horses. In some cases, they also grew cash crops, like tobacco and/or hemp (see sidebar on page 4).

What made a Kentucky farm a *plantation*? It was not the amount of land it covered or the types of crops it produced. On a farm, laborers were free people, and



Above Amec Foster Wheeler archaeologists excavate in a rectangular unit at the Barkley Plantation Site in 2005-2006. Excavation is just the first step in a long process of research and discovery. Using shovels and trowels, archaeologists excavate slowly and carefully, finding artifacts by screening the dirt through wire screens. The bulk of archaeological research, however, takes place after the excavation is finished. Investigators spend months collecting and analyzing data and carrying out comparative research. Only then can they develop interpretations about a site and its residents, its history of occupation, and the kinds of activities that took place there.

they were paid for their work. A plantation, in contrast, relied on an *institutionalized* (structured and highly formalized) forced labor system – race-based slavery. These laborers were property and they belonged to the plantation owner. In this respect, Kentucky plantations were exactly like their Southern counterparts.

Kentucky Plantation Slavery

Most Kentuckians did not own enslaved people. Primarily wealthy white men did – men like Henry Clay, John Rowan, Isaac Shelby, John Speed, and George Rogers Clark. Between 20 and 50 enslaved blacks worked on Kentucky's largest plantations. Typically, however, only four enslaved people lived and worked on a plantation in Kentucky.

Tasks ranged from domestic work (cooking, washing, cleaning, minding the children, being personal servants), to tending livestock, to working the fields, often side-by-side with their owners. Women were seamstresses, cooks, herbalists, and midwives. Men were tradesmen skilled in carpentry, masonry, brick making, and horse training. Slaveholders, on occasion, leased out individuals with these skills to other farms and plantations.

Industrial Hemp – Barkley's Cash Crop

Kentucky's climate was well-suited to industrial hemp production. A valuable cash crop, hemp was cultivated for its fibers. Bluegrass farmers often grew the tall, stalky plant on their richest soil.

Hemp played an important role in Kentucky's nineteenth-century farm economy. During the first half of the century, the rise in demand for cotton increased the demand for hemp bags – used for bagging cotton – and for hemp twine and rope – used for binding it. Kentuckians like Mason Barkley, who enslaved many people, grew large amounts of hemp before market prices fell in the early 1870s.

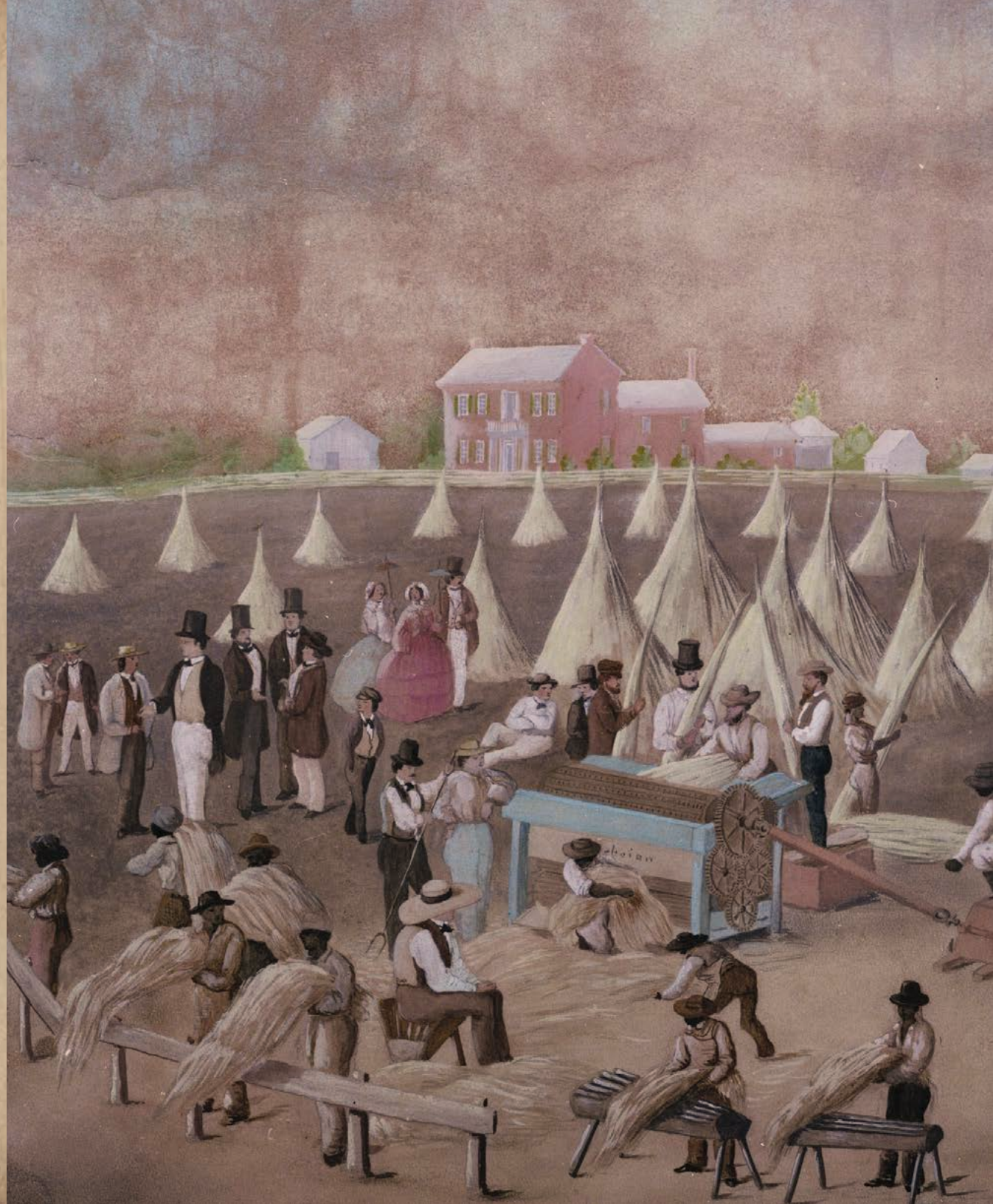
Harvesting and processing hemp was very hard, intensive work. Only the strongest could do it and do it day after day. For these reasons, hemp growers relied almost exclusively on enslaved labor.

In the fall, enslaved blacks cut and bundled the ripe plant stalks into shocks for drying. Once dry, they scattered the stalks back over the fields to rot during the winter. In the spring, to release the hemp lint and fibers, enslaved people processed or “broke” the rotted stalks using a “hemp brake.” The usual daily processing quota was 80 to 100 pounds per person.

After collecting the hemp lint and fibers into bundles, they were shipped to a factory. In a long building or shed known as a “rope walk,” enslaved people twisted hemp fibers into rope or twine. Some larger plantations had their own rope walks.

Right Shown here is a typical mid-nineteenth century Kentucky hemp plantation and the people involved in hemp production: investors, managers, and enslaved workers. The painting shows the labor-intensive hemp-breaking process. Conical hemp shocks (in white) are scattered throughout the field. The brick plantation house, with its additions, stands in the background. Outbuildings (also shown in white) are located in the backyard and along the side yards.

Barkley's Jessamine County plantation might have looked something like this, although his home was not brick. This circa 1850 painting is attributed to European American Kentucky artist Samuel I. Major.



Below Enslaved African American mothers endured the horrors of having their children sold away. Tinie Force and Elvira Léwis, formerly enslaved in Ballard County, Kentucky, describe the tragic effect this practice had on family life: *“At times, pathetic scenes prevailed in the selling of slaves; namely, the separation of mother and child. Often, a boy or girl would be sold and taken away from his or her mother. In many cases, the parting would be permanent and the child and its mother would never see each other again.”*

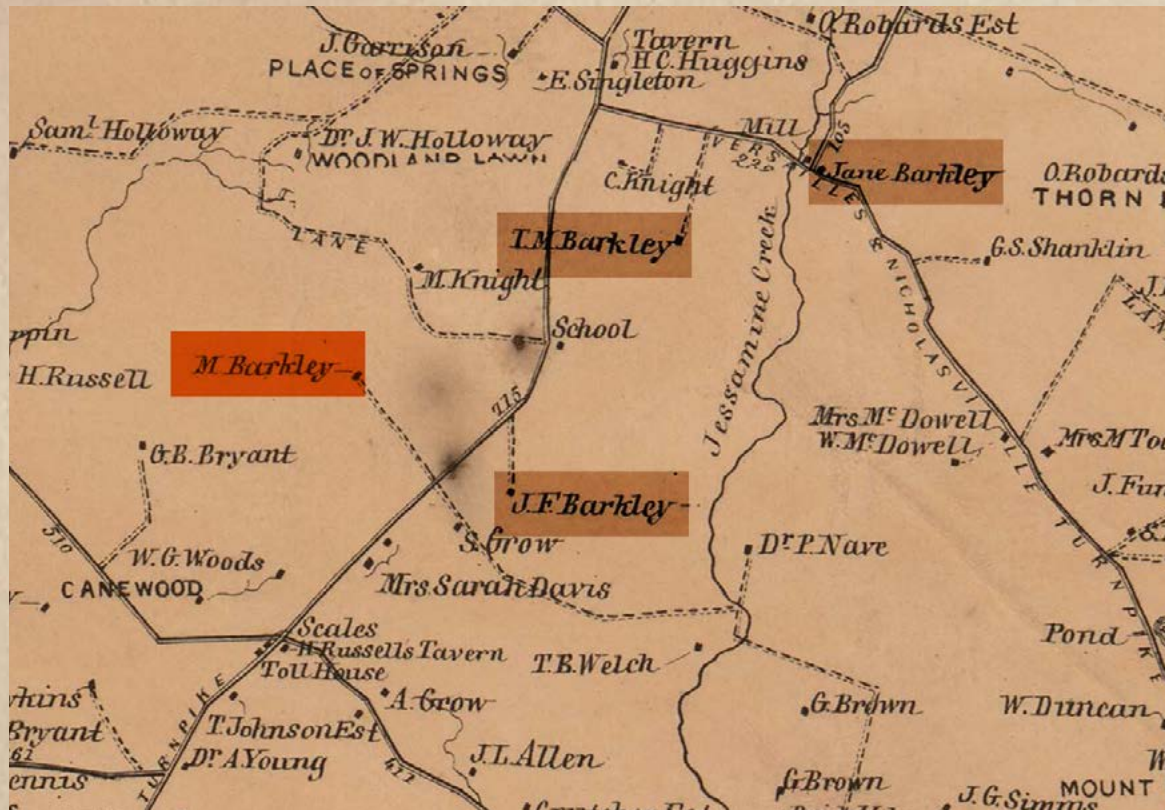
Enslaved people did, sometimes, work for themselves. For example, they might make money from the sale of their surplus garden vegetables or eggs. Some slaveholders also paid enslaved laborers when they surpassed their daily work quotas.

Since Kentucky’s enslaved people often did not work exclusively in the fields, people today have the impression that slavery in Kentucky was somehow “milder” than slavery in the Deep South. Make no

mistake: enslaved people in Kentucky suffered the same insults, the same abuse, and the same mental, emotional, and physical hardships as all people who live in slavery.

Lewis Clarke was enslaved in Madison County, Kentucky. One of four so-called “house slaves,” he describes his childhood experience of Kentucky’s “milder” form of slavery: *“...and though we had not, in all respects, so hard work as the field hands, yet in many things our condition was much*





Above This section of an 1861 map shows the location of Mason Barkley’s plantation (highlighted in orange) in north-central Jessamine County. His house sat just a few miles northwest of the Pleasant Hill and Jessamine County Turnpike (now U.S. Highway 68). Barkley relatives lived nearby (highlighted in brown).

worse. We were constantly exposed to the whims and passions of every member of the family; from the least to the greatest their anger was wreaked upon us. Nor was our life an easy one, in the hours of our toil or in the amount of labor performed. We were always required to sit up until all the family had retired; then we must be up at early dawn in summer, and before day in winter.”

Enslaved Kentuckians also suffered the same lack of control over their lives as did

enslaved people living elsewhere in the U.S. Here is an example. Enslaved blacks often married within their own plantation or married enslaved people living nearby. In Kentucky, however, because most plantations were small operations, keeping families together was not good business. Thus, Kentucky slaveholders often sold enslaved individuals separately, breaking up families. A formerly enslaved man in Floyd County, Kentucky, described it this way: “Slave traders came into the county to buy up slaves for the Southern plantations, and cotton or sugar fields—Slave families were frequently separated, some members [who were] mean, thieving, or were run-aways were sold (first) down the river.”

Lewis Clarke remembers this practice, too: “I never knew a whole family to live together, till all were grown up, in my life. There is almost always, in every family, some one or more keen and bright, or else sullen and stubborn slave, whose influence they are afraid of on the rest of the family, and such a one must take a walking ticket to the South.... Generally there is but little more scruple about separating families than there is with a man who keeps sheep in selling off the lambs in the fall.”

Clark experienced the heartbreak of family separation as a child: “...all my severe labor, bitter and cruel punish-



Above Excavated stone kitchen foundation, chimney base, and adjacent subfloor pit (in foreground and center), and cellar addition with subfloor pit (in background) at the Barkley Plantation Site in 2005-2006. Enslaved blacks worked in the kitchen and its addition. Some also likely lived in the building.

ments...were as nothing to the sufferings experienced by being separated from my mother, brothers and sisters; the same things, with them near to sympathize with me, to hear my story of sorrow, would have been comparatively tolerable. They were distant only about thirty miles, and yet in ten long, lonely years of childhood, I was only permitted to see them three times. My mother occasionally found an opportunity to send me some token of remembrance and affection, a sugar plum or an apple, but I scarcely ever ate them – they were laid up and handled and wept over till they wasted away in my hand.”

Mason Barkley Plantation Owner

Mason Barkley’s Jessamine County plantation began as a 40-acre tract along Curd’s Road (now U.S. Highway 68). The 21-year-old inherited it in 1839. It was a small section of his father Samuel Barkley’s 500-acre landholdings in the area.

Over the next ten years, Mason Barkley grew his farm. He built a modest house. He bought more land and enlisted help from his family to work it. In June 1842, he married Narcissa Hawkins, and two years later, the first of their five children was born. By 1847, he listed 30 cattle and

two enslaved people as assets. Financial records valued his wealth that year at \$5,500. They demonstrate that Mason Barkley was a middle-class farmer.

But Barkley’s fortunes were on the rise. Three years later, he owned a profitable 200-acre plantation. Eleven enslaved blacks, who now outnumbered the free whites on the plantation, helped him raise sheep and hogs, and grow wheat, rye, corn, oats, and hemp. He was worth nearly \$10,000.

He continued to invest in his plantation, acquiring more land, enslaving more people, and growing and selling more surplus food crops and hemp. By the end of the 1850s, Mason Barkley had a taxable worth of \$22,000. He was a wealthy man, thanks in large part to the labor of the 18 people of African descent he enslaved. As befitting a man of his economic means, he built a new, and larger, house. He likely converted his first house into a slave quarters.

The Civil War (1861-1865) forced Kentucky’s plantation owners to abandon their dependence on enslaved labor. Nevertheless, for a time, Barkley and others continued to operate profitable farms. They produced surpluses of livestock and food crops, and substantial amounts of hemp, largely because some formerly enslaved people stayed on as tenant farmers.

This success was short lived. Market prices fell sharply. Working the farm with cheap tenant labor was not as profitable as working it with unpaid enslaved labor.

By 1873, Mason Barkley was experiencing financial difficulties. He borrowed money from his brothers but could not repay his debts. Three years later, in 1876, he sold his farm and moved to Woodford County, Kentucky.

Archaeology at Barkley's Plantation

Archaeological research at Mason Barkley's plantation focused on its domestic center. This work revealed that it was a typical Kentucky Antebellum plantation.

Barkley's home was a moderate-sized four-room house. Built of wood timber framing, it sat on stone foundation piers. Its fireplace foundations also were stone, but the chimneys probably were brick. (*Click on **Spotlight 2: Early Inns and Homes** to read about early Kentucky house construction techniques.*)

Archaeologists documented several outbuildings near the house: a large one-room detached kitchen behind it and a small smoke or meat house in front of it. These structures were built of the same materials and in the same way as the house.

Numerous cooking and food preparation activities took place in the kitchen. In the smoke/meat house, meat was smoked and salted, and then was stored there.

Subfloor pits are commonly found at kitchen and slave house sites, and Barkley's Plantation Site was no exception. These pits vary in size, shape, and function. Some are large, square or rectangular, and are lined with wood or brick. Other pits are small, irregularly shaped, and unlined. Residents often used these pits for storage.

Archaeologists also discovered that a building had been attached to the side of the kitchen. A large pit had been dug into the ground below its floor. Archaeologists inferred that this pit was an underground cellar, accessible from the outside (see page 7). Root vegetables from the garden, such as sweet potatoes, carrots, and turnips, or food prepared in the kitchen could have been stored in the cool cellar.

A small, one-room, timber-framed slave house sat on stone foundation piers behind the detached kitchen. Typical of slave houses, it had a small fireplace and would have had a wooden floor and a stick and mud chimney (see sidebar to the right).

Archaeologists found many dish and bottle fragments, personal items – like buttons and marbles – and animal bones in areas between these buildings. The artifact

Stick and Mud Chimneys

Early nineteenth-century stone or brick chimneys were expensive to build, and many plantations lacked the quality raw materials needed to build them. For this reason, owners built the chimneys of some slave houses out of large sticks or small logs stacked together and plastered over with thick clay mud. The mud sealed the gaps between the sticks and helped insulate the chimney against flames. Wes Woods, formerly enslaved in Garrard County, described the slave house chimneys where he grew up: *"Some of the chimneys were made with sticks and chinked with mud, and would sometimes catch on fire."*

Because of this fire threat, stick and mud chimneys were built to lean away from the house. In the event that they did catch fire, they would fall away from the structure. A leaning chimney needed support, though, so posts or poles were propped up against it.

Archaeologists did not find any evidence of a chimney at Barkley's small slave house. However, they did find evidence for posts outside of the hearth and chimney foundation, in the form of post holes. From this evidence, they inferred that Barkley's slave house had a stick and mud chimney.



patterns imply that family members and enslaved workers carried out their chores and did other activities in these places.

Additional outbuildings and agricultural buildings would have been located some distance from Mason Barkley's home. These could have included an ice

house, a wash house, or a spring house; and barns, corn cribs, chicken houses, equipment sheds, granaries, and stables.

Archaeological research shows that Barkley made changes to his plantation early in the 1850s. As his family grew, he built a wooden frame addition onto the back of

his house that included bedrooms and a new kitchen. The underground cellar was abandoned and filled-in. Barkley built a larger smoke/meat house and converted the old one into a storage cellar. Because he now enslaved more people, Barkley turned his old detached kitchen into a slave house.

In the early 1860s, Barkley built a larger house for his family south of his original one. It is likely that new outbuildings were constructed around it. Because he had enslaved 18 people at that time, Barkley probably used his old house as a slave quarters.

After the Civil War, artifacts show that tenants lived in Barkley's old house. By the time Barkley sold his property in 1876, he had demolished the old detached kitchen and the small slave house. All that was left in the center of his once prosperous plantation was his original timber-framed home.



Above The early slave house on Mason Barkley's plantation may have looked very much like this Bon Air, Virginia example photographed in 1888. Typical of slave houses, the small log structure shown here has a wooden roof of long boards rather than a fully shingled roof, a small window, and a leaning stick and mud chimney propped-up by poles.

Barkley's Slave Houses

Slave houses on Kentucky plantations varied in size, quality, and construction. The tasks performed, the number of enslaved people living on the plantation, and the slaveholder's economic resources contributed to these differences.

Slave houses were supposed to be dry places to live, with good ventilation and a good fireplace. However, most were poorly built, small, one-room log

or timber-framed cabins. They had few windows, dirt floors, and were drafty and cold in the winter. Sometimes, slave cabins were larger, two- to three-room buildings, with perhaps a second floor. Plantation owners who wanted to make an impression occasionally built brick slave houses.

Dan Bogie, formerly enslaved in Garrard County, Kentucky, recalled that *“We lived in a one-room cabin, with a loft above, and this was an old fashioned one about 100 yards from the house. We lived in one room with one bed.”* Lewis Clarke, who had been enslaved in Madison County, Kentucky, described slave houses: *“They are made of small logs, about from ten to twenty feet square. The roof is covered with splits, and dirt is thrown in to raise the bottom, and then it is beat down hard for a floor. The chimneys are made of cut sticks and clay. In the corners, or at the sides, there are pens made, filled with straw, for sleeping. Very commonly two or three families are huddled together in one cabin, and in cold weather they sleep together..., old and young.”*

The enslaved people who worked in the Barkley family’s home may have lived in rooms in the house, especially after the addition was built. Living conditions there were likely adequate. Barkley’s other enslaved blacks would have lived in

the buildings where they worked – above the detached kitchen and in the separate slave house. Living conditions in those buildings were probably not as good.

(To see a 3D reconstruction of a typical Kentucky slave house, click on [Antebellum Period in the Historic Archaeology: Beneath Kentucky’s Fields and Streets.](#))

Archaeological Evidence of Lives Lived in Slavery

Like all enslaved peoples, the lives of those enslaved on Barkley’s plantation were not their own. Their food, their clothing, the furnishings in their houses – nearly everything they possessed – was either provided by Barkley, passed down from his family, or made on the plantation. Bert Mayfield, formerly enslaved in Garrard County, Kentucky, recalled that *“On Christmas each of us stood in line to get our clothes; we were measured with a string which was made by a cobbler. The material had been woben [woven] by the slaves in a plantation shop. The flax and hemp were raised on the plantation.”*

During investigations at Barkley’s plantation, archaeologists noticed that fragments of dishes from trash deposits around the main house were very similar to those found around the kitchen and

slave house (see page 11). From this they inferred that the Barkley family passed on their old or slightly damaged “hand-me-down” dishes to the enslaved blacks who lived on their plantation.

Enslaved people who worked on Kentucky plantations were several generations removed from Africa. Nevertheless, traces of their African heritage remained in their foodways, songs, and stories; and in certain beliefs and rituals. Archaeologists discovered evidence of this at the Barkley Plantation Site.

foodways

Enslaved people were typically provided a food ration that included pork, corn meal, and sometimes molasses. On occasion, owners gave out bread, coffee, sugar, and syrup.

Discarded animal bones show that enslaved people living on Barkley’s plantation ate mostly pork, along with lesser amounts of beef, mutton/lamb, and chicken. High-quality cuts of meat, like shoulder or rump, were rare. More common were lower-quality meat cuts, like pigs feet. From the characteristics of these bones, archaeologists inferred that enslaved blacks took home scraps and leftovers from the main house to make soups and stews.



Above Archaeologists found old, out-of-style, and mismatched English-made dishes where enslaved people likely lived on the plantation. From left clockwise: an older style blue transfer-printed cup base, a hand-painted saucer fragment, a red transfer-printed vessel fragment, a transfer-printed and hand-painted vessel fragment, and a hand-painted cup fragment.

The recovery of bones of wild game, including rabbit, squirrel, opossum, bobwhite, softshell turtle, and fish, show that the enslaved people on Barkley's plantation also hunted and fished, adding variety to their diet. George Henderson, formerly enslaved in Garrard County, Kentucky, described this practice: “*we ate all kinds of wild food, possum and rabbits baked in a big oven. Minnows were fished from the creeks and fried in hot grease. We ate this with pone corn bread.*”

Discarded seeds recovered from Barkley's plantation show that the enslaved people also ate many different plant foods. Wheat, barley, and corn were likely surplus plantation crops that Barkley gave them. Beans and squash, on the other hand, probably came from the main kitchen garden or perhaps from the enslaved peoples' own gardens.

Significantly, archaeologists also found cowpeas, known as black-eyed peas, at the site. In the nineteenth century, white Americans did not commonly eat cowpeas, but enslaved blacks did. A plant native to Africa, the recovery of cowpeas hints at the persistence of some aspect of traditional African foodways in the dishes prepared by the plantation's enslaved residents.

recreation

When they were not working, enslaved people spent some of their time playing music, singing, dancing, and enjoying games. Singing and dancing were among the few occasions when they could visit with other enslaved people.

Some were musicians. They played for their family and friends, as well as for their owners. According to Tinie Force and Elvira Lewis, who were enslaved in Ballard County, Kentucky, *“Banjo and guitar playing were practiced by the many blacks of the slavery period also. These were on the order of concerts; and many, although they had no scientific training, became rather accomplished musicians in this respect.”* Archaeological research at Barkley’s plantation supports their description.

religion and beliefs

In a world with little hope, religion sustained enslaved people in Kentucky. There was a complex mix of Christian belief, traces of traditional African religion, and nineteenth-century superstition.

Most of Kentucky’s enslaved people were Christians. On Sundays, they gathered to worship, sing, and pray together; sometimes with whites and sometimes separately. Lewis Clarke, formerly en-



Above Music was an important part of life for enslaved people. Around the kitchen and slave house, archaeologists found parts of several different kinds of musical instruments. Examples shown here are (from the top): a brass reed plate from a harmonica; a white metal bracket with three white metal and iron tuning knob pins from a guitar or banjo; the iron frame of a mouth harp (left); and three white metal and iron tuning knob pins from a guitar or banjo (right).

Below Enslaved blacks living on small plantations held summer and harvest dances. These events helped them build a community distinct from, although still economically linked to, that of their owners. In this Fauquier County, Virginia, scene, two men play stringed instruments – the fiddle and the banjo – while another plays the spoons. A third is “patting juba” on his thighs to set the pace.

slaved in Madison County, Kentucky, remembered that a Sunday was “...a great day for visiting and eating, and the house servants often have more to do on that than on any other day.”

Still, there was work to be done. Clarke continued: “There are certain kinds of work which are respectable for Sabbath-day. Slaves are often sent out to...collect and count the pigs and sheep, mend fences.... Sometimes corn must be shelled in the corn-crib.... In these and various other such like employments, the more avaricious slaveholders keep their slaves busy a good part of every Sabbath.”

Some of the beliefs of enslaved blacks were derived from the BaKongo culture of west and central Africa. In the BaKongo culture, there is a single supreme God who was the creator of all things. This god is remote and generally uninvolved in the daily affairs of the living. However, at the beginning of time, this god created the cosmic structure of the world, the cycling of all things, the natural world, the land of the dead and the land of the living, as well as souls and a variety of spirits, including ancestor spirits.

Kentucky’s enslaved people, like most nineteenth-century white Kentuck-



Below The African American people shown in this Rabun County, Georgia, drawing, are worshipping together on the plantation in one family's cabin. Kentucky's enslaved population also created community in this way – by regularly worshipping together, attending dances, and marrying other enslaved people who lived on nearby plantations.





Above These objects may have held symbolic meaning for the enslaved residents at Barkley's plantation. Several X's, lightly scratched into this 1833 Liberty Head penny (top), may represent the cross and circle. The penny also could have been a personal charm kept in a pocket as protection and for luck.

The brass disc (bottom) – with a hole punched in the center surrounded by short, shallow, radiating marks – might symbolize the rays of the sun and the upper world of the living. Archaeologists believe these symbols were based on the Bakongo cosmogram. They most likely did not hold the same meanings for enslaved blacks as they did for West Africans.

ians, believed in many types of spirits. Reflecting their African roots, enslaved blacks commonly prayed to their ancestors, asking for help in their day-to-day living; for good luck and for ways to win their freedom; and for protection from disease, misfortune, enemies, and evil spirits. These ancestor spirits functioned as important messengers between God and the living, much as Catholic saints do.

Also like many other nineteenth-century people, enslaved blacks tended to be superstitious, believing people could be hexed. To provide both people and buildings protection from evil spirits, they turned everyday objects into symbolically charged charms and talismans. These objects held secret meanings known only to other enslaved people. In this way, these objects also linked a shared and separate enslaved black culture and society.

Enslaved people chose objects for charms and talismans based on color or shape, or because of the kind of material they were made from. Sometimes, to enhance an object's symbolic meaning, they broke it on purpose, to let the spirits escape; or they closed it to contain them. (*To see other symbolic enslaved African American artifacts found in Kentucky, click on [Antebellum Period in Historic Archaeology: Beneath Kentucky's Fields and Streets.](#)*)

They put charms in their shoes or wore them under their clothing for personal protection. Gertrude Vogler, a woman formerly enslaved in Wayne County, Kentucky, described this practice: “*Every one of my children wears a silver dime on a string around their leg, to keep off the witches spell.*” To protect buildings, they buried charms or talismans in pits or placed them at meaningful interior locations, such as under the floor in a doorway. Sometimes, they buried multiple symbolic items in the shape of a cross or according to the cardinal directions – a **cosmogram** (see sidebar on page 17).

Kentucky's enslaved people also believed luck could be manipulated. A medicine man or woman within the enslaved community could be a healer in a medical sense, dispensing natural remedies for physical problems. But their practice also could involve **conjuring** (promoting or aiding in good luck). Making medicine meant packaging a variety of “spirit-embodying materials” for the patient. Healers most commonly used cemetery earth, white clay, stones, and other items. Containers included leaves, shells, bags, wooden images, cloth bundles, and ceramic vessels.

In his memoirs, Henry Bibb, who was enslaved at a plantation in Oldham County, Kentucky, described how he asked for help from a conjurer. Bibb was

Ancestor Shrine

Shrines honoring ancestor spirits were part of central and west African religious practices. Because of a shared religious heritage, enslaved people of African descent assembled symbolic objects as shrines to honor the spirits of *their* ancestors, too.

At several plantations across the South, archaeologists have discovered caches of artifacts covered by or contained within a ceramic vessel. When considered separately, alone, and unburied, the objects and vessels appear ordinary and meaningless. But vessel placement shows that these items could not have been casually thrown away. They occur together, and underground, on purpose. This suggests they are a collection of potentially symbolic objects – an ancestor shrine.

Archaeologists discovered what they interpreted as an ancestor shrine at Mason Barkley's plantation. In a small pit in the detached kitchen, they found an odd assortment of objects covered by an old, broken porcelain saucer.

The saucer fragment, snail shell, and shell button are white, a sacred color symbolizing purity and the Supreme Being. The freshwater snail shell, likely a substitute for a marine shell, represents water. Water separates the worlds. It is where the dead live temporarily as they wait to be reborn. Like a cosmogram, the circle of the plate references the life cycle. Iron and brass are common metals found in African ancestor shrines.

Hidden from view, the shrine gave the enslaved people on Barkley's plantation a private space where they could honor the spirits of their ancestors. It also provided protection from evil and bad luck to the kitchen building and to those who lived and worked there.



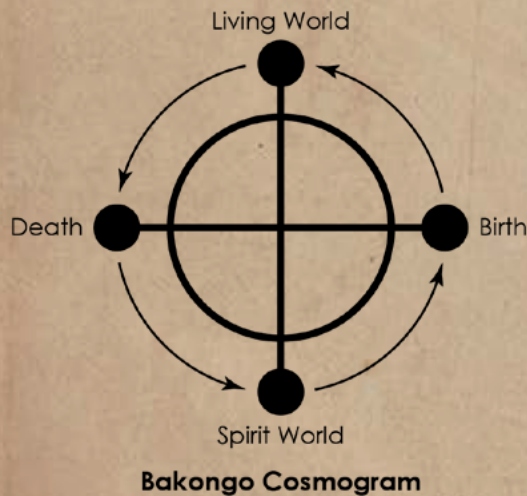
Above Objects that make up the Barkley Plantation ancestor shrine (top), and a view of the objects beneath the saucer (bottom). Shrine objects consist of a large, worn, saucer fragment of Chinese porcelain, and (clockwise from the top): three iron machine-cut nails, three fragments of a tin can, a brass straight pin, an iron needle, a shell button and a bone button, and (in the center) the shell of a complete freshwater snail common to large rivers in Kentucky. Although unmodified, the shell does show signs of wear (or *patina*) on its outside surface.

The BaKongo Cosmogram

People the world over may express their ideas about the origin of the universe as a flat geometric figure, a religious symbol known as a **cosmogram**. The BaKongo cosmogram, a core symbol of BaKongo culture, is expressed as crossed lines within a circle (see below).

The circle illustrates the continuity of the universe, the life cycle – birth, death, and rebirth – the spirit’s journey, and the evolution of the soul. The four arms of the cross represent the cardinal directions – the realm of the living to the north and the east/west line representing a watery barrier separating this world from the land of the dead and spirits beneath – and the four movements of the sun. The cross and circle can also symbolize male and female powers, and even the powers of the sun and moon.

Color symbolism appears in some cosmograms. White is associated with the dead and ancestors. Blue represents the sky and the living. Water, an important element, is often symbolized by reflective surfaces, such as mirrors, or by shells.



seeking better treatment from his master and he also wanted to win a woman’s love. George Conrad, who had been enslaved in Harrison County, Kentucky, noted, however, that while blacks could “*conjure each other,*” a conjurer’s work had little effect on “*whitefolks.*”

On several Kentucky plantation sites, archaeologists have uncovered evidence of the use of personal charms and talismans, and perhaps, evidence of beliefs rooted in the BaKongo culture. The types of objects, and their placement and arrangement in relation to other objects, provide the clues. At Barkley’s plantation, archaeologists found symbolic items in and around the kitchen and slave house. In particular, they discovered a collection of unrelated objects buried in the detached kitchen. They interpreted it as an ancestor shrine (see sidebar on page 16).

The Legacy of Slavery

Archaeological research at the Barkley Plantation Site revealed that Mason Barkley’s plantation was typical for its time: in size, in layout, and in the types of crops grown there. This research also showed that it was typical with respect to how Barkley housed and fed the people he enslaved.

Although Mason Barkley controlled nearly every aspect of their lives, the

archaeological investigations illustrate that the culture of these enslaved individuals was distinctly their own. They were connected to a community of enslaved people beyond Barkley’s plantation. Resilient and adaptive, they created their own identity. Wearing charms, scratching cosmograms into coins, making ancestor shrines – they were members of a community. These symbols, and the religious beliefs they mirrored, helped the enslaved black people living on Barkley’s plantation cope with the brutality of slavery.

To slaveholders, enslaved people were property. They lacked humanity.

The enslaved people living at Barkley’s plantation and at other plantations across Kentucky refused to accept this definition of themselves. They created a vital society within a harsh, cruel labor system. Much of today’s rich African American culture is rooted in the culture their enslaved ancestors created.

To Learn More About the History of Slavery in Kentucky

Read Henry Bibb (1849), *Narrative in the Life of Henry Bibb, An American Slave, Written by Himself*, published by the author, New York (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/bibb/bibb.html>).

Lewis Garrard Clarke (1845), *Narrative of the Sufferings of Lewis Clarke, During a Captivity of More Than Twenty-Five Years, Among the Algerines of Kentucky, One of the So Called Christian States of America, Dictated by Himself*, David H. Ela, Printer, Boston, MA. Electronic Edition (1999), Academic Affairs Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill (<http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/clarke/menu.html>).

J. Winston Coleman (1940), *Slavery Times in Kentucky*, published by the University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.

Federal Writers Project, Works Progress Administration (2006), *Kentucky Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery in Kentucky from Interviews with Former Slaves (1936-1938)*, published by the Library of Congress, Applewood Books, Bedford, MA. (<https://www.loc.gov/collections/slave-narratives-from-the-federal-writers-project-1936-to-1938>).

J. Blaine Hudson (2002), *Fugitive Slaves and the Underground Railroad in the Kentucky Borderland*, published by McFarland & Company, Jefferson, NC.

Marion B. Lucas (1992), *A History of Blacks in Kentucky, Vol. 1 From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891*, published by the Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort.

John M. Vlach (1993), *Back of the Big House: The Architecture of Plantation Slavery*, published by the University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill.

Colson Whitehead (2016), *The Underground Railroad*, published by Doubleday, New York.

Norman R. Yetman (2002), *When I Was a Slave*, published by Dover Publications, Mineola, NY.

To Learn More About Kentucky Archaeology

Read R. Barry Lewis (1996), *Kentucky Archaeology*, published by the University Press of Kentucky, Lexington.

Patti Linn and M. Jay Stottman (2003), *Bringing the Past into the Future: The Reconstruction of the Detached Kitchen at Riverside*, Educational Series Number 6, published by the Kentucky Archaeological Survey, Lexington.

Watch the *Kentucky Archaeology Video Series*, a list of which can be found here: (www.heritage.ky.gov/kas/pubsvids/archseries.htm).

Visit the Kentucky Archaeological Survey's web page (www.heritage.ky.gov/kas/kyarchynew).



Above An enslaved person is a complex human being – much more than a mere slave, or object, or property. “Enslaved” also refers to a process. Through circumstances of time and place, race, or gender, or due to socioeconomic standing, one person can *enslave* – and thereby gain power over – another.

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