

Buttons, Beads, and Buckles: Contextualizing Adornment Within the Bounds of Slavery

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During the 1770s, scores of men and women fled from bondage throughout the mid-Atlantic and the South in acts of rebellion which slaveowners recorded in newspaper advertisements calling for their return. Three such individuals from Virginia, Charles, Aminta and Benjamin Harwood, demonstrated the racial and ethnic diversity characteristic of slaves at this time. Charles was described by his owner as a "new Negro"; Aminta had "much the look of an Indian," being the daughter of a slave woman "brought from the Spanish Main to Rhode Island"; and Benjamin Harwood, "the son of a white man," possessed a variety of useful agricultural skills (Windley 1983a:310, 131-132, 274-275).¹ In the language of modern America, all were part of "the African-American community" of the late eighteenth century, a community that historical archaeologists have sought to understand through an examination of its physical remains.

Over the past three decades, anthropologists and sociologists have struggled to define and operationalize the concept of ethnicity. Although definitions vary, most include the following characteristics: ethnic groups are self-identifying, they maintain a myth of a common ancestry and a common past, they share elements of culture (which usually include language, dress, religion), they maintain a link with a homeland, and they perceive themselves as a collective "us" (Hutchinson and Smith 1996:7; Tonkin et al. 1996:23; Nash 1996:25-26; Eriksen 1996:29; see also Mouer 1993:110-111). The notion that a monolithic African-American ethnic community had taken shape by the eighteenth century

tury, and that it left traces discernible to modern researchers, has been an unquestioned assumption among historical archaeologists for too long.

Archaeologists study the material residues of cultural choices. Isolating those choices based on ethnicity from others based on class, gender, occupational status or simply the availability of certain goods in the marketplace is a daunting task for those who study modern cultures. The problem is made even more complex when ethnicity is considered in relation to past people subjected to institutionalized slavery. Historians and archaeologists have only a poor understanding of the extent to which enslaved Africans maintained contact with each other in the New World.² Clearly, people representing a variety of African ethnicities as well as those shaped by Native American and northern European cultures lived side by side. Did Charles, Aminta and Benjamin Harwood, and the thousands of contemporary men and women living in a state of legalized bondage, share a sense of "us"?

This paper is based on the premise that in eighteenth-century Virginia, a structured set of choices that scholars today define as ethnic simply did not exist. Divisions between Africans and African Americans, between blacks, mulattos and mustees, and between urban and rural slaves negated a sense of shared identity. Artifacts, so long used by archaeologists to argue for evidence of ethnicity within slave quarter sites, are here employed to suggest that alternate factors shaped the material world of Virginia's eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century enslaved population. One such category of ob-

jects, those associated with clothing, jewelry and hairstyle, form the units for analysis in this study.

Since the 1980s, the search for material evidence of ethnic behavior has been an important component of plantation-based archaeology in the American South (Singleton 1991:157-158; Samford 1996:100-103). Central to this discussion of ethnicity is the identification of individual objects, including blue beads, pierced coins, inscribed spoon bowls, and "lithic objects" as "Africanisms," or more recently, as reflective of an African-American world view (Adams 1987:14; Klingelhofer 1987; Samford 1996:101-102, this volume; Stine et al. 1996). The tendency to focus on specific artifacts as markers of static ethnic categories or of an inclusive "African American-ness," rather than as tools people used in the formation, maintenance and reinvention of ethnicity, has limited our understanding of the cultures of enslaved people (Singleton and Bograd 1995:24-29). Moreover, the focus on ethnicity itself as the principal explanatory device for interpreting the detritus of quarters, shops and other spaces inhabited by slaves risks diminishing the impact of slavery itself on individual choice and on the creation and maintenance of group identities.

More useful than looking for universals in "African" or "African-American" patterns of behavior is an approach which first seeks to elucidate the past with particularistic, site-specific, contextual data. Such an approach enables archaeologists to trace the ways in which enslaved individuals from diverse backgrounds began to form materially recognizable subcultures grounded in regional economics, community size and demographics, access to market and common experiences that eventually resulted in a shared African-American ethnic identity.

I am not suggesting that archaeologists studying enslaved people should ignore their

African heritages, nor that cultural practices learned in the Old World were abandoned wholesale in the New. Further, I am not denying the existence of broadly shared cultural values that resulted in what Mechal Sobel has described as "world view" (Mintz and Price 1976; Sobel 1987:15-20). However, world views are expressed through multiple media, each the result of an ethnic group employing objects that carry specific meanings to its members. Given the diversity of vehicles through which shared beliefs may be expressed, any concept of "African-ness" is too broad to usefully explain the meaning of individual artifacts such as buttons or beads in a given place or time. While the search for expressions of ethnicity should play a part in plantation archaeology, it should be undertaken with the understanding that "ethnic markers" may vary from household to household and from decade to decade, as American-born descendants succeeded enslaved men and women with diverse African lifeways.

Archaeology at Poplar Forest

From 1993 to 1996, archaeologists excavated the remains of a slave quarter at Poplar Forest, Thomas Jefferson's Bedford County tobacco and wheat plantation. Features, associated artifacts, and soil chemistry revealed the presence of three log cabins (designated structures I, II and III), a fenced workyard and extensive middens that characterized the site from circa 1790 to 1812 (Fischer 1996; Heath 1999; Moncure and Heath 1997) (Figure 1). Architectural and artifactual evidence suggests that members of four households shared the site, while documents provide general clues to their identities. Some came to Poplar Forest from Monticello and were at least second or third generation Virginians. Others like Guinea Will may have been African born, or may instead have come to

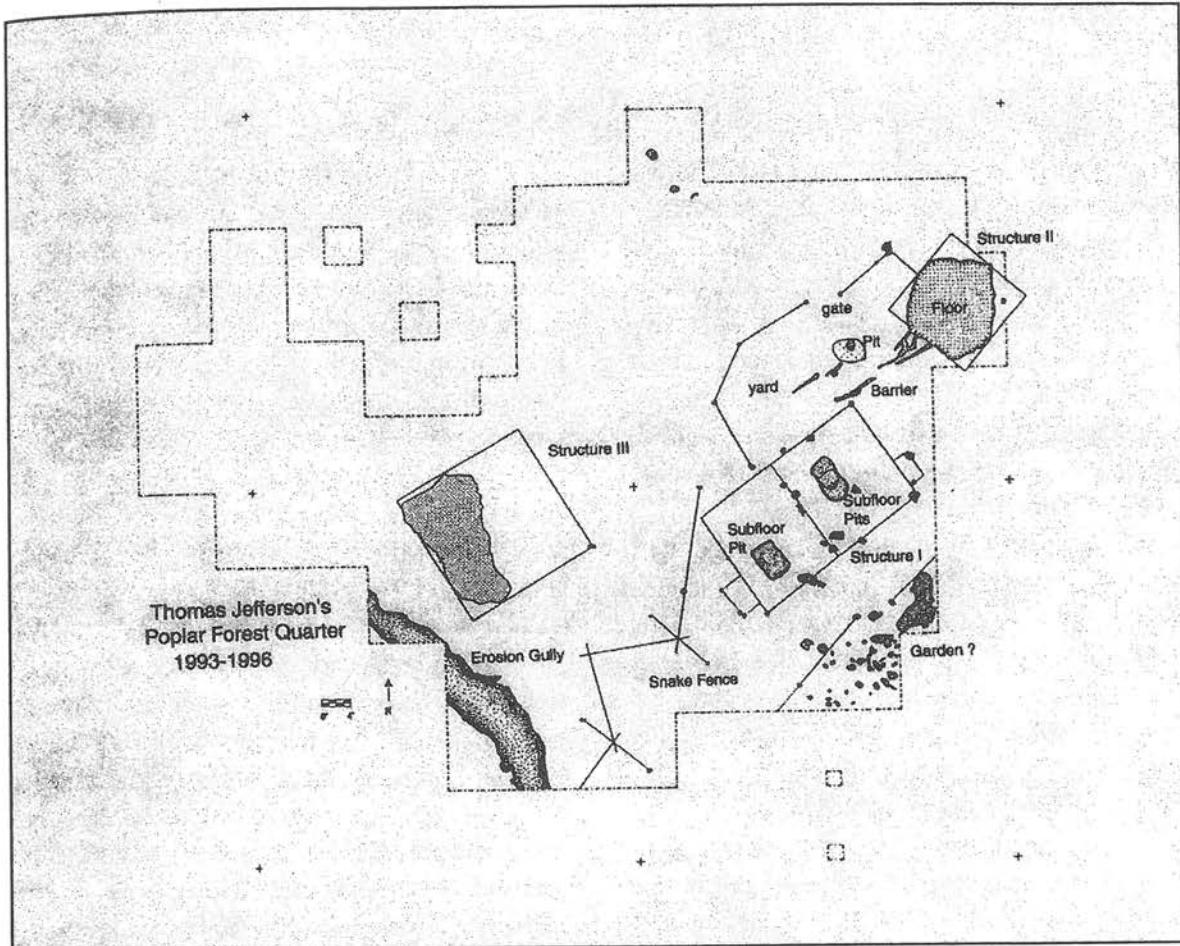


Figure 1. Poplar Forest excavations. Courtesy Thomas Jefferson's Poplar Forest.

Bedford from John Wayles' Guinea plantation in Cumberland and Amelia counties (Heath 1999).³

Prior to the completion of his octagonal house on the property in 1810, Thomas Jefferson was an infrequent visitor to his Bedford County plantation (Chambers 1993: 1-73). Thus, unlike the enslaved families at Monticello, residents of Poplar Forest had few opportunities to procure goods directly from the Jefferson household. Within the plantation provisioning system, overseers allotted to individual slaves and to families pork, preserved fish, corn, wheat flour and salt, as well as linen and woolens for clothing, bedding and blankets.⁴ On at least one occasion, Jefferson instructed that some of the

milk cows—"enough for the overseer & negroes"—be kept at the Bear Creek portion of the Poplar Forest tract (Betts 1944:467). Women marrying within the plantation received a pot and a bed as a reward (Betts 1944:539-40). Beyond these items, no records survive suggesting that other objects were systematically purchased by Jefferson for the slaves' use. With few exceptions, enslaved men and women living at Jefferson's Monticello plantation received similar allotments (Stanton 1996:38; Gruber 1990:58-62). As a result of this limited provisioning, most objects associated with the Poplar Forest quarter are potentially rich sources of information on the formation of individual and group identities within a system that allowed

slaves to participate in a variety of independent economic activities and to exercise some degree of consumer choice (Heath 1997).

Among the thousands of artifacts recovered during excavations at the site, archaeologists found over one hundred objects relating to personal adornment. Studies of consumption throughout the mid-Atlantic indicate that items relating to adornment, including fabric, ribbons and clothing accessories, were among the most common commodities purchased by both free and enslaved people during the eighteenth century (Martin 1993:302-309; Heath 1997, 1998). This research suggests that a closer examination of dress should prove fruitful in examining cultural values associated with personal identity and social display, attitudes towards bondage, and ultimately, the beginnings of the formation of an African-American ethnicity. While it is recognized that free Africans and African-Americans in Virginia undoubtedly used clothing, jewelry and hairstyle to convey cultural messages within and beyond their communities, this paper will focus exclusively on dress and adornment practices within enslaved communities.

The Multiple Roles of Adornment

Objects related to personal adornment objects played multiple roles in the past. Men and women used them to define themselves within the confines of the quarter, exhibiting individual preferences by the combinations of buttons that fastened their coats or the arrangements of beads strung around their necks, wrists or waists. Beyond reflecting personal taste, adornment practices functioned as meaningful social markers within the larger enslaved community beyond plantation boundaries, perhaps identifying those seeking spouses, those with specialized oc-

cupations, or those with memories of Africa. Finally, adornment contributed to defining people as slaves to the broader population of free central Virginians.

Although the practice of adornment is universal, its meaning is closely tied to the cultural contexts in which it is carried out. Adornment can take many forms: permanent body modifications such as scarification, tooth filing, body piercing, tattooing, and cranial deformation; or temporary transformations achieved through dress, the manipulation of hair, the application of cosmetics and the wearing of jewelry. Within the context of adornment, the use and meaning of objects is often dynamic and multifaceted (Cordwell and Schwartz 1979; Karklins 1992).

Africans sold into slavery came from societies in which adornment established membership in specific lineages or in cult groups, indicated political power or subordination, expressed personal wealth, ensured health or success in one's occupation, and marked rites of passage. Without the societies and cultures that had sustained them, few specific historic adornment practices appear to have survived transplantation to the New World. While slave masters noted the presence of "country marks," filed teeth and pierced noses among newly imported, or "salt water" Negroes, scarification, dental modifications and body piercing (with the exception of ears) appear not to have survived even a generation (Handler 1994:114-118; Mullin 1992:28). However, new practices surely emerged within slave communities as succeeding generations of African Americans forged social identities in their new surroundings. The questions addressed in this paper arise from this premise, made tangible through the consideration of adornment items that archaeologists recovered from the Poplar Forest quarter site.

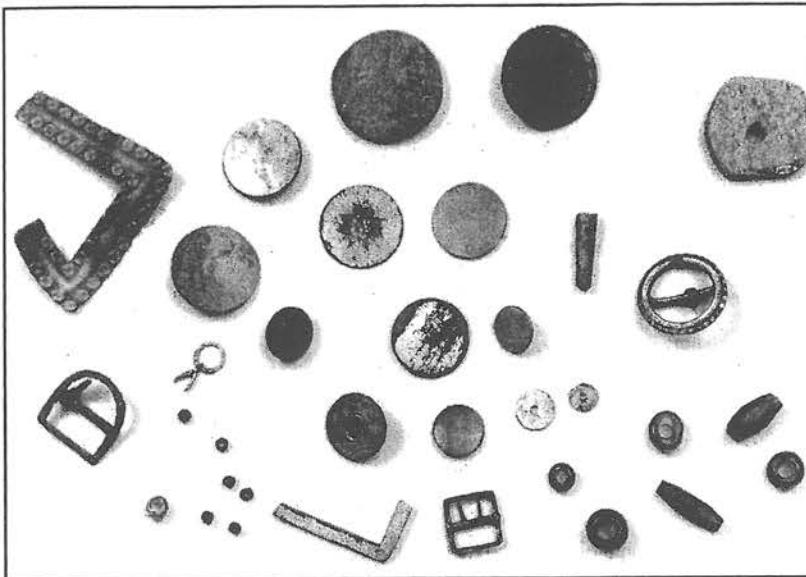


Figure 2. Adornment artifacts from the Poplar Forest quarter. Photo by Les Shofer.

Adornment at Poplar Forest

Archaeologists recovered 122 buttons, two shoe buckles, three small buckles used as knee, stock or hat fasteners, a buckle used to fasten underclothing or ribbons, an aiglet, 35 glass beads, a pierced stone disc, and a tiny fragment of gilt chain, perhaps part of a necklace, from features within the cabins and plowzone (Figure 2). Moreover, the recovery of a steel-edged razor has raised the issue of adornment through hairstyle.

The discovery of this modest assemblage of objects raises broad questions about the extent to which slaves were able to exert personal choice in their appearance, and if such choice were possible, the means by which individuals acquired small luxuries. Further, they encourage us to define the multiple roles of adornment within slave communities, the extent to which individuals blended elements of African ethnic identities through their adornment choices, and ultimately, the ways in which groups established codes of adornment through clothing, hairstyle and jewelry.

These questions arose out of an archaeological study in which specific objects can be

tied to a known time, place, and group of people. It seems clear, however, that these questions cannot be answered by archaeology. The adornment artifacts recovered at Poplar Forest suffer from all of the pitfalls of archaeological data in general. Organic objects such as those made of wood, textiles, leather and bone often do not survive. People treasured their jewelry, and particularly valuable pieces were carefully curated. Those items durable and common enough to be recovered are often found in contexts that relate to patterns of discard rather than use, or to post-depositional disturbances to sites such as plowing. Burials provide the most consistent opportunity to understand adornment practices and attendant objects in contexts that are specific to individuals (Handler and Lange 1978:129-131; Handler 1994:114; LaRoche 1994:6-11). However, given the ritual separation of the dead from the living, it is unclear how accurately the use of some items in burials reflects their meaning during life (Jamieson 1995:49; Stine et al. 1996:62-63).

To understand the Poplar Forest archaeological material, it is necessary to place it in its historical context. One useful source is a

study of slave clothing in eighteenth-century Virginia undertaken by historian Linda Baumgarten. Using documentary evidence from plantation records, personal correspondence, store account books and runaway advertisements, Baumgarten (1988) discusses the various types of slave clothing, how clothing was acquired, and the social meaning it conveyed within the larger community.

During the eighteenth century, wealthy women followed the fashions of England by wearing dresses with long, full skirts over elaborately ornamented petticoats. They wore bone-lined stays as undergarments, providing support and promoting good posture. Poorer women's clothing was simpler and used less and coarser fabrics. It consisted of a short, loose gown called a shortgown or a more fitted waistcoat or jacket, worn over a petticoat shortened to the ankles to facilitate movement (Baumgarten 1988:30, 45). Whether rich or poor, women fastened their clothing with hooks and eyes, laces, or pins (Hinks 1988:5-6).

The well-dressed man typically wore a three-piece suit consisting of a coat, waistcoat, and knee breeches, a shirt and stock, shoes, stockings, a wig, and a hat. Working men, including slave artisans, often substituted a jacket for a coat, trousers for breeches, and used less expensive materials (Baumgarten 1988:29, 48). Buttons of varying sizes fastened men's clothing, while buckles were used to secure stocks, knee straps and hat bands. Both men and women used buckles on their shoes, although working men and women, especially in the fourth quarter of the eighteenth century, fastened their shoes with strings as well (Hinks 1988:6-10).

Field slaves had their own characteristic clothing style, consisting of osnaburg shirts, cotton jackets and breeches, rough hose and locally made shoes for men, and waistcoats and petticoats for women. Slaveowners of-

ten ordered fabrics for field hand clothing in bulk, and typically issued new outfits twice yearly; a suit for spring and one for winter. Cloth often was of poor quality, and clothing generally was ill fitting when new, and stained, torn, or patched before it was replaced (Baumgarten 1988:40, 43-45, 48). Documents suggest that only a few favored domestic servants received hand-me-down clothing from their master's family; for most, clothing was specially made. Some slaves purchased clothing secondhand (Heath 1998:11). Most slaves had little choice in the style or fabric of their work clothes, but these two attributes were important indicators of occupation and status to outside observers (Baumgarten 1988:39-40, 58, 60-61).

While Baumgarten's discussion focused on fabrics and styles of slave clothing, this study considers the non-perishable remains of dress from the Poplar Forest quarter. Individuals may not have been able to choose most of their clothing, yet in a society where nearly everyone's day-to-day clothing was cut from the same cloth, archaeological evidence suggests that people expressed social nuances by purchasing fancy buttons, wearing ribbons or acquiring fashionable buckles.

Runaway Advertisements

To contextualize the archaeological data, an adornment database was created using published collections of runaway slave advertisements dating from 1730 to 1826.⁵ The database includes all references to buttons, buckles, jewelry, hairstyle, and general statements characterizing the attitudes of specific runaways toward dress.

These advertisements display several types of biases, some of which are specifically problematic for this study. First, slaveowners wrote the advertisements based on their recollections of slaves' appearances.

While in the northeast these recollections are surprisingly detailed, advertisements written by owners living further south, who often had little day-to-day contact with their slaves, are far less complete. In some instances it is difficult to know whether the frequency of adornment items recorded in the advertisements is a realistic reflection of current practices, or if owners failed to describe fairly common items because they were unaware of the details of slave dress. The results of the study must therefore remain impressionistic.

Second, since young men constituted the majority of runaways in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, adornment information is heavily biased towards that segment of slave society. If, as in many African societies, adornment practices in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century America varied significantly by age group and by gender, the advertisements provide little opportunity for observing these variations.

Finally, runaways tended to be skilled artisans or house servants whose occupations afforded them some mobility. These slaves, mostly men, met with more opportunities for flight, and possessed the skills to support themselves in freedom. It is also likely that they had greater familiarity with European styles than did field slaves living on large plantations, and their adornment choices reflect their special circumstances.

In spite of these biases, runaway advertisements provide the most comprehensive and detailed information on slave clothing and adornment available in the documentary record. Like archaeological data, they preserve information that is temporally and spatially specific. The advertisements provide a context for archaeologically recovered items, portraying individual objects as part of an assemblage that together helped to define an individual's social identity.

Clothing

For eighteenth-century slaves, clothing was valuable both symbolically and materially. Through dress, enslaved men and women conveyed their own sense of self worth. "Lunnon ... is very fond of dress, very foppish, and assumes an air of importance among other Negroes," reported a North Carolina slaveowner in 1821 (Parker 1994:686). Fanny was described by her Virginian master as "remarkable for her neatness in dress" while Tinah, from South Carolina, "generally dresses remarkably well" (Windley 1983a:381-382; Windley 1983c:408). A South Carolina slaveowner characterized Betsy as "a thick clumsy made Negro," yet she obviously saw herself very differently, being "very fond of dressing well" (Windley 1983c:571-572).

Slaves' clothing choices helped them to distinguish day-to-day existence from special events. In 1780, Isabella ran away from her South Carolina plantation dressed in "mourning cloaths for the death of her mother" (Windley 1983c:571-572). Jack fled a Virginia plantation wearing "such clothes as labouring Negroes are generally accustomed to wear, though ... he occasionally dressed gay," while the enslaved woman Jenny was described by a South Carolina slaveowner as "dressing gay at times" (Windley 1983b:408-409; Windley 1983c: 590).

Within the confines of slavery, clothing took on additional importance as a form of portable wealth and a fluid expression of social status. While many eighteenth-century slaves had few outfits, some accumulated substantial wardrobes, a practice that increased as the century drew to a close.⁶ Clothing, either owned or stolen, could be bartered for money before flight, used as a means of disguise, or sold on the run.⁷ Slaveowners recognized that by altering their appearances, runaways could pass as free men and

women. Peter's owner reported from Virginia that "his holiday clothes were taken from him when he first attempted to get off . . .," yet this attempt to control his mobility by governing his wardrobe ultimately failed (Windley 1983a:289-290).

Many of the social messages expressed by slaves through their clothing have vanished with the fabrics themselves. Some symbolic systems, expressed through color or form, may well represent choices based on specific ethnic preferences retained by individual Africans. Others may hint at the beginnings of an African-American aesthetic. The runaway advertisements preserve a few glimpses of what may have been much more commonly practiced, and suggest both subtle and bold modifications in dress.

Altering the color of white "Negro cloth" was one possibility available to slaves; adding fabric strips or shapes was another. In 1783, Anthony ran away from a Virginia plantation wearing "his usual outside clothing . . . of Virginia cloth . . . sometimes dyed with walnut, maple and other barks" (Windley 1983b:296). In 1770, Jamey "of the Angola country" was reported to have been wearing a "white Negro cloth jacket and breeches, with some blue between every seam, and particularly on the fore part of the jacket, a slip of blue in the shape of a serpent" when he ran away in South Carolina (Windley 1983c:436). In that same year, James and Adam of Albemarle County, Virginia, fled their plantations. Both wore coats with "hearts on the hips behind, and on the shoulders, doubled and quilted, with horn buttons." Adam was described as an "outlandish fellow . . . and speaks broken English," while James was "Virginia born" (Windley 1983a:305-306).

Slaves' conception and expression of fashion was often at odds with that of European American culture. While some clothing and adornment choices derived from Afri-

can customs, others may have developed in response to slavery. Combining what European Americans perceived as unlikely elements of dress may have been simply a matter of making do with materials at hand. In their study of runaway advertisements and African-American clothing, however, Shane and Graham White conclude that slaves appropriated and altered such elements of elite white fashion as velvet coats and powdered wigs in a conscious effort to subvert white authority through public ridicule (White and White 1995a:162-163). By the nineteenth century, an African-American aesthetic of contrasting colors, materials and patterns in clothing came to be a recognizable element of slave dress (White and White 1995a:168-173).

Hairstyle

Like clothing, hairstyles among enslaved men and women played multiple roles. Slaveowners described a variety of styles, including beards and whiskers, in the runaway advertisements.⁸ Dressing the hair provided a form of personal expression and served as a means of identifying ethnic affiliations (White and White 1995b:53-54). One owner from Virginia characterized his slave as wearing his hair "like a Madagascar's," while two other men, identified as "dark mulatto" and "mustee," both wore their hair "Indian-like" (Windley 1983a:2; 1983b:325; 1983c:714).

Evidence contained within the runaway advertisements suggests that slaves may have had more control over how they wore their hair than about many other aspects of their outward appearance. Non-western hairstyles, often mixing shaved surfaces with long hair, persisted among enslaved men throughout the eighteenth century (Smith and Wojtowicz 1989:232; Windley 1983b:118, 148, 188). Some men adopted European styles such as the practice of wearing their hair

queued or clubbed. They combined the basic style with variations, however, such as the wearing of braids in the front or sides of the head, or wearing multiple braids in the back (Windley 1983b:410; Parker 1994:248, 542).

Braiding, or plaiting hair in the front, back, or around the head, appear to be most commonly described for slaves living in North Carolina during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (Parker 1994:75, 91, 179, 457). Historians Shane and Graham White have suggested that elaborate hairstyles may have substituted for other ritual body modifications, such as scarification, that accompanied the transition from boyhood to manhood in some West African cultures (White and White 1995b:64). By the antebellum period, hairstyles for enslaved men became much more uniform across the southeast, a phenomenon which may suggest the emergence of a more unified African-American aesthetic (White and White 1995b:65-66).

Slaveowners had less call to describe women's hairstyles. For the most part, their descriptions are simple. Rachel, who was "uncommonly white," wore "long black hair" when she fled from Virginia (Windley 1983a:396-97). Other runaways had "a bushy head of hair," and one "wore her hair tied in a knot on the crown of her head" (Windley 1983a:161, 191, 205-206, 232, 262).

Beyond expressing style, hair became a battleground in a war of wills between owner and slave. Nineteen-year-old Hannah's hair "was lately cut in a very irregular Manner, as a Punishment for Offences" when she ran away from Virginia (Windley 1983a:187). Hair was used alternately to distinguish or to disguise a runaway's identity. Masters often noted that runaway slaves were likely to cut their hair to avoid recognition, and it is possible that some slaves favored long hairstyles for just that reason. When Watt disappeared from George Mason's plantation in

1786, Mason noted that he "has had cross paths lately shaved on his head, to conceal which it is probable he will shave or cut close the rest of his head" (Windley 1983b:163).⁹ Negro Jack's hairstyle, described as "pretty long, and ... remarkably high on the forehead, and very pointed and low on his cheeks" was altered by a Maryland overseer, who "made a slip from the forehead back, and from one ear to the other, which freedom will very plainly appear." This attempt to make him more recognizable, however, would only succeed "should the whole not be cut off" (Windley 1983b:185-186).

While rare and often difficult to interpret, hairdressing artifacts can provide a window into aspects of adornment that would otherwise go unconsidered. Archaeologists have recovered bone combs in slave quarter contexts at Monticello (Sanford 1994:126). At Poplar Forest a small buckle, which a resident of the site may have used to hold ribbons in her hair, and an iron razor, were found associated with Structure II. Whether the razor helped perpetuate the "outlandish" styles of a man with ties to Africa, or served instead to tidy the cheeks of a middle-aged, American-born man, will never be known.

Jewelry

Slaveowners rarely mention jewelry in the runaway advertisements, yet archaeological evidence from the American South and Caribbean makes clear that slaves and free blacks possessed and wore a variety of adornment items in life and death (Handler and Lange 1978:153-154; Singleton 1991: 158, 161-162; Yentsch 1994:191-194; Deagan and MacMahon 1995:35). Owners most commonly referred to pierced ears or earrings, and less commonly to finger rings and necklaces. It is curious that necklaces were so under-reported in these advertisements, since contemporary artists frequently depicted Af-

rican-American women, both enslaved and free, wearing them.

From 1763 to 1817, slaveowners list earrings of gold, silver, iron, brass or white stone in descriptions of runaways. Enslaved women pierced both ears, while men seemed to have pierced one or both. Eleven of the 35 recorded wearers of earrings appear to have been African born, while one man was born in Jamaica. The advertisements suggest that the remainder were American by birth. Two-thirds of those described with pierced ears or earrings were men. Among the white male population, the wearing of earrings was largely confined to men who went to sea and shared the belief that earrings warded off evil spirits (Fales 1995:146). Only one male runaway, "Negro Joseph" from North Carolina, might have been influenced by this nautical folklore, as he was described as "a nail cutter by trade, but has followed the sea for some time past" (Parker 1994: 362).

At least three runaway women, two from Maryland and one from North Carolina, wore finger rings. Eighteen-year-old Beck, "a mulatto wench ... had a brass Ring upon one of her Fingers, but uncertain which," while thirty-year-old Daphne, probably a "new Negro," wore "a pewter ring with a heart on it" when she ran away in 1779 (Windley 1983b:82, 234). A runaway in North Carolina in 1815 named Ruth was described as wearing "a silver ring on her left hand," perhaps as a wedding band (Parker 1994:433).¹⁰

In 1732, William Hugh Grove reported on the arrival of a slave ship and its cargo to a Virginia port. He observed: "The Boyes and Girles, all Stark naked; so Were the greatest part of the Men and Women. Some had beads about their necks, arms and Wasts, and a ragg or Piece of Leather the bigness of a figg Leafe" (Grove in Baumgarten 1988:28). Yet slaveowners were curiously silent on the topic of beads, with advertisements from Maryland alone describing their usage. In

1770, two "salt water" slave women, aged 15 and 22, and a boy of about three years "had beads with them" (Windley 1983b:82-83). Two other women were reported to have been wearing "a string of black beads" and "a string of large garnet beads" around their necks during the 1780s (Windley 1983b:269-270, 397). Finally, Negro Will wore "black string about his neck when dressed" (Windley 1983b:183).

Although not noted by slaveowners, it is possible that some enslaved women tied or wove beads in their hair. Travellers' accounts from the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries describe African women using beads in this way. Richard Ligon observed women at Cape Verde, noting that their hair was braided on the sides of their head, "of purpose to tie small Ribbon; or some small beads, of white Amber, or blew bugle ..." (Griebel 1995:219). More than 150 years later, Mungo Park commented on the differential use of hair ornaments among women of West Africa.

In Bondou the head is encircled with strings of white beads, and a small plate of gold is worn in the middle of the forehead. In Kasson, the ladies decorate their heads ... with white sea shells. In Kaarta and Ludamar, the women raise their hair to a great height by the addition of a pad ... which they decorate with a species of coral (Park in Griebel 1995:220).

Historical archaeologists have recovered beads used to adorn the body from a number of African-American sites. Most were manufactured from raw materials such as coral, semi-precious stones, glass, bone and shell (Handler and Lange 1978:127-129, 144-150, 274-281; Pogue and White 1991:30; Yentsch 1994:190-195; LaRoche 1994; Deagan and McMahon 1995:35, Stine et al. 1996).

Of the 35 glass beads recovered at the Poplar Forest quarter, eight are of a size consistent with stringing (Figure 3). Six are blue,

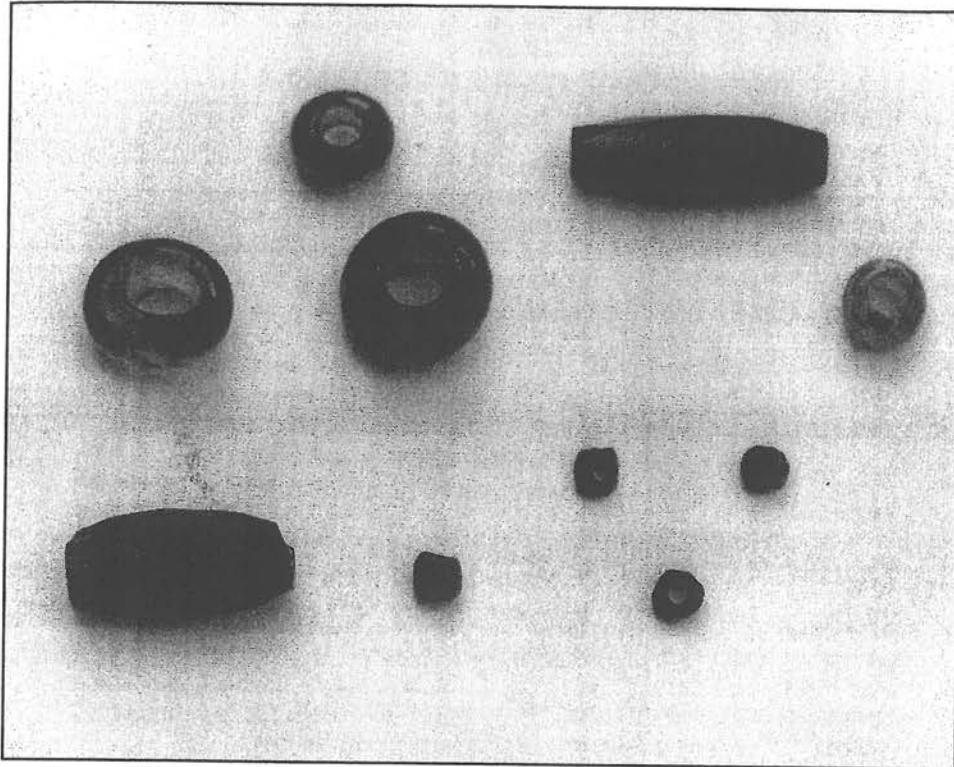


Figure 3. Beads from the Poplar Forest quarter. Photo by Les Shofer.

one is green and the other clear glass. Two are faceted, with the blue example retaining a ghost mark of gilt stars on each of its facets. Twenty seven beads are too tiny to have been strung, and were probably embroidered on clothing or sewn on other objects used by members of the household (Table 1). In addition, archaeologists found a shaped and pierced schist disc in association with a number of beads in the fill of a root cellar, suggesting that it too may have been worn.

Archaeologists recovered 26 of the beads at the site from the fill of a small storage pit or root cellar which sat beneath the floor of a duplex cabin (Structure I). Among these were all of the red beads (2 mm) and all but one of the faceted purple beads (3 mm).

While recovery methods explain some of the difference in bead numbers between various parts of the site—the cellar fill was wet-screened using fine mesh and the soil from plowzone was not—they do not explain them all. Archaeologists did not recover any

small beads from Structure II and only found one small bead associated with Structure III. Soils associated with occupation layers from both buildings were wet-screened. Similarly, an examination of bead distributions in plowzone indicates that all but one of the larger beads are associated with Structure I or its adjacent yard.

These data suggest variations in bead use between households. Given the small sample size, it is impossible to draw any firm conclusions. However, it seems clear that residents used beads in more complex ways than simply to affirm a shared ethnicity.

Buckles and Buttons

Runaway advertisements described a variety of buckles used in slave clothing, including stock, knee, belt, hat and shoe buckles. Slaves favored buckles made of silver, pewter, pinchbeck, steel, iron, tin, brass, and copper. Slaveowners most commonly com-

Table 1.
Beads from the Poplar Forest Quarter

Unit	Count	Kidd & Kidd Type ¹	Length/Diameter	Remarks
1130A/3	1	Wld3	5.5mm/10.3mm	wound donut, large blue
1185A/2	1	(?)	19.3mm/6mm	drawn, large blue faceted, remains of painted stars on facets
1187A/4	1	Wld3	3.9mm/7.9mm	wound donut, large blue
1207B/1	1	(?)	16.4mm/7.3mm	drawn, large aqua green faceted
1251A/1	1	IIIa3	3.2mm/3mm	drawn, opaque red with clear green core
828A/1	1	Wld3	7.9mm/11.3mm	wound donut, large blue
829C/1	2	WIIc13 (?)	1) 3 mm/3.7mm 2) 2.4 mm/3.7mm	wound pentagons, purple or amber red
829C/2	1	WIIc13 (?)	2.9mm/3.6mm	wound pentagon, purple or amber red
829D/1	2	WIIc13(?)	1) 2.8mm/3.7mm 2) 2.4mm/3.6mm	wound pentagons, purple or amber red
829E/1	2	WIIc13(?)	1) 3.1mm/3.3mm 2) 2.2mm/3.9mm	wound pentagons, purple or amber red, one is very corroded
829F	6	IC1(?) or IC3(?)	very fragmentary	drawn square, reddish pink
829F	1	WIIc13(?)	2.5mm/2.7mm	wound pentagon, purple or amber red
829F/1	1	WIIc13(?)	3.5mm/3.4mm	wound pentagon, purple or amber red
829F/2	1	Wld1	5mm/6.5mm	wound donut, amber
829F/2	7	WIIc13(?)	1) 3mm/2.3mm 2) 2.3mm/3.6 mm 3) 3.1mm/3.1mm 4) 2.6mm/3.5mm 5) 2.7mm/3.4mm 6) broken 7) broken	wound pentagons, purple or amber red
829F/2	3	IC1(?) or IC3(?)	1) 1.5mm/2.3mm 2) 1.4mm/1.9mm 3) 1.7mm/1.9mm	drawn square, reddish pink
1301B/1	1	Wld3	5.6mm/10.3mm	wound donut, large blue
1372C/3	1	WIIc3	2.5mm/3.6mm	wound pentagon, purple or amber red
1382A/4	1	Wld3	3.8mm/6.2mm	wound donut, light blue

¹ Typology from Kidd and Kidd 1983.

mented upon shoe buckles, but their descriptions were too few in number to support any meaningful analysis.

The buckles recovered at the Poplar Forest slave quarter support the notion that slaves attained at least a modest degree of luxury in dress (Table 2). Beyond footwear, men had access to accessories such as stocks or fancy hats. By the same token, women apparently fastened ribbons to their dresses or hair.

Buttons are much more common archaeological finds, and were mentioned frequently in the runaway advertisements. The majority date to the period of 1760-1790. In the northeastern and mid-Atlantic states, 73 to 79 percent of the buttons described were made of metal, while for North Carolina and South Carolina, 60 to 65 percent were metal (Table 3). Typically, slaveowners categorized these as either yellow or white, incorporating a variety of metals within each category.

Table 2.
Buckles from the Poplar Forest Quarter

Provenience	Material	Decoration	Function	Number
ER1009	copper alloy	stamped, rectangular	shoe buckle	1
ER1126A/1	pewter	none, rectangular	shoe buckle	1
ER1300V/4	copper alloy	tinned, rectangular	hatband?, stock?	1
ER1300V/4	copper/tin alloy	none, D-shaped	hatband?, stock?	1
ER829F	copper alloy	silver plated, chased, circular	knee buckle	1
ER1207C	copper alloy	none	ribbon / underclothes	1

Table 3.
Button Type by Region/State, 1728-1826

Region/State	Yellow Metal		White Metal		Unspecified Metal		Total Metal		Other N	Other Pct	Total N	Total Pct
	N	Pct	N	Pct	N	Pct	N	Pct				
New England	3	20	5	33	3	20	11	73	4	27	15	100
Pennsylvania	7	39	4	22	3	17	14	78	4	22	18	100
New Jersey	2	25	2	25	2	25	6	75	2	25	8	100
Maryland	23	32	23	32	11	15	57	79	15	21	72	100
Virginia	9	9	38	40	25	26	72	75	24	25	96	100
North Carolina	2	12	5	29	3	10	10	59	7	41	17	100
South Carolina	22	26	22	26	11	13	55	65	30	35	85	100

Beyond color, people used decoration or shape to describe buttons.

Horn buttons were noted on slave clothing throughout the eighteenth century. From 1770 until 1790, a variety of other button types began to appear more frequently. These include buttons of hair or mohair, cloth covered and twist buttons, and buttons made of pearl and tortoise shell, wood and leather. The attributes of surface finish (enameled or glazed) or color defined other types.

The following advertisements provide a glimpse of the diversity of clothing hardware worn by American slaves, and the level of detail that some slaveowners could recall. A South Carolinian white described in 1769 "... a likely young new Negro fellow ... about twenty-five years of age, had on when he went away a white Negro cloth jacket, breeches and cap, his jacket buttons are only

notted cloth of the same, his breeches had no kneebands ..." (Windley 1983c:645). A decade later, a runaway from the same state was described as "... a country born Negro boy named Toby, betwixt 16 and 17 years old ... [wearing] a homespun coatee and breeches twilled, a jacket of plain homespun with metal buttons of different sorts ..." (Windley 1983c 552). Further north in Maryland, "A Negro Man, named Abel" ran away in 1784. He was described as wearing "a new homespun dark grey cloth coating coat, lined with white shalloon, the buttons of which were white metal, nearly as large as a dollar with a hollow in the middle, and an anchor stamped on them ..." (Windley 1983b:312-313).

Button types described in the advertisements for Virginia and South Carolina from the period of 1760 to 1790 were compared to look for regional differences in dress.

Table 4.
Slave Buttons, Virginia, 1761-1790

Date	Yellow Metal		White Metal		Military		Unspecified Metal		Horn		Other		Total	
	N	Pct	N	Pct	N	Pct	N	Pct	N	Pct	N	Pct	N	Pct
1761-1770	4	20	7	35	—	—	7	35	2	10	—	—	20	100
1771-1780	4	10	20	54	—	—	7	20	4	10	2	5	37	100
1781-1790	1	4	9	33	4	15	6	22	1	4	6	22	27	100
TOTAL	9	—	36	—	4	—	20	—	7	—	8	—	84	—

Table 5.
Slave Buttons, South Carolina, 1761-1790

Date	Yellow Metal		White Metal		Military		Unspecified Metal		Horn		Other		Total	
	N	Pct	N	Pct	N	Pct	N	Pct	N	Pct	N	Pct	N	Pct
1761-1770	4	50	2	25	—	—	2	25	—	—	—	—	8	100
1771-1780	13	25	9	18	—	—	9	18	5	10	15	29	51	100
1781-1790	2	15	7	54	—	—	—	—	—	—	4	31	13	100
TOTAL	19	—	18	—	—	—	11	—	5	—	19	—	72	—

Throughout this period, Virginian runaways more commonly wore white metal, while those from South Carolina wore yellow. During the 1770s, enslaved Virginian men were four times more likely to wear white metal buttons on their clothing than those made of brass or gilded brass. For the same period in South Carolina, yellow metal is more common than white, although the difference between the two is modest (see Tables 4 and 5).

The meaning of this regional pattern is unclear. It would be useful to have similar statistics for free men's clothing for comparison before assuming that it is somehow linked with conditions of slavery. Information about cost would also help to better understand the differences observed between the two areas.

With the exception of those mentioned for South Carolina, the majority of buttons (53 to 75 percent) described in the runaway advertisements were sewn on to coats. But-

tons from jackets or waistcoats made up between 25 to 40 percent of the assemblage, while buttons on breeches and hats were rarely mentioned. In South Carolina, slave clothing appears to have consisted of breeches and jackets or breeches and coats, with waistcoats being only rarely mentioned. This regional difference may indeed relate directly to the condition of slavery. Rather than reflecting practices based on ethnicity, these trends may indicate more uniformity in clothing within enslaved communities, with variations perhaps based in part on climatic conditions.

How do the Poplar Forest buttons compare to the documentary profile of button use? Of the 122 buttons recovered, 69 (57 percent) are white metal, 43 (35 percent) are yellow metal, 7 (6 percent) are unidentifiable metal (having lost their original surfaces), and 3 (2 percent) are made of glass or bone. Of the white metal buttons, 35 (50 percent)

are identifiable as silver plated, while of the yellow metal, 15 (35 percent) can be identified as gilt.

Unlike the bead distributions, which vary between structures and their associated yards, buttons types are distributed fairly regularly across the site. Buttons are associated with occupation layers and plowzone surrounding each structure, and no clear patterns of size, color or material could be discerned. The prevalence of silver plated buttons at this site, however, seems unusual.

Excavations carried out between 1995 and 1997 at an adjacent quarter site, called the "North Hill," have yielded a total of 41 buttons to date. This site, occupied from the 1770s through the early 1790s, appears to have housed members of the Poplar Forest slave community in the years immediately preceding the construction and occupation of the quarter that forms the focus of this paper. It is possible, in fact, that the two sites together represent the debris of the same families over a forty year period. At the North

Hill site, white metal buttons outnumber those made of yellow metal (62 percent to 38 percent), yet only a single silver plated button has been recovered. In contrast, 29 percent of the later quarter site buttons are silver plated.

The 1790-1812 site was occupied during a period of transition in button making technology and in style. Plain gilt buttons became fashionable for the general population in the first decade of the nineteenth century, and in the period from 1810 through 1830, they virtually replaced all other styles on men's coats (Hughes and Lester 1993:178). The Poplar Forest assemblages appear to reflect a transition among slaves from the popular white metal buttons of the late eighteenth century to the plain gilt fashions of the 1810s (Figure 4).

An examination of the condition of the recovered buttons helps to test this hypothesis. Seventy-two metal buttons from the later quarter were divided between usable (intact and unbent) and unusable (broken)

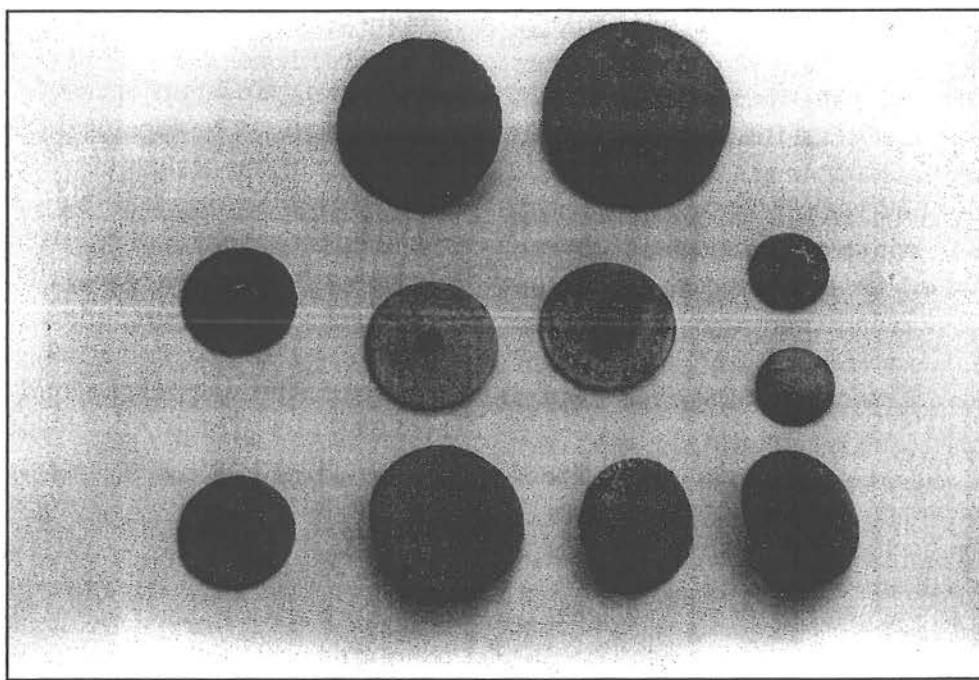


Figure 4. White and yellow plated buttons. The two in center show back stamps of "Best" and "Plated." Photo by Les Shofer.

categories.¹¹ Of 26 yellow metal buttons, nine have unbroken shanks and 17 have shanks that are broken or entirely missing. Of the white metal buttons, 29 are unbroken and 17 are broken. If the assemblage reflected simple button loss, an equal number of broken and unbroken buttons of each metal color in the sample would be expected. The recovery of greater numbers of intact, usable white metal buttons, and broken, unusable buttons of yellow metal, supports the hypothesis that slaves intentionally discarded the white.¹² These data, together with the comparative data made possible through an examination of the North Hill assemblage, suggest that whoever was acquiring and using the buttons was familiar with changes in fashion, and desired to follow them.

Back stamps found on individual buttons contribute additional information to the question of button acquisition and use. While archaeologists recovered 56 marked buttons, only four stamps appeared on more than one button. The first, a simple wreath motif, was found on five gilt buttons of identical size; the second, a wreath with the word "BEST" appearing above, was found on three gilt or plated buttons. The third, impressed with "WALLIS" and "PLATED" flanked by two stars on either side, appeared on two silver plated buttons, while the fourth, bearing "PLATED" with two stars, appeared on two small domed silver plated buttons. The remaining 44 marks are unique. One would expect to find identical marks on buttons adorning ready-made clothing. The quarter site buttons suggest that slaveowners or individual slaves purchased few articles of men's clothing. In fact, the diversity of marks points to a rather piecemeal strategy of button acquisition, perhaps more characteristic of episodic purchase by individuals than of purchase in bulk by the overseer for the entire slave population.

The Poplar Forest Assemblage Revisited

How a razor, beads, buckles and buttons came into the possession of the residents at the 1790-1812 Poplar Forest quarter will never be known. In the absence of records, it cannot be proven that the inhabitants of the quarter selected these adornment items for themselves. However, documentary evidence makes clear that slaves produced cloth and clothing at Poplar Forest at least as early as 1812, and suggests that they raised raw materials for cloth manufacture even earlier (Heath 1996). Slaves tended sheep for wool, and raised flax, hemp and cotton on the property. While shortages brought on by the War of 1812 increased the impetus to be self-sufficient, Jefferson had always favored home production when possible.

Artifacts recovered from the quarter indicate that activities related to sewing and cloth production took place throughout its occupation. Excavators recovered straight pins, two pair of scissors, thimbles and a spindle fragment within the cabins and in the surrounding yards. Indeed, if we assumed that the buttons recovered represent only a small percentage of those actually present during the occupation of the site, they themselves argue for a fairly substantial sewing industry.

Surviving documents indicate that individual slaves sold poultry and vegetables to Jefferson, and earned money within the plantation by performing tasks beyond those seen as customary. Three American one-cent pieces and a Spanish half real found on the site confirm the availability of currency to the site's residents. With money in hand, there were stores nearby in which to spend it.

At least one man, named Will, bartered labor for merchandise at a local store. Significantly, his acquisitions included Kersey,

a coarse woolen cloth (Heath 1997). Perhaps this purchase indicates Will's desire to supplement inadequate rations, or perhaps the cloth he bought was finer or more colorful than that produced on the plantation.

Although a single surviving shop account records the purchase of cloth by this Poplar Forest slave, contemporary accounts from across central Virginia document slaves purchasing pins, needles, knitting needles, buckles, buttons and various types of cloth (Heath 1997). The varieties of each item may have been determined by cost and availability at the local store, as well as by prevailing European fashions.

Documentary evidence from census and provision records from this period also indicates that most enslaved men, women and children at Poplar Forest lived in family groups. Thus it is possible to observe strategies employed by households, if not by individuals, to personalize items of clothing and to construct identity. Beads found at the site show differences between contemporary households in their use of adornment items; buttons indicate similar strategies among households at a given point of time, but clear changes over time. However these similarities and differences are interpreted, it seems clear that a complex series of choices involving cost, market access and availability, awareness of fashion trends, and household make-up contributed to the adornment decisions made by these men and women.

Conclusions

Understanding the interrelationships between cultural systems and the material culture which at once supports and defines them is a complex task. Class, gender, and ethnicity are just a few of the categories that social scientists typically use to explain patterns of behavior. To understand choice for many residents of eighteenth-century Virginia, the

restrictions of slavery must be added to the equation. Finally, myriad contextual factors such as the regional availability of goods dictated by local economics, historic events such as wars or embargoes, and even local manifestations of broader fashion trends all contributed to the choices men and women made in shaping their individual and group identities with appropriate material goods.

Runaway advertisements from across the Southeast preserve glimpses of adornment practices tied to specific ethnic affiliations among "new Negroes." For example, Dibbee, "from the Timini nation," had "his ears bored" and "his teeth filed" (Windley 1983c:451). Slaveowners described some runaways by ethnicities they perceived, identifying these differences by the regions where slaves originated. Thus, they sought the return of "Angola," "Congo," "Guinea," "Kissey," or "Madagascar" negroes (Windley 1983a:2, 34; Windley 1983b:383; Windley 1983c:8, 15, 436, 459, 461, 645, 742). The ethnic expression of others was simply described as "outlandish" (Windley 1983a:143, 179, 202, 305-306, 344-345). By the second generation, however, slaveowners classed their runaway property as "negro," "mulatto" or "mustee." Gone were the obvious adornment items and physical modifications that announced African ethnicities to the world.

In eighteenth-century Virginia, ethnic identities were not strictly codified. Only through a detailed study of adornment choices made with reference to a specific time and place can we begin to approach the social messages these items helped to convey. A closer study of the Poplar Forest assemblage and contemporary runaway advertisements points to the complexity of understanding material culture choices. To varying degrees, clothing, hairstyle and jewelry choices reflect economics, occupations and market access. They were also influenced by

regional styles and by gender. The combination of these factors, alongside beliefs about appropriate dress passed from one generation to the next, resulted in patterns of choices that ultimately came to be seen as African American.

By focusing our research on the complexity of constructing identity rather than the documentation of static ethnic markers, archaeologists can move towards a richer un-

derstanding of the world that Charles, Aminta and Benjamin Harwood helped to create. Comparative materials from contemporary sites throughout the Southeast, as well as from antebellum and postbellum sites inhabited by enslaved people and their descendants, may ultimately lead us towards a clearer understanding of the construction of ethnic identity, and in the roles that objects played in these processes.

Endnotes

¹ Slaveowners used a variety of terms to describe the men and women who fled from slavery. The terms "new Negro" and "salt water Negro" refer to Africans newly arrived in the colonies; owners used the terms "mulatto" and "mustee" to define individuals of African and European ancestry (mulatto), or African and Native American ancestry (mustee).

² An interesting exception to this statement is Colin Palmer's study of marriage records in colonial Mexico City, in which he traces the retention of kin and ethnic bonds in the New World by African-born slaves (Palmer 1995:223-236).

³ Thomas Jefferson lists the division of John Wayles' lands in 1773, noting that 5145 acres of the Guinea plantation lay in Cumberland County and 1221 acres lay in Amelia (Bear and Stanton 1997:329).

⁴ References to Jefferson's provisioning system are scattered through his Farm Book, various memoranda and letters to overseers, and letters to local merchants. On blankets and bedding, see Betts 1987:25, 166-168; also "Slave Schedule," Rosenbach Museum and Library. On unprocessed wool used by slaves, see Betts 1944:540. Jefferson notes his practice of giving a pot and a bed to women who choose spouses within the plantation in a letter to overseer Jeremiah Goodman in Betts 1944:540. Jefferson conducted a lengthy correspondence regarding the acquisition of barrels of salt fish (herring and shad) for Poplar Forest slaves between 1810 and 1822. He ordered fish in May, June or

July. For a sample of correspondence, see Thomas Jefferson to Mr. Darmsdatt, May 27, 1810, MHi; Thomas Jefferson to Mr. Peyton, June 20, 1822, ViU. See also Joel Yancey to Thomas Jefferson, May 31, 1821, MHi. On provisions of pork, see Betts 1987: 161; Betts 1944:467 discusses pork and offal. On salt and wheat flour, see Betts 1944:517-518 and Thomas Jefferson to Jeremiah Goodman, February 3, 1814, ViU. On corn, see Betts 1944:535; Thomas Jefferson to Joel Yancey, July 18, 1815, MHi; Joel Yancey to Thomas Jefferson, February 27, 1829, MHi; and Thomas Jefferson to Archibald Robertson May 25, 1822, MHi. Jefferson also makes indirect reference to corn provisions for slaves at Poplar Forest in a letter to Martha Randolph, August 24, 1819, ViU.

⁵ This database included advertisements collected and published by Smith and Wojtowicz (1989) for the *Pennsylvania Gazette* from 1728-1790, Windley (1983a, b and c) from Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina from the 1730 until 1790, and Parker (1994) from North Carolina from 1790-1826.

⁶ Many slaves seem to have been able to accumulate substantial wardrobes by the early nineteenth century. Although I have not quantified the differences in descriptions, there is a clear increase in the number of slaveowners who made statements similar to that referring to the Virginia runaway Jack: "it is probable he may change his dress, as he has a number of other cloathing" (Meaders 1997: 42).

⁷ Slave clothing also took the place of cash in less dramatic circumstances. Jacob's master complained in a runaway advertisement he placed that, "his hat (if any) I cannot describe, as he lost his own at cards just before he went away ..." (Windley 1983b:144).

⁸ While the wearing of beards or whiskers is not always included in descriptions for enslaved men, those advertisements which do describe facial hair indicate that beards and whiskers were rarely worn by men younger than 25, and most often worn by those over 30. For examples from Virginia see Windley 1983a:15-17, 34, 41, 44, 53, 68, 72, 88, 95, 97-98, 106, 109, 112-113, 118, 157, 183-184, 194, 219, 230, 271-272, 282-283, 324, 337-338, 394-395, also Windley 1983b:296.

⁹ See also Windley 1983c:507; Smith and Wojtowicz 1989:75-76.

¹⁰ That some slave women in early nineteenth century North Carolina had adopted the custom of wearing a wedding band is confirmed by Harriet Jacobs, a slave who escaped to freedom and later wrote her memoirs. Jacobs' grandmother, upon hearing that her unmarried granddaughter was pregnant, "tore from my fingers my mother's wedding ring and her silver thimble. 'Go away!' she exclaimed, 'and never come to my house, again'" (Jacobs 1987: 56).

¹¹ Buttons with bent shanks were not included in these calculations since it was not possible to determine whether their owners had considered them usable.

¹² Using Yates' correction, the association between metal color and condition at the time of discard was found to be statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 5.35$; $df = 1$, $p < .05$).

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