

Using Material Culture to Tell The Stories of Enslaved African Americans

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Within the 1816–1819 account book for Charles Pinckney’s Pinckney Island Plantation in Beaufort County, South Carolina, are records of purchases to support the plantation and a record of labor. Among the objects purchased for the 349 enslaved people at Pinckney Island were spectacles for an enslaved woman named Sarah; several purchases for fabrics including flannel, homespun, and osnaburg for enslaved women Phyllis and Sophia; summer clothes for an enslaved man named Maurice; stockings for an enslaved woman named Nancy; and multiple purchases of so-called negro shoes.¹ Despite the differences between the objects Pinckney purchased for the people that he enslaved, they all have one thing in common. They are all material culture.

Historical archaeologist James Deetz defined material culture as “that sector of our physical environment that we modify through culturally determined behavior.”² Art historian Jules David Prown defined material culture as “the study through artifacts of the beliefs, values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions of a particular community or society at a given time.”³ Across disciplines such as historical archaeology, art history, public history, and museum studies, scholars agree that material culture is both the study of objects and the objects themselves.

Scholars of African American history often turn to material culture as evidence when the documentary or written record falls short. In the case of enslaved African Americans, more often than not, the documentary record does not capture their lived experiences. Some enslavers wrote records that documented parts of the lives of the enslaved people they owned; however, these records are incomplete, because they do not include an account from the perspective of the enslaved person. In other cases, enslavers kept no written records, or those records were lost over time. For these reasons, to better understand the experiences of enslaved African Americans, scholars turn to the study of the objects or material culture they left behind.

By reading documents such as Charles Cotesworth Pinckney’s account book, alongside material culture associated with the experiences of enslaved people and other archival records, we can better understand the lives of enslaved people. For example, Pinckney’s purchase of osnaburg fabric was common practice, as osnaburg was a coarse, unbleached linen fabric once considered appropriate for clothing enslaved people. In fact, South Carolina’s Negro Act of 1735 dictated that clothing for the enslaved be made from specific fabrics, including coarse kerseys, coarse calicoes, checked linen, cotton, and osnaburg. Enslaved men wore osnaburg pants and shirts, while enslaved women wore osnaburg shift dresses.

¹ Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, “Pinckney Island Accounts 1816, 1817, 1818” (South Carolina, 1816), University of South Carolina, South Caroliniana Library.

² James Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten: An Archaeology of Early American Life* (New York: Anchor, 1996), 35.

³ Jules David Prown, “Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method,” *Winterthur Portfolio* 17, no. 1 (1982): 1.

JOSEPH W. PAGE,
 NO. 28, ELLIOTT-STREET,
WILL offer for sale, To-Morrow, 21 bales and packages of *GOODS*, by the bale or piece, viz.—
 Sheetting Cotton, or Hunchums; Jallapore Sannahs, Emerties, White Calicoes, Salam pores and Baftas; Superfine Broad Cloths and Cassimeres, and Sattin Cassimeres of a new fabric—all of the first quality; second quality Broad Cloths and Cassimeres; Bennett's Cords; Superfine Flannels, assorted colours; spotted Swanskins; double and single width Baizes, superfine Coatings; plain Plush Negro Cloths, wide and narrow Checks, trunks of Calicoes; 12 English Watches, 2 Time Pieces, one very elegant.

ON CONSIGNMENT,
 2000 pairs Negro Shoes, 13 boxes of No. 10 Cotton Cards, of as good a quality as can be offered for sale in Charleston; 32 kegs Boston Butter, first quality.
For sale for approved credit or produce.

October 30, 1778. A Negro Fellow who calls himself Bede, of the Gullion country, with his country marks all over his breast and belly; he is 5 feet 5½ inches high, had on a white negro cloth jacket and breeches, and a blue jacket under the white, with a leather apron and an old blanket, says his master's name is Abey Roach, living near one Mr. Quash; he says he run away in planting time.
JOHN R. HUTCHINS, Gaoler.

Top: This newspaper advertisement for merchant Joseph W. Page lists objects for sale, including negro shoes and plain plush negro cloths. The Charleston Daily Courier, October 27, 1806.

Bottom: The enslaved man, Bede, was described as wearing a white negro cloth jacket and breeches with a leather apron. "Brought to Camden Gaol," The South-Carolina and American General Gazette, December 3, 1778.

Archival records, such as newspaper advertisements, show the abundance of goods that enslavers had available to purchase for enslaved people, including osnaburg fabric. Many of these objects, such as clothing and shoes sold by merchants, exemplify that many people profited from the practice of enslavement. Advertisements like the one to the left display the availability of goods produced for enslaved people and the goods marketed for purchase by enslavers. All of these objects became part of the material culture of enslaved life.

Often, enslaved men and women were given clothing connected to their labor, such as leather aprons for blacksmithing work and livery and uniforms for enslaved butlers. The newspaper advertisement to the left, seeking the return of enslaved man Bede, provides a clear example of this by noting that he self-emancipated with a leather apron, a sign that he labored as a blacksmith.

Enslaved women were regularly assigned to the textile trades, while enslaved men were assigned and apprenticed to various trades, including blacksmithing, carpentry, stone masonry, furniture making, shoemaking, and more. Through laboring in these trades, enslaved people acquired the tools necessary to complete their work. These tools included wooden carpentry planes, spinning wheels, needles, and more.

Enslaved carpenter's apprentice Boston King described his labors in a carpentry shop in Charleston, South Carolina, on the eve of the American Revolution. Of his time there, King wrote in his memoirs:

When 16 years old, I was bound apprentice to a trade. After being in the shop about two years, I had the charge of my master's tools, which being very good, were often used by the men, if I happened to be out of the way: When this was the case, or any of them were lost, or misplaced, my master beat me severely, striking me upon my head, or any other part without mercy.⁴

After he self-emancipated or freed himself, King recalled wanting to work but being unable to do so due to a lack of tools. He wrote, "I endeavoured to follow my trade, but for want of tools was obliged to relinquish it."⁵ Here, we see how essential tools were to working in a shop environment and to supporting oneself after self-emancipation.

⁴ Boston King, "Memoirs of the Life of Boston King, A Black Preacher," *The Methodist Magazine*, March 1798, 106–15.

⁵ King, 106–15.

One of the objects that would have been under Boston King's care was a carpenter's tongue plane like the one pictured to the right. A tongue plane is a tool used to cut interlocking wood joints. Cesar Chelor, the maker of the pictured tongue plane, was born enslaved in about 1720 and is the earliest identified African American toolmaker. Upon the death of his enslaver, Chelor was freed. He then used his skills as a toolmaker to begin a successful business making and selling planes to carpenters and joiners.

Like Chelor, some enslaved people used their skills to sell objects, and then used their profits to purchase objects they could sell to others. Others bartered or traded with shopkeepers to acquire goods. In her study of the backcountry of Virginia, material culture scholar Ann Smart Martin recounted the story of Sukey, an enslaved woman who traded four pounds of cotton for a looking glass, or mirror, and a ribbon from merchant John Hook in February 1774. Martin pointed out that enslaved people "could appropriate commodities even as they could be appropriated as commodities themselves."⁶ Sukey's purchase of a looking glass and ribbon also assists in understanding the material culture of enslaved life and how material culture can be used to tell stories of enslaved African Americans.



Tongue Plane Made by Cesar Chelor between 1752 and 1784. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History and Culture (2001.5001.0001).

Through Sukey's story, we learn the history of enslaved people as consumers purchasing their own objects. Martin's in-depth research of Hook's store revealed purchases from 13 enslaved people. Among the items bought or traded for were rum, sweeteners, molasses, mirrors, ribbons, hats, and textiles.⁷ Nearly 30 years later, Hook's store ledger revealed more purchases and trades by enslaved people. For example, an enslaved man named Will was recorded several times exchanging harvested tobacco for a wool hat, household ceramics (including a dozen plates), a knife, cotton cards (tools used for brushing cotton fibers), two more hats, three jars, and a pair of men's shoes.⁸ What we can determine through Will's purchases was that he was farming his own tobacco and using that as payment at Hook's store. Will's purchases of ceramic plates suggest that he sought better dinnerware, perhaps indicative of how he viewed himself—and how he would want his fellow diners to view him. His purchase of jars indicates that he was possibly canning and preserving food. His purchases of hats and a pair of men's shoes, much like the earlier documented purchases by enslaved people at Hook's store 30 years prior, suggest that he wanted better clothes and shoes than those provided by his enslaver. Additionally, Will and the previous enslaved buyers interested in fabrics and ribbons may have sought to adorn their clothing in ways that reflected their identities.

Using the examples provided in this essay, we can determine that the material world of enslaved people was wide and varied. Whether objects were given to enslaved people by enslavers, provided to enslaved people for their labor in trades or handicrafts, or purchased by enslaved people, examples of material culture became practical tools and necessities for living. Today, what remains of most of these objects are descriptions written in a few documents.

⁶ Ann Smart Martin, *Buying into the World of Goods: Early Consumers in Backcountry Virginia* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 173.

⁷ Martin, 180.

⁸ Martin, 181.



Top Left: Stoneware Storage Jar by enslaved potter David Drake, c.1852. Enslaved potters such as David Drake labored to craft stoneware storage jars to store food and other goods. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History and Culture (2011.69).



Top Right: Enslaved people in the early nineteenth century used this large, handmade basket to carry cotton. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History and Culture, Gift of Danny Drain, Walterboro, SC (2012.134.2).

Bottom Left: Printed floral skirt, worn by Lucy Lee Shirley (1855–1929) as an enslaved child in Leesburg, Virginia, c.1860. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History and Culture, Gift of the Black Fashion Museum founded by Lois K. Alexander-Lane (2007.3.5).

Bottom Right: Jesse Burke (1834–1909) was given this violin (c.1850–1860) by his enslaver Elisha Burke. Jesse was a trained violinist who played the violin for his enslaver and in social settings. Collection of the Smithsonian National Museum of American History and Culture, Donated by Shirley Burke, Great-Granddaughter, on Behalf of Jesse Burke's Descendants (2007.3.5).



However, through historical archaeology—which studies the lifeways of past people by combining archaeological work with written accounts and oral histories—some of these objects have been recovered. Many historical archaeologists who study enslaved life have made their findings available digitally. Collections such as the Digital Archaeological Archive of Comparative Slavery (DAACS) provide photographs of the material culture of enslaved people recovered archaeologically from plantation sites across the Atlantic World.⁹ Objects in the database range from colonoware (earthenware pottery used for storing food),¹⁰ to glass beads used in jewelry or to adorn clothing, to tobacco pipes and pipe bowls, to recreational objects such as dice, objects for sewing such as thimbles, needle guards, and buttons, to objects used by enslaved children such as marbles and ceramic dolls.

Through studying the material culture from the lives of enslaved people, we can understand some of the experiences that shaped their lives. Domestic objects such as ceramic plates and colonoware, and work objects such as leather aprons and carpenter’s planes, aid our understanding of the objects and tasks that filled their days. Many of the objects used by enslaved people are also used in the present. In many ways, examples of material culture such as children’s marbles, ceramic dolls, or dice, are all social objects—ones that we can connect to our own lived experiences. We can turn to these to tell stories and to form personal connections with people of the past. Through the process of examining and contextualizing material culture, we can determine the objects’ significance in the lives of enslaved people, explain the roles of enslavers and enslaved people, consider the complexities of enslaved life, and identify the roles and lived realities of individual enslaved people and their contributions to our country.

By showing students examples of material culture, we can encourage them to explore and discuss the daily, lived reality of enslaved people. The objects in this article can act as social objects to which students can relate. Material culture can be used to introduce the study of slavery and the lives of enslaved people. Students can reflect on the lives of enslaved people and think about how many enslaved people used objects similar to ones familiar to us in the present day. Though enslavement in the United States ended over 150 years ago, it is important to remember that the objects enslaved people used—and the reasons they used them—are not so different from the objects we use and the reasons why we use them today.

⁹ To learn more, visit the Digital Archaeology Archive of Comparative Slavery at daacs.org/.

¹⁰ See examples of colonoware at daacs.org/galleries/colonoware/.

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