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**The Sexton's House Has A Ritual Concealment:  
Late Nineteenth-Century Negotiations of Double  
Consciousness at a Black Family Home in Sussex  
County, New Jersey**

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## June 2010 Newsletter

### **The Sexton's House Has a Ritual Concealment: Late Nineteenth-Century Negotiations of Double Consciousness at a Black Family Home in Sussex County, New Jersey**

By Megan E. Springate\*

#### **Introduction**

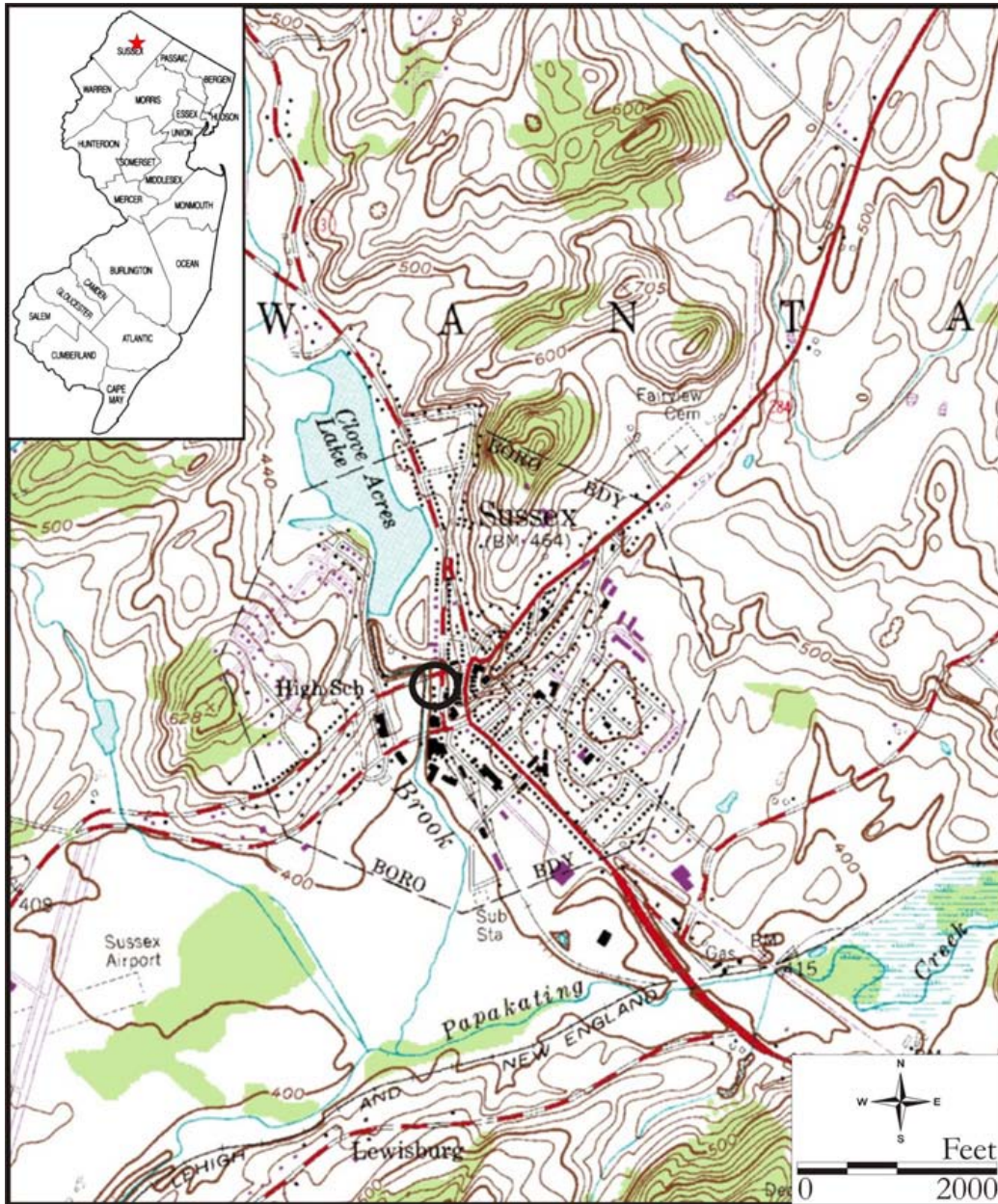
An archaeological data recovery was recently completed by Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. at the Cooper-Mann House site (28-Sx-399), owned from 1862 through 1909 by the Manns, a free black<sup>1</sup> family in Sussex Borough (formerly known as Deckertown), Sussex County, New Jersey (see Figures 1 and 2). These excavations were done in advance of a New Jersey Department of Transportation (NJDOT) project to realign State Route 23 through the area; the Cooper-Mann House site was considered significant for its long association with the Mann family. Excavations were conducted in 1999 around the exterior of the house, and in 2008, in the building's interior prior to demolition. Prior to excavations, the interior walls of the house were removed as part of asbestos remediation; this left the framing of the house open for inspection and investigation (Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. 2001, 2010a).

In addition to several features and deposits associated with the family, a protective ritual concealment was identified. Two other possible concealments were present, though the ritual nature of them is ambiguous. Analysis of the archaeological data, in conjunction with the

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1. Following the lead of other researchers (see, for example, Armstead 2003), the use of the term African-American has generally been avoided in favor of the term "black." The term African-American is inconsistent with how blacks were perceived, related to, and interacted with during this period of history. It also carries with it the presumption of American citizenship. This misrepresents the experience of the Mann family, at least one of whom had been enslaved -- no more than physical property of someone who did enjoy the benefits of citizenship. Even as free blacks, the male members of the Mann family were not considered legal citizens until 1868 with the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment and 1870 with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment, giving black men the right to vote. Mann family women associated with the site never enjoyed full legal citizenship, as women (of any color) remained disenfranchised until 1920, when the Nineteenth Amendment was passed, giving women the right to vote.

documentary record shows that, beginning around the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the Mann family actively engaged the vastly white Deckertown community, exemplified by their becoming members of the local Presbyterian Church. William Mann served as a church official – a sexton – for that congregation. At the same time, the family chose to engage more with the



**Figure 1. U.S.G.S. map showing site location.**

local market economy, and to spend money to display and assert their social status in ways meaningful both to the white community and to other blacks. The material remains left by the



Mann family show their negotiation of what W.E.B. Du Bois termed the “double consciousness” of many blacks living in America. This article documents the ritual concealment, and places it in the context of the Mann family’s experience.

### **Background: The Mann Family**

The Mann family homestead at 37 Mill Street was a frame building with a dry-laid stone foundation. It was built circa 1857 of large timbers cut in the late eighteenth century, and reused from some earlier building, likely a barn or other large post and beam structure. The house never contained a fireplace; instead, an iron stove located near the center of the house provided heat for cooking and to warm the house. The presence of large amounts of coal, coal ash, coal slag, and coal cinder throughout the archaeological assemblage, including the earliest contexts, indicates that this stove burned coal instead of wood. The chimney stack for the stove, likely built of brick, extended up through the second floor and into the attic, exiting near the center of the house.



**Figure 2. Photograph of house exterior, April 14, 2009 9 (Photo by Mike Tomkins).**

In 1862, William and Harrison Mann purchased the house and associated 0.25 acre property from miller Mahlon Cooper for \$350. According to the deed, at least one member of the Mann family – possibly William’s father Benjamin Mann -- was residing in the house prior to the sale. Benjamin was a laborer, and was likely employed at Mahlon Cooper’s grist mill, located next door. Benjamin was born into slavery circa 1800 in Sussex County, New Jersey (*Sussex Register* 1896). In 1804, New Jersey passed the “Act for the Gradual Abolition of Slavery,” which provided that women and men born to enslaved parents in 1804 or afterwards would be free on their twenty-first birthday or twenty-fifth birthday, respectively. Born four years too early, Benjamin was not eligible for emancipation under the act, and may have remained enslaved through the late 1830s. Although slavery was not abolished in New Jersey until later, by 1840, Benjamin Mann was free, and living in a household with nine other free blacks in Wantage Township, New Jersey (McManus 1973; Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. 2010b).

In 1850, at age 50, Benjamin was working as a laborer and living in Wantage Township with his wife, Catherine (born in 1810) and their four children, William (age 8), Mary J. (age 6), Anna (age 3), and Emaline (age 7 months). Of the 51 black people enumerated in the 1855 New Jersey census for Wantage Township, 12 had the surname Mann; their relationships to each other are unclear (Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. 2010b).

In 1860, two years before purchasing the house on Mill Street, neither William nor Harrison Mann appeared to have the financial resources to pay the \$350 for the property. William, age 18, was in nearby Sparta Township working as a farm laborer; Harrison, age 20, was working as a servant in Deckertown. Benjamin was enumerated in Deckertown working as a laborer, with a personal estate of \$10. A comparison of Benjamin’s neighbors with an 1860 map of the area locates him and his family within or adjacent to Elias Cooper’s 1,000 acre farm. Cooper settled in Deckertown in 1812 on the plantation of his uncle, and had owned several enslaved laborers. His son, Mahlon owned the Deckertown grist mill and the house which was to become the Mann family homestead (Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. 2010b). It is, therefore, possible that Benjamin and/or Catherine Mann had been slaves owned by the Cooper family, and that the transfer of the house and land at 37 Mill Street was part of a legacy or other agreement between the families.

In January of 1870, Benjamin Mann died of consumption. His wife, Catherine (also known as Kate or Katie) died in 1874 from palsy; it is not known how severe or extensive her symptoms were, or for how long she suffered from paralysis. Following the death of his parents, William became the owner of the house. At the time of the 1870 census, the Mann family living at 37 Mill Street included 73 year-old day laborer John Mann, possibly Benjamin's brother; Benjamin's widow Kate, who at age 60 was keeping house; Fillis, age 100, possibly the mother of John and Benjamin; William Mann, age 28 and working as a day laborer; William's wife Louisa, also age 28; and William's brother, Wilson, who at age 18 was working next door at the grist mill. In 1874 or 1875, William and Louisa had a daughter, Maggie, who lived until 1892. Prior to her birth, William and Louisa had two other children, neither of whom lived past their second birthday (Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. 2010).

Architectural details and documentary evidence indicate that the house underwent several improvements during William's ownership. These include the construction of a narrow addition along the west side of the house sometime prior to 1885, and the raising of the house from a one-and-one-half story to a full two-story structure sometime between 1880 and 1885 (Richard Grubb & Associates, Inc. 2010).

William owned the house until his death in 1896. He died without a will, and the property passed to his siblings. William had been a member of the nearby Presbyterian Church since 1873 and served as a sexton since 1886; he was praised for his conscientiousness and sobriety, and "no colored person in Deckertown and but few of its white inhabitants have ever won a more general tribute of respect" (*Wantage Recorder* 1896). The *Sussex Register* noted that William had been employed as a mason, and that his father had been a slave (*Sussex Register* 1896).

William's siblings transferred the property to his widow Louisa for \$1, who lived alone in the house working as a wash woman until her death. Louisa died of typhoid in 1907 at the age of 65. She named her brother, Horace Campbell, as her heir; two years later, he sold the property out of the family.

### **Background: The Black Experience in New Jersey from Slavery to Jim Crow**

The experience of the Mann family members who resided at 37 Mill Street encompassed slavery, emancipation, the Civil War, the right to vote (both rescinded and returned),

Reconstruction, and the beginning of the Jim Crow era. It is not possible to understand the lives of the Mann family without understanding the larger context of these events.

Between 1790 and 1807, people meeting age, wealth, and residency requirements could vote in New Jersey, and there is evidence that free men and women (both black and white) exercised this right. While there is no evidence that slaves voted, a 1797 legislation limiting the right to vote to free inhabitants suggests that prior to that date, there was no law specifically preventing the enslaved from casting ballots. In 1807, state legislators limited the vote to free white males; this limitation on suffrage was written into New Jersey's second Constitution in 1844 (Geismar 1982: 9-10). The Fifteenth Amendment, extending suffrage to all citizens of the United States regardless of race, color, or previous condition of servitude, was passed in 1870, giving black men the right to vote. Though the passage of the amendment led to widespread celebration by blacks in New Jersey and elsewhere, white New Jersey residents and legislators generally held little sympathy or support for their rights (Price 1980: 131-132). Women at the time were not considered citizens, and it was not until 1920, with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, that the right to vote was returned to New Jersey's women. While a young Benjamin Mann may have been personally aware of blacks who had the right to vote prior to 1807, he would have been too young to vote at the time. He died just before the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment in 1870, without ever having the legal right to cast a ballot. His son William, however, would have been able to vote during some of the time he lived at 37 Mill Street. Whether any of the Mann men exercised their right to vote is unknown. None of the Mann women who lived at 37 Mill Street lived long enough to vote.

Although it is unknown when they first arrived in New Jersey, black slaves were among the earliest inhabitants of the state. Slavery gained legal sanction in New Jersey in 1664, following England's acquisition of the colony. In 1680, a total of 120 enslaved laborers were reported in the province of East Jersey – approximately three percent of the total population. The black population of New Jersey grew quickly, likely because New Jersey placed fewer restrictions on the slave trade than did neighboring states (New Jersey Historical Commission 1984: 3).

In general, northern slavery consisted of a relatively small number of laborers per owner who most likely lived within their owners' house. By contrast, southern slave owners tended to own a large number of laborers who lived in separate quarters. While some have argued that the

living arrangements in the north fostered a paternalistic and “relatively mild form of servitude and a kind of household kinship” (Piersen 1988: 146), others have argued that shared domestic space was actually an important aspect of slave control (Fitts 1996). Quartering enslaved laborers in the main house or nearby outbuildings gave owners virtually constant access to their slaves’ activities, permitting easy detection of absences or other transgressions, and slaves were quickly punished. This lack of their own space and level of white supervision has been interpreted as limiting slaves’ ability to keep alive many African-derived folk ritual traditions, retain a distinct material culture, or to store other forbidden goods (Fitts 1996: 57-58).

Although many of those enslaved in the northern states shared domestic space with their owners, there are examples of large northern plantations with separate slave quarters, including Beverwyck Manor in Morris County, New Jersey. The earliest owner of the plantation, William Kelly, was said to have about 100 slave huts on his property. Investigations at the Beverwyck Manor Archaeological site (28-Mr-256) included the excavation of slave quarters. Artifacts recovered included iron shackles, caches of pins, needles and beads, ritualistic arrangements of cooking utensils, and cowrie shells (Greenhouse Consultants, Inc. 1996; New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection 2004; Toner 2003). A Sussex County plantation was described in the 1806 will of Frances Price: “My will is that she the said Anna my wife shall enjoy the plantation in as good repair as when she takes possession of it after my discease [sic] if she outlives me . . . .” (Johnson 1995: 17).

Not all black people living in New Jersey were enslaved; in 1687, several free blacks from New York settled in the upper Hackensack Valley. Many of New Jersey’s slaves were freed prior to the end of slavery – some by service in the Revolutionary War, some via wills, and others for unspecified reasons (Geismar 1982: 8). Despite their early presence, however, New Jersey was not an hospitable place. New Jersey citizens figured prominently in the Colonization movement of the nineteenth century that worked to return blacks to Africa. New Jersey lawmakers also refused to ratify the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution which abolished slavery; in fact, slavery remained legal in New Jersey until the state was required to end it by federal order in 1870 (Hodges 1998: 28-29; New Jersey Historical Commission 1984: 7-8).

The black population of Sussex County in 1800 included a total of 514 slaves. This number gradually declined through 1860, when no slaves were enumerated within the county



limits. The number of free blacks in Sussex County peaked at 473 in 1820, and gradually declined to 324 in 1860 (Johnson 1995: 17). Never a high density area for either enslaved or free blacks, it is likely that those who were freed moved out of largely rural Sussex County to urban areas in search of both employment and community. Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, denied access to more lucrative and higher status jobs, many blacks worked in agriculture, domestic service, or as unskilled labor. The common thread among these jobs, which included cook, maid, coachman, laundress, and laborer, was their irregular, often seasonal nature and low pay (Armstead et al. 1988: 5).

While blacks formed discernable residential clusters in the late nineteenth century, predominantly in larger towns and urban areas, strict segregation was not the rule. Class, rather than race, seemed to be the predominant organizing force in residential location; “Like their white, working-class counterparts, blacks first lived in undesirable, devalued areas and/or near their sources of employment” (Armstead et al. 1988: 5). This pattern is observed in the location of the Mann household on the edge of Deckertown, located immediately next door to the grist mill.

Following emancipation and into the Jim Crow years, blacks had to contend with employers and others who, in the not too distant past, had considered them to be a form of property – if not their own, then of someone else (Palmer 2009). Though New Jersey did not pass laws codifying racial segregation, there was intense social segregation throughout the state, enough so that laws mandating desegregation were eventually passed (jimcrowhistory.org 2010). As segregation increasingly defined relationships, blacks founded and relied upon their own community organizations. Churches functioned not just as religious centers, but as community centers and “centers of local black intellectual and social life that connected members with black activity elsewhere in the nation” (Armstead et al. 1988: 6).

No such community organization was present in Deckertown. Without the benefits of these sorts of community organizations and living in a town with an extremely small number of other black people, the Mann family must have felt keenly what was described by W.E.B. Du Bois and others as a double consciousness or “two-ness”; of living in two distinct worlds defined by color. The tensions and struggles of living both within and outside of their group have been conceptualized as a conflict between the historical, agricultural, traditional, spiritual, African, and black world and the modern, industrial, urban, materialist, European, and white world. Du

Bois argued that, in striving for acceptance in the white world, coupled with a heritage of poverty and slavery, many blacks were wasting their money on good clothes, extravagant furnishings, expensive and elaborate entertaining, and “miscellaneous ornaments and gewgaws.” Instead, he argued, blacks should spend their limited incomes to buy homes, educate their children, and accumulate savings. Perhaps not surprisingly, this double consciousness appears not to have been approached in a clear-cut manner; blacks in America instead brokered “diverse, often ambiguous practices, values, and constraints to create and re-create a cultural style and material world, through the power of choice” (de Cunzo 2004: 269-270). Through the late nineteenth and into the early twentieth centuries, Booker T. Washington and other activists encouraged blacks to assert and maintain a sense of dignity, to move away from paternalistic relationships and interactions with whites that limited their aspirations. One means of achieving this was through self-sufficiency, which included self-provisioning, religious faith and practice, and education (Palmer 2009; Price 1980: 132-133).

### **Background: Ritual Objects and Ethnic Identity**

Many archaeological investigations of ethnicity look for specific ethnic markers, such as the presence of conjure items to denote black occupation of a site. The material culture of blacks in America, enslaved and free, was not, however, overly different from that of poor whites and other ethnic groups, despite the racial, legal, and symbolic differences (Fennell 2000: 304; Klingelhofer 1987: 113; Perry and Paynter 1999). In examining these assemblages, archaeologists must be mindful that social status and ethnic identity are often interwoven and that “ethnicity may become confused with a culture of poverty” (Reitz 1987). In studies of black material culture from the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Mullins notes that it is not so much the items that people choose to buy and have in their houses, but the meanings attributed to them and their active use in negotiating racism and asserting identity (Mullins 1996, 2001). In this context, material culture – which includes objects and buildings – is “actively used in the justification and manipulation of intergroup relations” (Fennell 2000: 304). Other archaeologists have also addressed the use of material culture to negotiate status, identity, and ideology between dominant and dominated groups, particularly in the context of mass-produced goods (Little 1997).

There is a growing body of literature addressing the physical remains and meanings associated with black ritual practices in America. Many of these studies focus on finds from Southern sites associated with slavery, though there are a very few examples from Northern sites and from those occupied by free blacks. Many characteristics of these ritual practices have been traced to regions of Western Africa. There is, however, a distinction between African ritual practices and later practices such as hoodoo and others that blend African and European traditions (Fennell 2000; Leone 2008). Past researchers have assumed that large plantations, denser populations of Africans, patterns of absentee ownership and limited contact with Europeans typical of sites in the Caribbean and the American South ensured the survival of African cultural elements. Following this logic, areas such as the Mid-Atlantic and Northeastern United States, with smaller numbers of slaves and fewer examples of plantation-style slavery were assumed to be devoid of African cultural elements, including folk ritual practices. Recent studies indicate these assumptions were incorrect (Neuwirth and Cochran 2000).

In an article published in 2000, Christopher Fennell noted that archaeologists have generally inferred a site to have been occupied by blacks where evidence of protective charms, divination, or conjure items are recovered (Fennell 2000: 281). Blacks were not, however, the only people engaging in ritual or magical practices in the United States. Ralph Merrifield, in his book, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (1987) provides extensive evidence for ritual practices predominantly in historic Europe, though he does mention examples from the United States. These European ritual practices included witch bottles, foundation sacrifices, protective markings on buildings, and offerings of valuables in wells, rivers and other bodies of water. Robert Blair St. George (1998) discussed the otherworldly realities of the people of Colonial New England, and the protective charms they used to protect their homes, including witch bottles, horse shoes, and poppets (dolls). Clothing and shoes concealed in buildings have also served ritual purposes (Eastop 2006; Swann 1996). Examples of these European traditions have been recorded throughout the United States, and are not limited to the distant past -- during the 1904 construction of an Army barracks at Fort Rosecrans in San Diego, California, a boot and hat were purposefully concealed behind a brick chimney (May 2000).

Both African and European derived examples of these kinds of ritual practice after circa 1750 are generally hidden, with items used or placed in locations where they would not be seen, and the placement of which was not generally discussed (Fennell 2000: 289; Leone 2008). Amy

Gazin-Schwartz recently challenged the dichotomy of ritual versus everyday items and practice, reinforcing that the ritual nature of items is not necessarily inherent in the things themselves, but stems from how they are used (Gazin-Schwartz 2001). The presence of ritual materials in archaeological sites is often overlooked or misinterpreted, as archaeologists are uninformed regarding what to look for, where to look for it, and what possible associations may hold ritual meaning (Samford 1994; Wilke 1997). Through extensive publication and public interpretation, this has largely changed with respect to African derived traditions, particularly in the South, but continues with respect to European traditions.

Researchers have used a wide variety of terms to describe folk ritual practices. In describing black traditions, some researchers reference specific syncretic religious traditions, including Haitian Vodun and Santeria, which take many of their beliefs and practices from African traditions, mixed with Christian, Catholic, Muslim, and other African beliefs (Neuwirth and Cochran 2000). Other terms, such as conjure, Hoodoo, and rootwork describe ritual and spiritual practices that, although they incorporate elements of Christianity, Islam, African traditions, and Native American traditions, are not conducted in the context of a structured, hierarchical religion. Conjurations typically invoke a non-personified spiritual power, rather than individual deities (Fennell 2000: 297). It is postulated that Hoodoo spread across the United States as blacks moved and settled across the country following emancipation, resulting in a relatively cohesive practice nation-wide. Descriptions of early to mid-twentieth century Hoodoo across the South consistently include reference to the use of dolls, human figures, pins, and bottles placed beneath steps to heal, safeguard, and bewitch (Ruppel et al. 2003). Other researchers refer to all of these practices by American blacks generically as folk religion, magic, or ritual practices. When referring to European examples, researchers use terms including magic, apotropaic (“evil averting” or protective) practices, and ritual practices. In European contexts, these are rarely referred to as religious practices, except in reference to pre-Christian or hold-over pagan contexts (Merrifield 1987). Unless there is specific evidence indicating a particular tradition of ritual practice, the term folk ritual is preferable, as it is inclusive of both religious and non-religious activities, without reference to specific ethnicities or cultures.

Common to many black ritual concealments is their association with liminal spaces – areas that are transitional between the interior and exterior of houses and other buildings. These include doorways, windows, hearths, and chimneys. In some cases, such as a mid-nineteenth

century Hoodoo bundle recovered from a chimney at the Fanthorp Inn site in Texas, placement of materials at these locations can serve to protect the house. In the case of doorways, however, conjure materials may serve to protect the house and its inhabitants, or may target a specific individual who will pass over the items as they enter or leave the house. Northeastern corners of rooms and buildings have also been identified as significant locations (Fennell 2000: 297; Neuwirth and Cochran 2000; Ruppel et al. 2003; Schablitsky 2009). These threshold and liminal spaces are also considered important in examples of European folk ritual practices (see Eastop 2006; May 2000; Merrifield 1987; St. George 1998; Swann 1996); these locations in and of themselves cannot, therefore, be taken as indicative the presence or agency of black people.

Certain objects are associated with African derived ritual practices, and appear repeatedly both individually and in caches on black sites. Some of these, including quartz crystals, pierced silver coins, and objects marked with inscribed X marks have been considered indicator artifacts -- sufficient on their own to be indicative of both black occupation and ritual practice. Other objects have been interpreted to have ritual meaning only when their location and other associations are considered. These include: pre-contact stone tools; buttons; iron nails; faunal material; roots; shells; glass and ceramic sherds; bottles; blue beads; and metal charms (Ferguson 1999; Jones 2000; Klingelhofer 1987; Neuwirth and Cochran 2000; Russell 1997; Schablitsky 2009; Stine et al. 1996; Wall 2000; Young 1996). Researchers have begun to question a reliance on indicator artifacts to determine the ethnicity of a site's inhabitants; without additional evidence, no amount of these objects, they argue, can provide absolute proof of the presence of a particular ethnicity (Baumann 2004; Fennell 2000: 284-285). Instead, analysis should address whether the objects and their placements could have been meaningful for other ethnic groups. This opens up the opportunity to address the boundedness of ethnic groups and belief systems, and to challenge persistent, unintentional stereotypes that black people were the only ones to practice these types of rituals (Fennell 2000: 284-285).

Many examples of the ritual practices of both free and enslaved blacks have been documented in the Southern slave-holding states, especially from Maryland (see, for example, Derr 2007; Neuwirth and Cochran 2000, Schablitsky 2009). There are also a smaller number of examples known from farther north, including sites in New York, New Jersey, and Delaware. In Brooklyn, New York a cache of five corncobs arranged in a star pattern, a cloth pouch tied with hemp, an animal pelvis, and oyster shell were recovered from beneath the floor boards near a



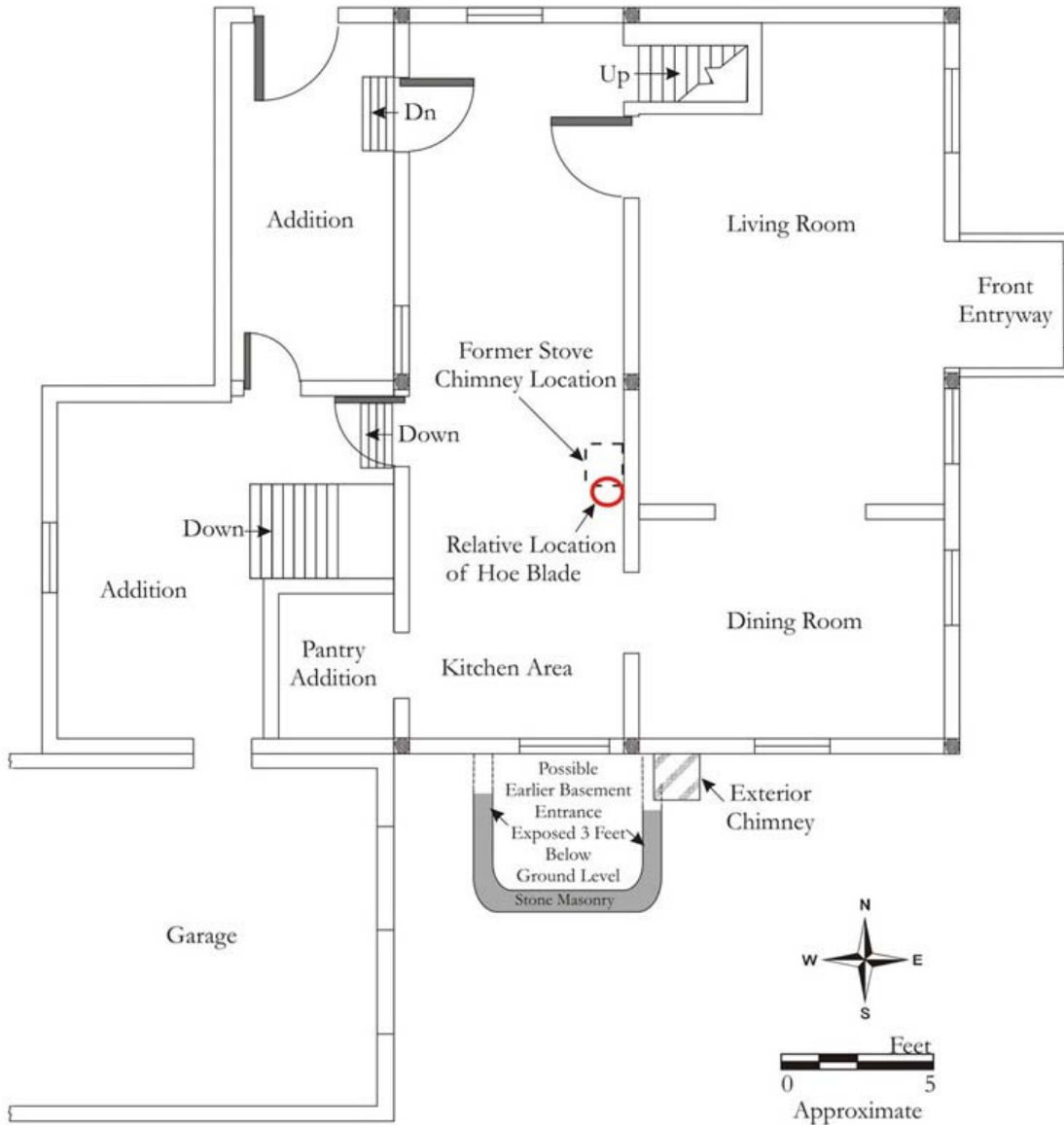
chimney in a cramped garret of the Lott house. This location housed the Lott family's slaves, and the cache was interpreted as evidence of ritual and religious activity by those laborers, hidden beneath the floor boards to prevent detection by their owners (Ruppel et al. 2003; Staples 2001). Several other possible examples, including a spoon marked with an X, have been identified in New York City (Wall 2000). In Middletown, New Jersey a corn cob and shell were discovered beneath floorboards in a similar, cramped space beneath the eaves of Marlpit Hall. These were interpreted as evidence of ritual and religious activity by the slaves of the house. Artifacts associated with ritual caches and concealments were also recovered from the Beverwyck site in Morris County, New Jersey (Greenhouse Consultants, Inc. 1996). An example of ritual evidence from a free African-American site which has a similar date range as the Cooper-Mann house comes from New Castle County, Delaware. At the Thomas Williams site, occupied by the black Stump family from 1887 through the 1920s, an iron axe head was recovered from a pit within a dairy cooler. The axe head was interpreted as serving a protective function, protecting the dairy products from taint (Catts and Custer 1990; de Cunzo 2004).

### **Concealments at the Cooper-Mann House**

Three possible ritual concealments were identified within the Cooper-Mann house. Two of these, a shoe and a locket, may have been accidental losses, and cannot be considered definitive ritual concealments. Evidence suggests, however, that a hoe blade found concealed in the house most likely served a ritual purpose.

An entire leather shoe was recovered from fill deposits beneath the kitchen. The shoe, likely a woman's work shoe, has characteristics indicating that it was manufactured in the 1850s or 1860s. Shoes of this type were often worn up to twenty years or more before being discarded (Rexford 2000). There was no evidence of rodent gnawing on any of the shoe leather. The shoe easily dates from the Mann family occupation of the house, and is likely representative of the Mann women's everyday footwear. While single, worn shoes have been identified in subfloor contexts as ritual concealments, these are among the most questionable, because the contexts, particularly in crawlspaces such as at the Cooper-Mann House, are so open (see Swann 1996). While there is no evidence that the shoe was carried into the crawlspace by an animal or somehow lost there, there is also no evidence that it was placed there deliberately.

## First Floor



Cooper-Mann House, First Floor Plan.

**Figure 3. First floor plan showing location of the hoe blade.**

Recovered at the joint between a floor joist, vertical post, and the long central support member of the first floor of the house was a small, book-shaped brass locket. This area would have been enclosed by the floor and the plaster and lathe walls. The front of the locket had engraved scroll and floral decoration; the rear had a colored design covered by a rock crystal

face. While the location at the heart, or center of the house, the shiny nature of the object, and the presence of the crystal element are consistent with folk ritual, it is unclear if this item was deliberately placed, or ended up at this location accidentally.

The iron hoe blade was found resting on a hand-hewn second floor joist between the first floor ceiling and the second story floor, immediately south of the former hole for the chimney stack and beneath a saw-cut timber (sees Figures 3 and 4). The hand-hewn floor joist had been notched to accommodate the former chimney stack; the hoe blade was located within the notch. The location, hidden between the first and second floors and directly associated with a chimney, strongly suggests that this is an example of a folk ritual concealment. Characteristics of the hoe are consistent with a late nineteenth through early twentieth century manufacturing date (see Figure 5). Based solely on the manufacturing date of the hoe blade, it could have been associated with either the Mann family or later, twentieth century occupants of the house. Following Fennell's lead (2000), the hoe blade is evaluated according to both black and European folk ritual traditions.



**Figure 4. Hoe blade in situ. The upper arrow points to the hole in the second floor for the no longer extant chimney; the lower arrow points to the hoe blade, June 12, 2009 (Photo by Megan E. Springate).**

At least one other example of folk ritual using a hoe blade is recorded. In Calvert County, Maryland, a hoe blade was discovered in the bottom of a pit feature located directly outside the main doorway to the Indian Rest cabin, occupied from the 1870s through 1934 by at least two black families. Based upon its location and contents, the pit was interpreted as a conjure deposit, with the iron of the hoe blade acting in a protective capacity. The *Terminus Post Quem* (TPQ) for the feature was 1903, indicating that folk ritual practices using iron hoe blades continued at least into the early twentieth century (Derr 2007: 51). A large iron implement (an axe) has also been interpreted as serving a protective ritual function in a dairy at the Thomas Williams site in Delaware, placed there between 1887 and the 1920s by the free black Stump family (de Cunzo 2004). It is not clear whether the hoe or axe configuration of those tools had any significant meaning in ritual context, or whether their importance lay solely in their iron content or in the fact that they were edged tools.



**Figure 5. The hoe blade (Photo by Amy Raes).**

The use of iron as a protective material is not, however, derived strictly from African sources; there is also a long history of the use of iron for protective purposes in European folk ritual traditions (see Merrifield 1987). Likewise, the association with a chimney is not strictly an

indicator of black folk ritual; there are many examples of the importance of liminal spaces including chimneys, doorways, and windows in European folk ritual traditions (see, for example, Eastop 2006; Merrifield 1987; St. George 1998; Swann 1996).

It is not, therefore, possible to definitively identify this hoe blade concealment as a *de facto* example of either African or European derived folk ritual practices. Based upon the history of the house, however, it is most likely that the hoe blade was placed during the circa 1880-1885 expansion of the Mann house from a one-and-a-half to a two story structure. During reconstruction, this usually concealed space would have been open and accessible for the placement of the hoe; indeed, saw-cut lumber used during the home's expansion was laid directly above the hoe concealment. Protective ritual concealments are usually associated with the construction or major renovation of a building, a change in ownership, or are done when the occupants feel threatened. The manufacturing range of the hoe post-dates the construction of the house, but comfortably encompasses the timing of the renovation to two stories. It is unlikely that the hoe blade was placed in that location following the removal of the chimney stack and conversion of the house to an alternate source of heat, likely by the mid-twentieth century, as without the chimney, this location loses its ritual association with a threshold or liminal space. The placement of the concealment may have been spurred by the family's changing status in town, or as a result of recent losses of family members, including children.

## **Discussion**

Personal artifacts recovered from the Cooper-Mann site include pieces of jewelry, a pocket watch, hair combs, and slate pencils. Denied access to non-manual and higher status jobs because of their race, status negotiation and display within the black community was evaluated on different criteria than within the white community. Expressions of middle-class status within the black community included literacy, home ownership, occupation of single- versus multi-family dwellings, and working as laborers instead of domestic servants (Harris 2003; Wall et. al 2008). The Mann family met these criteria for middle-class status within the definitions of the black community, and also expressed their status to the white community in which they lived. Good clothes and personal adornment are often associated with attending special events and church; as no black churches or other institutions were present in Deckertown, the jewelry, fancy hats held on with hat pins, polished shoes, and pocket watch would have also served as display



of status to the other, white, parishioners of the Presbyterian Church. Also serving as a very public display of social status was the Mann family's expansion of their home from a one-and-a-half story dwelling to a proper, full two story home between 1880 and 1885.

The financial means to expand the house and to purchase higher status material goods was generated by both William and Louisa Mann. Working as a laborer throughout his life, William may have found increased levels of employment in the early 1870s associated with the Midland Railroad. He may have taken work during construction of the line through Deckertown, and most likely found himself very busy as the town boomed after the line's completion in 1872. There is also archaeological and documentary evidence that Louisa was taking in laundry to supplement the family income. By 1873, William was secure enough in Deckertown to join the white Presbyterian Church. The Mann family's negotiation of social status was recognized as both acceptable and exemplary by the white community, and by 1886 William had been made a Sexton. He and Louisa were never, however, considered full members of that community, recognized explicitly as upstanding black members of the town on their deaths, and in William's case, directly compared to the quality of white community members.

Generally isolated from the larger black community, it is unknown whether William and Louisa were aware of the activism of Du Bois and Washington. At the same time they were negotiating membership and status within the white community, choices made by the family, including personal adornment and the pursuit of literacy (exemplified by the presence of slate pencils), expressed their social status in ways that held meaning in the context of black community. The presence of the protective ritual concealment of a hoe blade within the house, placed during the expansion to a two-story house, strongly suggests that the Manns were aware of conjure and other folk ritual traditions within the black community. This is a powerful expression of identity and belief, enacted during a period when the Manns were simultaneously actively asserting their social position in the white community – negotiating the “double consciousness” described by W.E.B. Du Bois.

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## Note

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**Return to June 2010 Newsletter:**  
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