THE BATTLE OF WILLIAMSBURG’S HOODOO SPELL BOTTLE

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by
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DEDICATION

To the unnamed African American slaves who risked their lives in the pursuit of freedom
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ABSTRACT

In November 2018, archaeologists from the William & Mary College Center for Archaeological Research and Virginia Department of Transportation announced the discovery of an artifact on the site of the Civil War’s Battle of Williamsburg. The item was a partially broken bottle from Columbia, PA, and filled with nails that had corroded together into a ball. The team theorized that the artifact was a “witch bottle” planted by a Pennsylvania soldier, for protection during the war.

This report briefly outlines the possibility that this artifact was actually a “hoodoo spell bottle” buried by enslaved African Americans, to curse and sabotage their Confederate captors.
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Civil War Witch Bottle Linked to Runaway Slaves

Last month, archaeologists from the William & Mary Center for Archaeological Research (WMCAR) and Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) announced the discovery of a “witch bottle” on the site of the Civil War’s Battle of Williamsburg. The artifact was discovered at Redoubt 9, one of the 13 satellite fortifications originally built to protect Fort Magruder, the “mother fort”, from a Union assault. Amateur anthropologist Carla Lynne Hall claims that the bottle is actually a “hoodoo spell bottle” buried by runaway slaves.

While witch bottles were historically used to reverse witchcraft, they have also been used as amulets to protect against harmful intentions. Although nearly 200 witch bottles have been documented in Great Britain, fewer than a dozen have been found in the United States. Similar to a witch bottle, a hoodoo spell bottle is a bottle filled with nails, filled with urine, and buried under a doorstep. This placement incorporates African “foot track magic”, which symbolically poisons people who step over it.

“The main difference between witch bottles and hoodoo spell bottles are the cultures of the people who buried them,” says Hall, “Hoodoo folk magic has been practiced by African Americans for hundreds of years, but as the first national publication of an African American archeological dig happened in 1971, these magical practices have gone mostly unnoticed.”

Hall researched the creation of the Williamsburg forts, which were built to protect Union invasion of Richmond via the Peninsula between the James and York rivers and uncovered that the Confederate Army used slaves to build the entrenchments.

In May 1861, General Robert E. Lee tasked Lt. Colonel Benjamin Ewell, former William & Mary President (and fellow West Point graduate) with building the 13 satellite forts for Fort Magruder, named for Gen. John B. Magruder, who was commander of the Army of the Peninsula.

However, Confederate troops had a strong distaste for physical labor, which they saw as beneath them, as white men. Robert E. Lee’s soldiers hated digging
trenches so much that they gave him the derisive nickname “The King of Spades”.⁶ Being accustomed to having slaves wait upon them, Confederate soldiers had even brought their slaves to war with them. Known as “body servants”, these slaves would tend to their masters’ personal needs, such as cooking and shaving, even at the risk of their own lives. Some body servants were even armed to fight alongside their masters, which angered the North.⁷

As little progress had been made on the Williamsburg forts by June 1861, Magruder replaced Ewell with Gen. Lafayette McLaws⁸, and began an aggressive plan of forcing upwards of 20,000 slaves and free Negroes into building the entrenchments.⁹ As slaves and free Negroes were the primary fort builders, the history of the racial slur “spade” - used even to this day - becomes clear.

The strength and number of the forts built by African-American slave labor gangs were successful at causing Union General McClellan to delay fighting the Confederate Army. Their appearance even influenced Union Maj. General George B. MacClellan to incorrectly assume that his troops were outnumbered by Confederates in the Peninsula. However, runaway slaves escaped behind Union lines and informed McClellan that some of the forts were not occupied, and that there were fewer troops than he anticipated. Intelligence offered by additional runaway slaves caused the Union Armies to proceed, which resulted in the Battle of Williamsburg on May 5, 1862.¹⁰

As the self-emancipated slaves made their way behind Union lines, they were considered “contraband”, confiscated property of the Confederacy. The contrabands could work and receive compensation from the Union, allowing them a freedom they had never experienced. The tenuous status of contraband slaves led to the First Confiscation Act, which gave freedom to slaves who had been impressed into war-related labor.¹¹

“Blacks played a pivotal role during the Civil War’s Peninsula Campaign and Battle of Williamsburg. Slaves built the Confederate entrenchments, they escaped to freedom behind Union lines, and they also supplied intelligence to the Union on the occupants of the Williamsburg fortifications¹²,” says Hall. “This might be an
unpopular narrative with Southerners, so it’s not surprising that this so-called “witch bottle” hasn’t been connected to hoodoo that was practiced by slaves.”

Regarding the creation of the hoodoo spell bottle itself, slaves also had the sanitation duties of burying the dead from battle sites, which included discarded items such as bottles. The nails likely came from the nearby Tredegar Iron Works of Richmond, the largest producer of iron in the South, which employed both slaves and free blacks.

So what is hoodoo? “Not to be confused with Voodoo, Hoodoo first emerged in the southeastern United States when people from West African tribes of the Congo, Sierra Leone, and present-day Ghana came to America,” says Katrina Hazzard-Donald, author of Mojo Workin’: The Old African-American Hoodoo System, and Director of Rutgers–Camden’s Africana Studies and Research Program “The cultural profile of those three regions is very different and the religions are different. But after 1807 Hoodoo emerged from these three distinct African religious traditions.”

Hall disagrees with the WMCAR theory that the bottle was placed by a soldier or officer who felt threatened by the war. “A slave’s life was constant oppression and strife. Hoodoo spell bottles were a regular part of their life, before, during, and after the Civil War.” She continues, “As slaves and free blacks alike were subject to whippings for refusing to work on these entrenchments, they literally had the most skin in this game. They had the most to lose. So slaves fit this bill more than anyone.”

While the official history of The Battle of Williamsburg is that this was an inconclusive skirmish during the Civil War, Hall offers, “I have a few reasons why I believe that the magic of Redoubt 9’s “hoodoo bottle spell” was successful:

- The site ended up occupied by Union troops
- Not much evidence of gunfire was found at Redoubt 9
- The site was mostly untouched by machine churn for 154 years, and ended up covered by a median
- Over 12,000 slaves escaped behind Union lines during the Peninsula Campaign
• The US Confiscation Acts freed the runaway slaves who had built the entrenchments

“If you ask me, the self-emancipated slaves were the clear winner of this battle. So did the hoodoo spell bottle work?” Hall smiles, “Yeah, I’d say so!”

References

Notes
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