

Discarded Items: A Photograph and Glass Eye Give Clues to the Past

ABSTRACT: *Few people create grand legacies or make great gestures in society. Rather, most individuals live their lives within a small, quiet world. Many depart unnoticed, leaving behind no awards, estates, or monumental achievements. When two items of seemingly small significance were separately happened upon, further analysis revealed their rather personal nature. These relics offer clues to the identities of the individuals who left them, and something of their lives. They also offer ophthalmologists a useful perspective.*

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A PICTURE WORTH TEN THOUSAND WORDS

In a Manhattan antique shop, I stumbled upon a wooden box of forgotten photographs. The photos included portraits, families, homes, and lives, recorded and then discarded. One old “cabinet card” portrait (a contact-printed black and white photograph mounted on dark card stock) caught my eye. By the type of photo and the style of the sitter’s clothing, I estimated that this image of a young monocular black girl was taken in the 1920s. She was a toddler who looked about 3 years old.

Except for the single word “studio,” this particular image bears no clues to its origin. There is no writing or other identifying markings on the photo, the name having been torn off long ago. The 5-inch by 7-inch card stock on the back of the photo is interesting precisely because the edges look like they might have been deliberately mangled. Yet, it is hard to imagine that this almost artful abuse was done intentionally (Figure 1).

Like a find from an archaeological dig, this image of a young girl with an obviously missing left eye opened my wallet amidst the dust and other clutter in this obscure shop. Only a few people (several of whom read this journal) appreciate old, worn images of unidentified, disfigured children; otherwise, these images are not popular collectibles.

Studying American photographs in their historical context allows us to see them as illustrations of the past. Unlike a drawing or painting, a photograph represents an event that will never be repeated, a single moment in time. Each photograph sends a unique message. While many interpretations of a photograph are a matter of personal opinion, most of the empirical elements cannot be easily narrated.¹

It is impossible to guess what happened to this child’s eye, or what condition caused its loss. In her era, doctors treated eye conditions differently than

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FIGURE 1. Top, front, and back views of a cabinet card photograph, 5 x 7 inches, showing a monocular child. The author found this photograph in a New York City antique shop. Bottom, view of the Benjamin Hilderbrand plantation house before it was razed in 1999 to allow expansion of Memphis International Airport. Bottom inset, a glass eye found in the privy on the Hilderbrand plantation. The posterior view is at left and the anterior chamber and full iris are shown intact at right. While the eye is significantly discolored, it is in surprisingly good condition considering where it was found. Interestingly, both of these relics are damaged on the periphery in an almost artful manner that preserves the central identifying details.

they do today, and her age and race could have been factors in the eye loss. The need for prosthetics and the number and skill of ocularists have also evolved in the interim, so that it is difficult to imagine a child sitting for a formal photograph under such circumstances today. We can only guess at the circumstances that caused this photo to be discarded rather than preserved in a family album.

Archaeological evidence provides us with yet another means for extracting meaning from the past.

THE HILDERBRAND DIG

During 12 weeks in the course of a year, Weaver & Associates of Memphis, Tennessee, conducted archaeological testing at the Benjamin Hilderbrand House (historical site number 40Sy615), a 19th-century Memphis plantation.* The firm also conducted archival research into the plantation and documented its findings. The firm's research design "focused on... spatial organization through time, consumer behavior, subsistence patterns, material correlates of ethnicity, and the evolution of social relations between Hilderbrand and his slaves" (email communication, Guy Weaver, Weaver & Associates, June 2012).

This federally funded project was conducted in 1998-1999 during an expansion of the Memphis International Airport. A buffer zone was required around the airport to mitigate noise, and the Hilderbrand plantation – situated directly across the highway from the airport – fell in development's way. The house was demolished in 1999.

Benjamin Hilderbrand acquired the Memphis property about 1836. He built the house, where he lived with his family, between 1847 and 1860. There is very little archival documentation remaining on the Hilderbrands, and even less on the slaves who worked the plantation fields. Census records show that Hilderbrand owned 19 slaves in 1850. By 1860, 29 slaves lived in five houses. By comparing the relative ages and genders of those listed, Weaver & Associates determined that the Hilderbrands owned at least five slave families. The Hilderbrand family lived on the property until Benjamin's death in 1879. The house was owned by a family named McTighe from 1950-1987, when the property was deeded to the Airport Authority in Memphis.

In addition to the Hilderbrand/McTighe house, Weaver & Associates used aerial photographs to iden-

tify six other structures on the plantation grounds. They found the remains of two large cellar areas in the backyard area. These cellars were associated with the slaves' housing and yielded artifacts typical of slave cabin excavations. One of the most interesting finds was an antler-handled dagger with elaborate scrollwork on the hilt and a large "X" carved into the base (email communication, Guy Weaver, Weaver & Associates, June 2012). A pierced 1834 half-dime, found in one of the cellars, is nearly identical to a half-dime pendant found in an excavated slave area at the Hermitage Plantation in Nashville. The presence of another coin, a badly eroded trade token, indicated that coin charms were produced at the Hilderbrand plantation. The token is incompletely drilled on both sides, indicating that it was being crafted when it was lost.^{2,3}

A small charm in the form of a hand was recovered by a technique called "flotation," in which water is forced up through a sample of soil suspended in mesh. The Hilderbrand hand charm weighs less than a gram and is about half the size of a penny (10 mm by 7 mm). It is flat, of stamped copper or alloy, and is only the sixth known example of such a charm found in the Southeast. Three charms were found at Andrew Jackson's plantation, the Hermitage, in Nashville, Tennessee, one at Peter Jefferson's Poplar Forest in Virginia, and another at the Calvert House in Annapolis, Maryland. Their size and material makes such charms elusive; copper fares poorly in acidic clay soils. Still, these charms may have been common. Sickness in the slave population was often attributed to curses or ill intentions, and hand charms were considered to help ward off the evil eye. These charms had several names, including "hand," "gris-gris," "mojo," and "jack" charms. The small hand ornament might also have been a symbolic substitute for a spell called a "hand."^{4,7} To place this artifact in historical perspective, hand symbols are also found in charms from all over the Islamic, Roman, and Hebrew worlds, in jewelry from Europe as well as from north and western Africa.

Unearthing a Glass Eye

The relevance of the rare hand charm found in the Hilderbrand archaeological dig lies in another small fragment (Figure 1, lower right) found elsewhere on the property. The fragment is part of a glass eye found in a privy. A magazine article about the Weaver & As-

sociates dig generated numerous inquiries, including a letter from a Memphian who mentioned that his grandfather had been a surgeon in the area. As a child, the reader remembered hearing his grandfather say he had removed Benjamin Hilderbrand's "festered eye."⁸ What made this comment more interesting is that the article on the dig did not mention a glass eye found in the excavation or the fact that Hilderbrand was monocular. Thus, the reader's story provides independent corroboration that the glass eye found in the dig was likely Benjamin Hilderbrand's.

While it is common for excavation teams to unearth unique (if often partly pulverized) items, a fraction of a glass ocular prosthesis is rare in the finds of Weaver & Associates. The team's curiosity about this artifact (Figure 1, lower left and right) led to a search for expert advice. The details of the eye fragment suggested several conclusions. The eye itself was approximately 12 mm in diameter. Its periphery was jagged, although the grey-blue iris remained intact. The cryolite glass was showing significant signs of etching, but this was not surprising in a prosthesis buried for more than 100 years. Before 1910, few custom mouth-blown glass prostheses were made outside New York City, Philadelphia, Boston, or Chicago. The rural region where this eye fragment was found suggests that it was probably a stock eye, most likely of German origin, perhaps fitted by a general physician in the Memphis area. (It is interesting that the Hilderbrand house was later owned by physician George W. Ham, a country doctor who bought the property at auction in 1881.) The 19th-century find was an early, pre-Snellen type (single-walled) prosthetic glass eye, likely produced between 1870 and 1900.

There are several documented archeological reports of ancient artificial eye objects, and such finds have been reported in this Journal. However, early reports can be unreliable. The finds may actually fall into the category of non-medical decorative items, rather than actual prosthetics.⁹ For example, in excavations of the old city of Jericho in Palestine, archaeologists found a small terra cotta head dated to 3,000 BCE, with seashells placed to represent eyes. The insertion of smooth white secondary materials into statuary to represent the eyes also appears in works from this period in the cultures of Ur, Babylon, and Egypt.¹⁰ Egyptian artifacts give us a particularly good idea of the advanced stage of development of the artificial eye

because of the fine materials used, including bronze, ivory, and limestone. While these items can be admired for their beauty and artistry, they are rarely mistaken for detailed replicas of the human eye. Thus, European glass eyes were a major development in medicine. Weaver & Associates knows of no other prosthetic eye uncovered in any excavation (email communication, Guy Weaver, Weaver & Associates, June 2012).

CONCLUSION

Photographs and archaeological relics are like items from the earth's fossil record. Finds that provide specific information can be scarce, offering tantalizingly incomplete evidence of those who lived before us. Many historical facts are narrations of evidence, such as that found in the antique photograph and artifacts from the Hilderbrand dig. As such, they are subject to interpretation. The traces left by a young black girl and a plantation owner include evidence of their monocular lives, but we are dependent on experts to recover and interpret the objects. These items from the past also remind us of situations in our own time. Perhaps you have had a patient report losing their prosthesis as George Hilderbrand probably lost his, or seen photographs showing monocularities in otherwise everyday settings.

While losing an eye or wearing a prosthesis does not define an individual, these issues do affect lives, even long after the person is deceased. The people associated with the glass eye and photograph were separated by at least 30 years and had very different socioeconomic situations: One was a white, blue-eyed Southern plantation owner with the means to have an artificial eye fitted, and the other was a young black child who apparently went without an artificial eye even in formal situations, at least for a while. However, in being monocular, they had more in common than either could have imagined.

Eye loss is not limited to any demographic group. However, the circumstances of these found relics were determined by income and the availability of health care. Then and now, ophthalmologists might tend to consider only their patients' eye loss and how he or she can provide prosthetic restoration. (Of course, maintaining a narrow focus is necessary to providing professional services. Also, common to many occupations, a carpenter might tend to see only the

leaky roof rather than considering that the house is a family's dwelling.) However, monocular people rarely perceive their whole lives as defined by the eye loss. So, this brief historical journey may remind ocularists of two things: First, just as a black toddler and white plantation owner both suffered eye loss, humans often have more in common than the differences that divide them. Second, patients are fellow beings with complicated histories; their eye concerns may temporarily be a pressing daily concerns, but they are only one part of our patients' lives.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Hilderbrand plantation was considered middle-class, or "middling" (Weaver & Associates, LLC. Hilderbrand House. <http://www.weaverassociatesllc.com/experience/hilderbrand.html>. Accessed October 17, 2012). A middling plantation had between 20 and 49 slaves (Dunaway, Wilma P. *Slavery in the American Mountain South*. Cambridge, England, UK: Cambridge University Press; 2003: 9).

