



Concealed Shoes and Cape Houses: Artifacts as Agents of the Past

By Anne Grulich

The 2013 remodeling of the Great Cranberry Congregational Church parsonage house opened the door to a mystery. During demolition of the chimney and fireplaces, we discovered four peculiar shoes and four wooden trinkets hidden inside the stud wall of the northerly facing fireplace. Later in the renovation, remnants of at least ten other shoes were recovered from the crawlspace under the kitchen wing. The cache of four ritually concealed shoes led us to the world of folk magic, an early-nineteenth-century building boom, and a dendrochronology study that dismantled some cherished myths.

Concealed Shoes: An Ancient Folk Ritual

Old shoes hidden inside the walls around fireplaces and windows have been discovered throughout New England and in several other states since colonial times. Indeed, since the parsonage discovery, two other Great Cranberry households reported finding concealed shoes in their homes. Worn out, repaired, mostly single shoes were placed inside walls as part of an ancient folk ritual to bring good luck, to ward off evil spirits, or to commemorate a person. Shoes protect the wearer, so, allegorically, they protect the spirit of the living and the dead. As apotropaic artifacts, they serve as talismans or charms.¹ The parsonage



Shoes from a father, mother, and two children (GCIHS 2013.252.1979). Poignantly haunting, this family of worn, patched shoes came to light nearly two centuries after they were hidden in the fireplace wall. Three of them have tiny wooden pegs attaching the soles to the upper leathers. Archaeologists feel these open-tab, round-toe, and slit-vamp styles could date as early as the 1820s or 1830s.

Photographs by the author



Parsonage renovation. In 2013 the parsonage was renovated from the ground up. It was moved off its foundation and temporarily shifted thirty feet closer to the Church. The cellar and additional space under the kitchen were excavated, and a new cement foundation was poured. The house was then moved onto the new foundation and expanded. The second group of shoes was found during the cellar renovation. *Photograph by the author*

fireplace shoes demanded recognition and influenced the research projects of Great Cranberry Island Historical Society (GCIHS) for the next four years.

Nowadays, archaeologists record such discoveries. The Great Cranberry parsonage shoes were added to a database of two thousand shoe finds kept by the Northampton Museum in the United Kingdom; and a Histarch ListServ posting drew responses from historical archaeologists across the United States.² Archaeologists dated these open-tab, round-toe, and slit-vamp-style shoes to as early as the 1820s or 1830s.

The four concealed shoes posed a conundrum and demanded answers. Should we honor tradition and return them to the chimney, or should we curate them in the Great Cranberry Island Historical Society collection? If the shoes were 180 years old, how old was the house, and who hid them inside the fireplace wall? An examination of deeds, census reports, oral history, and house features indicated

that the house was built ca. 1835. The parsonage was a family homestead for a century before it ever housed a parson. This little cape began as the property of the second generation of two of the earliest settlers on Great Cranberry—the Spurlings and the Stanleys. The house was built on land that Robert Spurling (1782–1844) inherited from his father Benjamin (1752–1836). In 1804, Robert married Mary Stanley (1786–1841) and they began their family of ten children, including son Enoch (1812–1890). In 1834, Enoch married Mary Ellen Young, and together they raised nine children, including daughter Sarah (1841–1916). Enoch was given title to the house "in which he was already living" when Robert died. In 1861, Enoch's daughter, Sarah,



married Ebenezer Cobb Rosebrook (1835–1911), and had two children. Eventually, the house passed from Enoch to daughter Sarah and from her to Sarah Wheelwright, and then to the Ladies Aid Society. In 2012, it was given to the church.

It was Enoch Spurling's family who hid the shoes inside the chimney wall. His daughter Sarah Jane Rosebrook's generation placed the shoe remnants in the kitchen crawlspace decades later.³ Because the crawlspace was disturbed before the shoe remnants came to Great Cranberry Island Historical Society, their context was destroyed. We do not know if Sarah was continuing the folk tradition of concealing shoes, or if these were scraps used in the cottage industry of making and mending shoes.

Repatriation: Honoring Memory and Tradition

Church members had only days to decide the fate of the fireplace shoes before the new chimney walls of the renovated parsonage were sealed. Would they preserve them in the Great Cranberry Island Historical Society archives or repatriate the cache? They chose the latter. On October 7, 2013, the shoes and trinkets were put into a plastic carry case along with four modern items. The new minister, Tom Powell, took a last walk up the old spiral stairway and lowered the case onto the ledge in the non-functioning hollow of the new chimney. It was bricked in that afternoon and the stairway was removed.

A pink-and-white flip-flop sandal, a church roster, a bulletin, and a note explaining the discovery of the shoes were included in the box as tokens of the present. The flimsy sandal seemed



Repatriation. Pastor Tom Powell returned the concealed shoes to the remodeled chimney shortly before it was bricked-in and the stairway removed.
Photographs by the author

a fitting contrast to the four practical leather shoes. Today, the island is a haven for vacationers; two centuries ago it was home to seafarers, boat builders, and farmers with large families.

The Story Evolves: A Cluster of Nine Early Cape-style Houses Discovered

The investigation into the history of the parsonage brought a cluster of eight very similar 1830–1840s cape-style houses into focus. Research suggests islander Michael Bulger (1801–1859) had a hand in their construction. In 1820, after emigrating from Ireland, Bulger began building houses on nearby Mount Desert Island with his friend John Carroll and moved to Great Cranberry in 1827 when he married Dorothy Newman.⁴

Four of these houses share a clever space-saving design for a Maine island coming into its prime:

one massive central chimney vents three first-floor fireplaces and a steep, winder stairway leads to the attic rooms. The other capes have one chimney for two fireplaces, and straight, steep steps. All nine have wide-plank flooring, half-log cellar beams with bark on one side, and cut granite or stone foundations.⁵ These snug capes would have filled a niche between the log cabins of earlier settlers and the spacious homes of entrepreneurs William Preble and Captain Benjamin Spurling.

More Than a Hunch: An Unexpected Tree-ring Dating Opportunity

In May 2015, Rebecca Cole-Will (of Acadia National Park) connected Great Cranberry Island Historical Society with

Dendrochronology.
NADEF crew took core
samples from cellar beams
of two GCI cape houses
in June 2015. *Photograph by
Jessi Duma, Great Cranberry
Island Historical Society*



dendro-archaeologists Paul Krusic (of Stockholm University) and Bill Flynt (of Historic Deerfield), and their students from the Schoodic Institute's North American Dendroecological Fieldweek (NADEF).⁶ In June, Krusic and Flynt surveyed the attic and basement beams of eight Great Cranberry Island houses and the John Carroll homestead in Southwest Harbor. They then brought their students out to take core samples from cellar beams of two Great Cranberry Island cape houses for tree-ring dating.

The NADEF findings disturbed some long-standing myths. The trees used for the cellar beams were not felled locally but in Maine's North Woods between 1837 and 1842, and the beams were likely notched and components

fabricated at sawmills before ever arriving on Great Cranberry. (At least a dozen sawmills were cutting beams, boards, lath, and clapboard in this region in the early-nineteenth century.) These cape houses were like kits intended to be shipped and assembled on site.⁷ It seems the frontier era was waning on Great Cranberry Island; the homesteader hewing his own cabin logs was already passé. To a great extent, the island's virgin forests had already been harvested. Indeed, the earliest island photographs depict a fairly denuded landscape.

The Past in the Present

The discovery of four ritually concealed 180-year-old shoes and trinkets led to the discovery of a cluster of historic cape houses that had become nearly unrecognizable through remodeling and neglect. There is no denying the voice of the shoes and a



Shoes from the kitchen crawlspace. Weeks after discovery of the fireplace shoes, forty remnants from at least ten leather shoes were found in the kitchen crawlspace. These pieces date to the late-nineteenth century, a generation after the fireplace shoes. *Photograph by the author*

bit of folk magic at work throughout this project. What else but the skillful arrangement of ancestors could have drawn an astute stone mason, a new archivist, a new pastor, a field school in search of a project, enthusiastic homeowners, and a receptive historical society to one spot on one little island at one particular moment? Artifacts are powerful agents of the past, especially on an island, when science and religion converge and leave an archivist content without artifacts, a parsonage protected by the old folkways, and cherished myths dismantled. Four soles led the way and we honored their footsteps.

Great Cranberry has never been part of any historic archaeological or architectural survey. What other historic riddles might be resolved with enough time and talent invested on the island? This small study opens the door to many fields of inquiry beyond the obvious need for historic preservation: folk practices, the oeuvre of a prolific nineteenth-

century house builder, Cape-style innovations, granite and lumber sources, dendrochronology, and genealogy.

Anne Grulich is the part-time archivist for the Great Cranberry Island Historical Society. With a Master's in American Studies (Material Culture/ Museums) and a B.A. in Anthropology, Grulich has over a decade of experience curating eleventh- and seventeenth-century archaeological artifacts, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century historical artifacts, plus ample experience developing exhibitions and writing for various organizations. She's heeded the calls of stolen silver spoons, ceramic sherds, a Dutch master, and serpent-stemmed glassware fragments, but this is her first foray into shoes and rural architecture. Thriving on the variety of projects Great Cranberry Island Historical Society offers, Grulich has also managed two cemetery preservation projects on the island.

Acknowledgments: Many people contributed to this research and continue working to decipher the enigmas of Great Cranberry, including Chuck Liebow, Tremont Historical Society and island residents Bruce Komusin and Wini Smart, Great Cranberry Island Historical Society founders, Charlotte Harlan and Leslie Astbury, great-great granddaughters of Michael Bulger, archaeologists Jessica Costello, Chris Manning, and Al Saguto, Jeri D. Spurling, architect for the parsonage renovation, Jesse Jameson, Frame to Finish, Gerry Brache, Mystic Stoneworks, Paul Krusic, Bill Flynt, and 2015 NADEF students, Jeff Benjamin, NADEF Research Summary, and Phil Whitney, Great Cranberry Island Historical Society President.

-
1. Additional reading on ritual concealments: Chris M. Manning, "Homemade Magic: Concealed Deposits in Architectural Contexts in the Eastern United States," (master's thesis, Ball State University, 2012); Ralph Merrifield, *The Archaeology of Ritual and Magic* (New York: New Amsterdam Press, 1987); June Swann, "Shoes Concealed in Buildings," *Costume Society Journal* 30, no. 30 (1996): 56-69.
 2. The concealed shoe find was reported to Rebecca Shawcross: rshawcross@northampton.gov.uk, the Shoe Resources Officer of Northampton Museums and Art Gallery, Guildhall Road, Northampton, NN1 1DP, www.northampton.gov.uk/museums.
 3. The forty kitchen crawlspace shoe fragments were recovered in May 2013, and include nineteen soles, two discernible heels, one toe, and ten upper boot pieces (pictured herein).
 4. Michael Bulger (1801-1859) was born in Ireland and arrived on Mount Desert Island via Newfoundland with his friend John Carroll about 1820. According to one history, Bulger built the Thomas Newman house in Southwest Harbor with Carroll ca. 1830: "Michael Bulger of Cranberry Island was the builder of the house, getting out the inside finish by hand. John Carroll did the mason work." Mrs. Seth S. Thornton, *Traditions and Records of Southwest Harbor and Somesville, Mount Desert Island, Maine* (Bar Harbor, ME: Acadia Publishing Co., 1938. 1988 reprint.), 202. It seems likely Bulger would have helped build John Carroll's Cape-style house in Southwest Harbor a decade earlier, but in the 2007 Acadia National Park report on the Carroll house the builder is listed as 'unknown'. In turn, perhaps John Carroll, who specialized in chimney

construction and plastering, built the massive chimneys and fireplaces for the Great Cranberry Cape-style houses. Bulger was the great-great-grandfather of the current owners of the house on Cranberry Road that was once lived in and added onto by his son, Samuel Newman Bulger (1835-1919). Sadly, the old trunk filled with Bulger tools and a box of twenty finish planes was stolen from the house in the early 1980s. One of the planes was stamped with machine-lettered initials "M.B." Peter Morrison, *Cultural Resource Assessment of the Carroll Farm, Acadia National Park, Southwest Harbor, Maine* (Bar Harbor, ME: NPS, 2007).

5. For current information and photographs of this study, email info@gcihs.org.
6. Cole-Will was made aware of the Great Cranberry Island Historical Society project via the *2014 Draft Research Report on Early 19th-century Concealed Shoes and Cape-style Houses on Great Cranberry Island, Maine*, (Cranberry Isles, ME: Great Cranberry Island Historical Society, 2015) that the author submitted to Acadia NPS and the Maine Historic Preservation Commission.
7. "The successful crossdating of the MDI and GCI samples with the GNW Red spruce master chronology from north-central Maine indicates that the houses sampled for this study, and probably others in the area, were built from timbers most likely transported down the Penobscot River from the north-central forests of Maine. This practice was well established by the late-eighteenth century when Europeans first settled in the river valley, but peaked during the mid-nineteenth century; the same time period from which our samples dated." Jeff Benjamin, Meghan Ladolcetta, Gary Macadaeg Paul Krusic, and Bill Flynt, "A Dendroarchaeological analysis of three historic structures near Acadia National Park," (draft, September 2015); Jeremy S. Wilson, "Nineteenth Century Lumber Surveys for Bangor, Maine: Implications for Pre-European Settlement Forest Characteristics in Northern and Eastern Maine," *Journal of Forestry* 103, no. 5 (July/August 2005), 218-223; Jeff Benjamin, *Dendroarchaeological Analysis of Three Cape-style Houses NADEF 2015*, (Winter Harbor, ME: Schoodic Institute, November 2015).