

## Miraculous Medals

As has been discussed, at least two specific artifacts suggest that the excavations did provide data related to the spirituality of the cabin's residents. The artifacts are the Medals of the Immaculate Conception, or Miraculous Medals (Figure #17). These medals were recovered from the northern room of the cabin. While two other metal objects were recovered that may also have been religious medals their surfaces were too heavily corroded to confirm them as additional medals. The history of the Miraculous Medal begins in Paris, France in 1830 when Sister Catherine Laboure, now Saint Catherine, experienced three apparitions of the Virgin Mary. During these apparitions Mary gave Sister Catherine the mission of designing and distributing a medal so that "those who wear it will receive great graces, especially if they wear it around the neck" (Anonymous 2006). The first medal appeared two years later in 1832 and it rapidly became popular among the poor and oppressed. The name "Miraculous Medal" stems from the belief that "almost immediately the blessings that Mary had promised began to shower down on those who wore the medal. The devotion spread like wildfire. Marvels of grace and health, peace and prosperity following in its name. Before long people were calling it the 'Miraculous Medal'" (Anonymous 2006).

According to the Association of the Miraculous Medal (Anonymous 2006), the front of the medal was designed with the Virgin Mary standing on a globe "as the Queen of Heaven and Earth. Her feet crush the serpent to proclaim Satan and all his

followers are helpless before her" (Anonymous 2006). Mary is posed with her hands outstretched with rays of light extending from her fingers. Written around the figure of the Virgin was the inscription "O Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee" (Anonymous 2006). The back of the medal has twelve stars referring to the Apostles of Christ, who represent the entire Church. The cross symbolizes Christ and the sacrifice made for humankind, "with the bar under the cross a sign of the earth" (Anonymous 2006). The capital "M" intertwined with the lower bar on the cross stands for Mary and symbolizes her role with Christ and the world. This intertwining also symbolizes Mary's role in the salvation of the faithful and as the Mother of the Church. "The two hearts represent the love of Jesus and Mary for us" (Anonymous 2006).

As yet we have been unable to locate precise information on the age of either of the medals we recovered. However, one of them appears to have been made of aluminum, or some very light weight metal, and has the inscription written in English. While aluminum has been known since the mid-1820s, the process of extraction was so expensive that it remained something of a precious metal, even more costly than gold, until the mid 1910s. Therefore, given the English inscription and the use of aluminum in its manufacture, it is likely that this medal was not produced prior to the late 1910s. The gold Miraculous Medal, with its inscription written in French, may be the older of the two, though just how much older (or even if it is older) is unclear at the moment. A photograph of a medal engraved by "Vachette" during the 1800s contains a number of similarities

with the gold medal, and our research has found to closest to the one we recovered.

However, what may be of most significance concerning the gold Miraculous Medal is that it was modified from its original form. The modifications were made in the area of Mary's head, neck, and the earth she is standing on. As can be observed in Figure #29, the Virgin's face has clearly been changed with the eyes and nose becoming considerably larger and more distinct, while her neck is completely missing when compared to the Vachette engraving or the aluminum medal. Further, while the medal recovered from cabin #1 retains the snakes beneath her feet, it lacks any indication that she once stood on a symbol of the earth. A search of the limited literature on these medals has failed to yield any other medals pictured with this type of face, as all tend to show a rather Anglicized version of Mary's face, in all cases the Virgin is depicted with a neck and is standing on a stylized earth. Tiny scrap marks can be seen on the surface of the medal in the area of the figure's head, further supporting the hypothesis that the medal was altered at some point after being struck. This alteration may signify the wearer's adaptation/appropriation of Catholicism, rather than the straightforward acceptance of the Catholic version of Christianity. Even if the medal had been worn around the neck, such an alteration would likely have gone unnoticed by nearly all "casual" observers. Thus, the alteration may have been "hidden in plain view."

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Figure #29: A close up of the gold Miraculous Medal with a copy of Vachette's engraving for comparison. (The copy of Vachette's engraving is adapted from Dirvin 1984)

Three "archaeological contexts" appear to provide additional data on the spiritual lives of the cabin's occupants.

These deposits consist of the intentionally buried bottles: one inside the southern room of the cabin beneath the internal doorway; the Hoyt's Nickel Cologne bottle placed under the window/doorway in the east wall of the north room; and the amber glass bottle found outside of the cabin but beneath the southern edge of the porch (see below). The buried bottles are interpreted as having been deposited during hoodoo or conjure rituals aimed at controlling and/or manipulating aspects of the lives of individuals residing within cabin #1. In each case, the bottles formed the primary object recovered, along with a small number of chicken eggshell fragments. Although it is likely that items such as cloth and/or fluids were originally placed along with the bottles, no perishable items, other than the eggshell fragments remained to be collected, (Puckett 1926; Hyatt 1970-78; Leone and Fry 2001). The two Miraculous Medals, one of which was clearly modified; the locket with its secondarily carved lines; and the three intentionally buried bottles all appear to be material indicators of the spiritual lives of at least some of the residents of cabin #1. Based upon the stratigraphy that remained after the wooden floor of the cabin was removed, it is not yet possible to place these deposits and artifacts into a temporal sequence demonstrating the appropriation, adaptation, and change in the spiritual beliefs of the cabin's occupants. The date of manufacture of the gold Miraculous Medal cannot yet be determined, nor can the date of its modification, other than that it had to have occurred after 1832 when such medals were first produced, although the mid to late-1800s appears likely. The aluminum medal was most likely manufactured after 1915 when

aluminum could be extracted in an inexpensive and efficient manner. Two of the three bottles likely date to the first twenty years of the 20th century, while the third (the Hoyt's bottle) was likely produced during the 1880s-1890s.

Unfortunately, date of manufacture does not necessarily correspond to the date when the medals or the bottles were deposited. Based on their condition, it is likely that the bottles were deposited shortly after their original use as containers, but that might not have been the case. Certainly, the medals could have had years of use after their manufacture, and most likely did.

Unfortunately, even the stratigraphy associated with the brass locket cannot be employed to provide evidence to securely date the locket's manufacture, modification, or its placement under the cabin. That is, while the locket was found within the fill of a postmold that had been sealed by the original dirt floor of the cabin, a rodent burrow passed through the floor and into the posthole/mold beneath. The discovery of the locket within the postmold would suggest that the locket entered the archaeological deposit shortly after the post had been removed, likely during the construction of the cabin. However, the close proximity of the rodent burrow makes this conclusion open to interpretation.

Thus, evidence was developed during the 2006 excavations related to the question of the spiritual beliefs of residents of the Magnolia Quarters. However, cabin #1 does not appear to have been the church noted in the historical record of the site, or, at least, it lacks the deposits that ritually sanctified the

space of the Jordan and Richmond Hill praise houses/churches. Perhaps the additional excavations planned for the next three field seasons will provide the location of this church, but the 2006 fieldwork did answer at least one important question concerning the integrity of the site. As argued by Keel (1999), the site retains sufficient integrity to permit an examination of the lives of its residents.<sup>1</sup>

1. Excavations into Quarters Community by Kenneth Brown pp. 29-30