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Filming Belinda's Petition: A Half the History Story



I am Belinda, an African, since the age of twelve a Slave.
--from Belinda's Petition: A poem by Rita Dove

How can we start to connect with the story of someone whose time and life experiences are so distant from our own? I teach film studies and filmmaking at Tufts University, and my students and I faced this question over the course of this year as we developed and filmed the short film, *Half the History: Belinda's Petition*. The story of making this film began in 2013-14, when I launched the Half the History Project, a multi-media project created to highlight the under-told stories of women in American history. The 2-minute introductory film <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RRKeeW-55W8> provides an overview of the project, which is dedicated to increasing diversity of media representation.

As part of Half the History, my students began work on a short film on Jane Franklin, Benjamin Franklin's sister, and the Royall House and Slave Quarters allowed us to film some scenes at the site. The Royall House and Slave Quarters as a film setting is a production designer's

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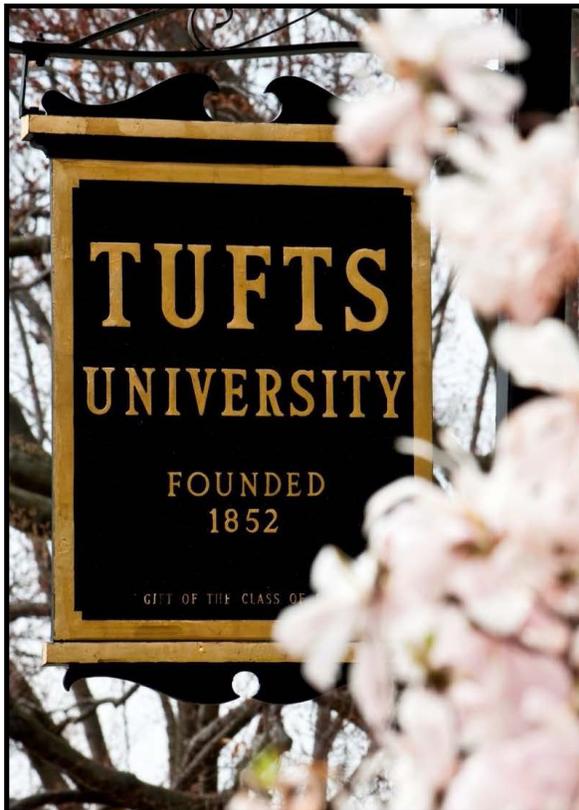
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In powerful, beautiful language, (voiced by Oregon Shakespeare Company's Kimberly Aileen Scott in the film), Belinda's petition chronicles her kidnapping, the Middle Passage, her realization of her position as a slave, and her eventual freedom. To visualize Belinda's story, we built on the emotions evoked by the diverse interior and exterior spaces of the site, with the older Belinda (played by Boston actor Monique McIntyre) seeing the ghosts of herself as a child and as a young woman reflected within and beyond the walls where she was enslaved.

dream (although we did have to frame out many of the lush details of the Royall House for that project, given Jane's relative poverty). Of the 20 professional crew, students and faculty involved in that shoot, none had been to the Royall House and Slave Quarters before even though the site lies less than a mile from Tufts. That day, our Jane Franklin crew base was in the slave quarters, where we were surrounded by the displays about the estate's history. Particularly striking were the artifacts from the 1999-2001 archaeological excavations that recovered objects owned and used by people enslaved on the estate. While filming the Jane Franklin scenes in the Royall House, over the sheer visual power of the setting, it was the echoes of Belinda's story in the space that struck me and my students the most. Filming in the very rooms where she was enslaved, it was clear we needed to come back to film Belinda's words and story.

This film brings together the two sides of my work. I have a background in African American studies (Henry Louis Gates, Jr. was my Ph.D. advisor, and we have since published books together, including *Call and Response: Key Debates in African American Studies*). I also am a working filmmaker, making features, commercials, and shorts since 1999 with my family company, Five Sisters Productions (<http://www.fivesisters.com>). Creating this film with my Tufts students has been particularly meaningful, since Tufts is built on land that was originally part of the Royall estate, and making this film as part of a class provided pointed teachable opportunities for the exploration of the history and legacy of American racial slavery.

A key aspect of the question of how to give voice to a story of enslavement was answered by the petition itself.

The horror of kidnapping and slavery are beyond cinematic recreation. Instead, *Belinda's Petition* draws on experimental uses of sight and sound to approach Belinda's story. For the Middle Passage scene, for example, we filmed the dark shadowy space of the Royall House basement as a reflection of the ship's hold during the Middle Passage, adding the sounds of waves and ship creaks to reinforce Belinda's traumatic memory. For the music to frame the film, we recorded original music with Tufts Professors Attah Poku and David Locke and Kiniwe, the African Music and Dance Ensemble of the Music Department, drawing on Ghanaian drumming traditions to evoke the region from which Belinda was captured when she was 12 years old.

The challenge of visualizing slavery was reinforced when we completed our first edit of the film—despite our conscious efforts to show the hardship of forced labor, our original memory scenes with the young enslaved Belinda looked too genteel, especially in the context of the luxurious furnishings of the Royall House. Luckily, we were able to return to the Royall House to film additional scenes conveying the hardship and the relentlessness of Belinda's enslaved labor.

As my students and I indicated in the credits of the film, we are grateful to have been able to tell Belinda's story, which would not have been possible without the support of the Royall House and Slave Quarters. Our special thanks to Peter Gittleman, Penny Outlaw, Tom Lincoln, and Jen Pustz.

Jennifer Burton is Professor of the Practice, Department of Drama and Dance, Tufts University.

Boston Middle Passage Port Marker Ceremony

by Emily MN Kugler and Katherine May Stevens

On August 23, 2015 in Boston, a remembrance ceremony will be held to draw attention to Boston's history as a Middle Passage Port Site, as well as to honor the memory of the enslaved survivors of the Middle Passage and their descendants. Remembering slavery in Boston may seem unusual, but Boston and New England were central to the development of slavery in the thirteen colonies, and slave labor was integral to the development of the city. Of the thirteen colonies, the Massachusetts Bay Colony was the first to formally legalize slavery in 1641, and for over 150 years enslaved people were part of the colony's economy, culture, and society.

Boston will be the first New England site to have both a marker and a ceremony as part of a larger movement in the Middle Passage Ceremonies and Port Marker Project (MPCPMP), which has sponsored remembrance ceremonies at more than 175 sites where ships carrying slaves across the Atlantic arrived in the New World. MPCPMP works with local institutions and historical interpreters, including the National Park Service, to create unique markers and ceremonies for each port site.

The Boston marker will introduce visitors to the history of the Middle Passage, and the MPCPMP remembrance ceremony will draw on diverse traditions from Africa and the Americas, including music, libation, and the laying of flowers into the Atlantic. The ceremony opens with two requests for permission to proceed. The first is given by a local tribal representative to acknowledge the intertwined histories of captivity and enslavement in Native American and African experiences of the Middle Passage, especially in Massachusetts. In 1637, the ship *Desire* took seventeen enslaved Pequots to the West Indies where it traded them for enslaved Africans and then returned to Boston. Its return marked one of the earliest recordings of African slaves in the colony. The ceremony will reflect on this earliest record of slavery in Boston, the long history of slavery that followed, and the resilience of survivors and descendants of slavery. The second permission given during the ceremony will be from an elder from the Boston community over the age of one hundred. Central to the ceremony is the West African practice of a "second burial"



which, as the MPCPMP website puts it, is not only an act of “personal and communal healing... but [an act in which] the living are fulfilling their responsibility to the dead – to those who died in the Middle Passage (two million) and those who survived (10 million) from whom we descend” (MPCPMP 9 Oct 2014).

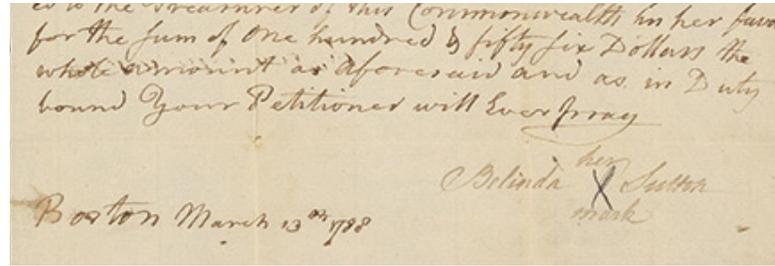
For more information on this event as well as resources on the Middle Passage's role in Colonial New England, see the website for the Boston branch of the Middle Passage Ceremonies and Port Markers Project: BostonMiddlePassage.org

References:

Button Kambic, Emily. “The Middle Passage.” Boston African American National Historic Site Newsletter. Winter 2014/2015. <http://www.bostonmiddlepassage.org/newsletter>

MPCPMP. “Second Burial.” Middle Passage Ceremonies and Port Marker Project. 9 October 2014. Web. Accessed 5 December 2014. <http://www.middlepassageproject.org>

New Details on Belinda's Story from the Massachusetts Archives



In February Harvard University launched a searchable online database of close to 3,500 anti-slavery and anti-segregation petitions sent to the Massachusetts colonial and state legislatures from the 1600s to 1870. These petitions are all housed at the Massachusetts Archives.

Of course we immediately searched for Belinda, enslaved for fifty years by the Royall family, whose successful 1783 petition to the Massachusetts General Court for a pension from the estate of Loyalist Isaac Royall Jr. is among the earliest narratives by an African American woman and an important resource for our museum's story of those enslaved here. Belinda was seventy years old when she wrote, "The face of your Petitioner, is now marked with the furrows of time, and her frame feebly bending under the oppression of years, while she, by the Laws of the Land, is denied the enjoyment of one morsel of that immense wealth, a part whereof hath been accumulated by her own industry, and the whole augmented by her servitude."

We had known that Belinda petitioned a second time for her pension's resumption. To our surprise, we found seven additional petitions relating to her original one. Hers are signed with an X, between the words "her mark," with Belinda's name alongside. They all reference in some way "that your petitioner in Con[s]ideration of her service for a long course of years in the family of the hon'ble Isaac Royall Esqr had an allowance by a Resolve of the honourable General Court of this Commonwealth."

With the invaluable assistance of Rebecca Ennis, a Tufts University undergraduate, who volunteered to transcribe these subsequent appeals to the legislature for us, we learned that in 1785 and 1787, Belinda requested resumption of the annual pen-

sion she had received just one time. After receiving another year's payment, in 1788 she asked for the three years' back payments due her, and in 1790 she notes that the executor of Royall's estate has refused to make any more payments without "further interposition of the General Court." In her final petition, in 1793, Belinda again asks for her pension's resumption, or other "relief & support in such way & manner as your Honours shall think fit," having received just two annual payments in ten years.

Remarkably, we also learned of Belinda's marriage through these subsequent petitions. The 1788 petition is that of "Belinda Sutton," described as a widow. Her 1793 petition is again in the name Belinda Sutton, this time witnessed by Priscilla Sutton.

In 1797 the executor asks that the state relinquish its hold on Royall's estate, that he may administer it according to the decedent's will. Apparently this occurred, as the final petition, submitted in 1799 on behalf of Royall's heirs, describes funds still held in the Massachusetts treasury from Royall's estate that were "intended to provide for the support of two family servants who were left behind & to prevent their becoming public incumbrances. As the last of said family servants is now dead," the petitioners continue, they request that the balance of the estate be directed to his descendants.

These names and dates are tantalizing leads to still more of Belinda's story, and of course we are left with new questions. Who was the man named Sutton to whom Belinda was married, and when did that marriage occur? Who was Priscilla Sutton, and what was her connection to Belinda?

These "new" details of an old story remind us that the past is always changing.

Please Welcome Our New Board Members



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Barbara Berenson is a lawyer and independent historian. She has worked as a senior attorney at the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court since 2004. She is the author of *Boston in the Civil War: Hub of the Second Revolution* (2014) and *Walking Tours of Civil War Boston: Hub of Abolitionism* (2011, 2nd ed. 2014), which is an official guide of the Freedom Trail Foundation. She is also a coeditor of *Breaking Barriers: The Unfinished Story of Women Lawyers and Judges in Massachusetts* (2012). Barbara's next book will focus on the history of the woman suffrage movement in Massachusetts.

Barbara first became interested in the Royall family when she attended Harvard Law School, because a bequest of Isaac Royall Jr. established the first professorship of law at Harvard. Even today, Harvard Law School's shield features the three sheaves of wheat from the Royall family crest. Barbara hopes to introduce Harvard Law School students to this history. While working at the Supreme Judicial Court, Barbara developed an expertise in the end of slavery in Massachusetts, and frequently presents on this topic to courthouse visitors and at professional development programs for teachers. She is honored to join the Board of the Royall House and Slave Quarters.



Collins Warren will join the board for the 2015-2016 fiscal year as the inaugural Belinda Sutton Board Member. Named in honor of the enslaved woman whose petition is central to the site's interpretation, this board position will be filled each year by a student enrolled in the Tufts University Museum Studies program. In addition to giving an emerging professional valuable experience working directly with a board charged with management of a small museum, this position will bring fresh and new perspectives to the table and deepen the Royall House and Slave Quarters' connection to the Tufts community.

Ms. Warren comes from South Carolina, where she studied at Furman University. She described her attraction to joining the board as follows: "The history of enslaved people and the impact of slavery on the South was a major part of my history education growing up, but I knew very little about slavery in the North. I was drawn to the Royall House because of their revitalized interest in telling that story to the public. I love museums for their ability to tell us stories from the past, and I hope to bring my experience with this organization to my future work in the museum field."

Program Updates

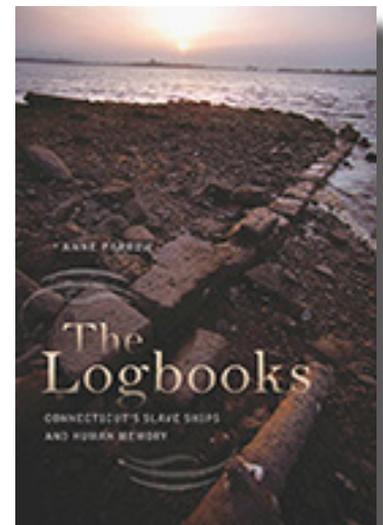
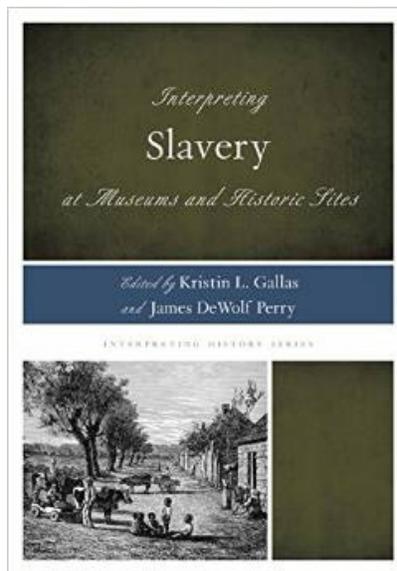
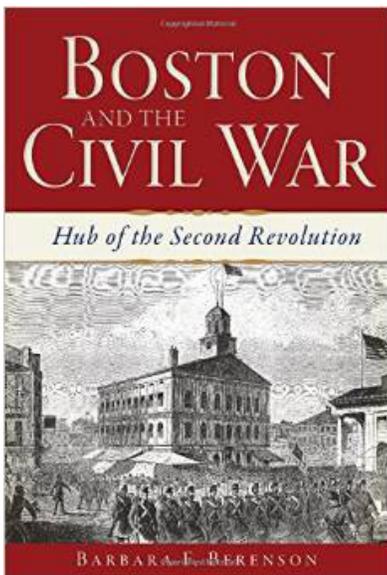
Although the museum is closed during winter and early spring, a range of public programs gave members a chance to learn more about important topics related to the mission of the Royall House and Slave Quarters, while introducing new friends to our unique historic site. Our fall and winter programs began on November 19, when Richard Douglass-Chin of the University of Windsor, Ontario, spoke on his research into the life of Belinda—the African woman held in bondage on the estate whose story was also the subject of Tammy Denease’s interpretation at our Giving Voice benefit on Sunday, June 7.

January 21 brought a fascinating discussion by attorney and historian Barbara Berenson on her new book *Boston and the Civil War: Hub of the Second American Revolution*, which traces the ways black and white abolitionists together worked to honor the promise of liberty made in the Declaration of Independence. While Berenson’s talk highlighted Boston’s contributions to freedom, a sobering talk on their work in progress by journalists Lisa Braxton and Alex Reid, on March 18, looked at

Boston’s pivotal role in the development of American slavery during the 17th and early 18th centuries.

On April 15, in conjunction with our annual meeting, journalist Anne Farrow spoke about her research into Connecticut’s part in the slave trade, documented in her recent book *The Logbooks: Connecticut Slave Ships and Human Memory*. And on May 6, after two postponements because of snow, Kristin Gallas and James DeWolf Perry of the Tracing Center on Histories and Legacies of Slavery visited to launch their new edited volume, *Why This Matters: Interpreting Slavery at Museums and Historic Sites*. The standing-room-only audience, which included representatives of several area historic sites, engaged the book’s editors in a thoughtful and candid discussion of the challenges facing those who interpret this difficult history and its legacy.

The three books featured by their authors during our program season are available for purchase at the Royall House and Slave Quarters.



Landscape Updates

When visitors come to the Royall House and Slave Quarters this season, they will likely notice a number of subtle but significant improvements in the appearance of the site. Not only will they find updated bathroom fixtures and a wider, more accessible doorway to one of the restrooms in the Slave Quarters, but fresh coats of paint on the buildings. Perhaps the most visible change is the condition of the decorative fence between the mansion and the summerhouse fragment.

Evidence suggests that during the Royalls' tenure in Medford there was such a structure between the west side of the mansion and the formal garden. An "L" portion near the northwest corner of the Slave Quarters may also have existed, now replaced by a large shade tree.

The decorative fence is evident in several late nineteenth century photographs, but likely disintegrated by the early twentieth century. The main section was recreated when the mansion was refurbished (ca. 1910-1925) as a Colonial Revival interpretation of the original fence. This version included a pair of painted pineapples, a motif that became popular in such re-creations to suggest hospitality and a connection to the maritime trades, despite the absence of any eighteenth century documentation of this custom.



This twentieth-century fence was mounted on a brick base and consisted of 11-foot sections interspersed with boxed fenceposts.

It is about 77 feet long, with a center entrance-way. The fenceposts were originally cedar, boxed in pine boards. Sometime in the early 1990s, the fence was repaired in several places.

For many years, the fence was an important visual element of the site. It framed the main house and the courtyard, as well as the Slave Quarters. Although somewhat conjectural in design, it was clearly influenced by the colonial era and its size and grandeur spoke of the wealth of the Royalls. Time, however, took its inevitable toll. Like all

outdoor wooden structures, the fence suffered from exposure to wind and water. In particular, the flat, horizontal trim on top of the bricks collected large quantities of rainwater and rotted. Similarly, water infiltration badly attacked the flat tops of the fenceposts. The pineapples, although mounted with an internal metal rod, also deteriorated over the decades.



By late 2013, the fence was in very bad shape, although the pickets were remarkably intact. That winter, one of the pineapples split in half. We saved the remaining pineapple and stored it in the Slave Quarters. Clearly, the clock was ticking loudly.

Given the poor condition of most of the twentieth-century materials, the best option was to recreate the fence using all new wood. Thanks to generous funding from Cummings Foundation, we were able to hire Ken German and George Guyton, master carpenters who have worked on several projects at the Royall House and Slave Quarters. Earlier this spring, they took down the rest of the pieces, carefully saved the pickets, and re-created the whole fence from the bottom up using rot-proof elements. Only two of the interior fenceposts were salvageable, so 4x4 pressure-treated lumber was installed instead; this will last into eternity, or at least beyond our own tenure!



If you study the fence carefully, you will note that the brick base is a bit "wavy," due to decades of frost heave. Our master restorers, however, have made the fence itself perfectly horizontal, a real construction tour de force!

The new fence has been primed in white, thanks to a donation by John Thompson, our master painter. Although the fence was entirely white for many decades, research suggests that fences like these were typically finished in the same trim color used on adjacent houses. Our fence will get a final coat in the off-white color of the mansion and Slave Quarters trim this fall.

A Tree Falls



For more than 100 years, an American beech tree held a prominent position in the east yard of the Royall House. In early May, however, a major branch gave way, fortunately missing the mansion, the fence between our property and the adjacent Royall Park, an interpretive panel, and—best of all—the painter who was at work perhaps twenty feet away.

Special thanks to our Landscape Committee volunteers Lindsay and Dale Rider for arranging and overseeing the tree's removal, and sincere thanks to the many generous friends who responded to our call via Facebook for donations to help cover this unanticipated expense. More than half the cost of removal was raised and we are grateful for the extra support.

It soon became apparent that the tree was rotted at its core, was potentially dangerous, and needed to be removed. Because of the narrow opening in the museum driveway, the bucket truck was based in the park and a seven-person crew spent three hours on the project the last week of May. The farewell was sad, but there is some good news: three beech saplings seem to be thriving along the park fence.



“Belinda’s Footsteps” Provides a Path from Schools to the Museum



Photograph by Doug Mindell.

With our on-site school program up and running, we were surprised that more teachers weren’t scheduling field trips. While many teachers are interested in the subject, we learned that teachers find the time commitment of an out-of-school visit difficult. To address this issue, our Education Committee worked with our education coordinator Olivia Searcy and two consultants to design an engaging complementary program that Olivia now takes into the classroom. Since February, Olivia has presented “Belinda’s Footsteps” to over 500 students at their elementary schools in Dorchester, East Boston, Malden, Medford and Roxbury.

Who was Belinda? How did she get from her West African homeland to Ten Hills Farm in Medford? What roles did the triangle trade and sugar play in her journey? These questions form the basis of “Belinda’s Footsteps: Sugar, Slavery, and Survival.” Students get the chance to move around the classroom carrying products and recreating the routes of the triangle trade. They learn about trade’s effect on products, people, and purses. They smell spices that were part of the trade. And students learn how people like Belinda survived and retained their identities as Africans through lifelong enslavement.

A third grade teacher from Roxbury’s Orchard Park School said “Belinda’s Footsteps” also “tied into math, with our study of triangles and pictograms (6 students = 600 people).” A fifth grade teacher commented that “Belinda was the

perfect example” for narrative writing and the African Experience which the class was currently focused on.

Our goal for the in-school program is that students will be engaged by Belinda’s story and their teachers will schedule a follow-up field trip to see where she lived and worked. This strategy seems to be working as several classrooms from the Dorchester and Roxbury schools have already come to the Royall House and Slave Quarters this spring. The repetition of Belinda’s story, as part of “Parallel Lives: Life and Work on a Northern Plantation,” helps to reinforce learning about slavery in colonial New England.

“Parallel Lives” is also gaining momentum on its own. Close to 700 students have visited the Royall House and Slave Quarters for this two-hour school program, which explores daily life in 1758 from the perspectives of two pairs of children living at Ten Hills Farm – the privileged daughters of Isaac Royall Jr. and Belinda’s two children Joseph and Prine, both enslaved.

Funding our part-time museum education coordinator, who schedules and teaches school programs, is provided by a generous multi-year grant from Cummings Foundation, along with transportation subsidies to ensure that students from a full-range of school districts have access to this important piece of American history.

For more information or to inquire about scheduling a program for your class, please contact Olivia Searcy at education@royallhouse.org

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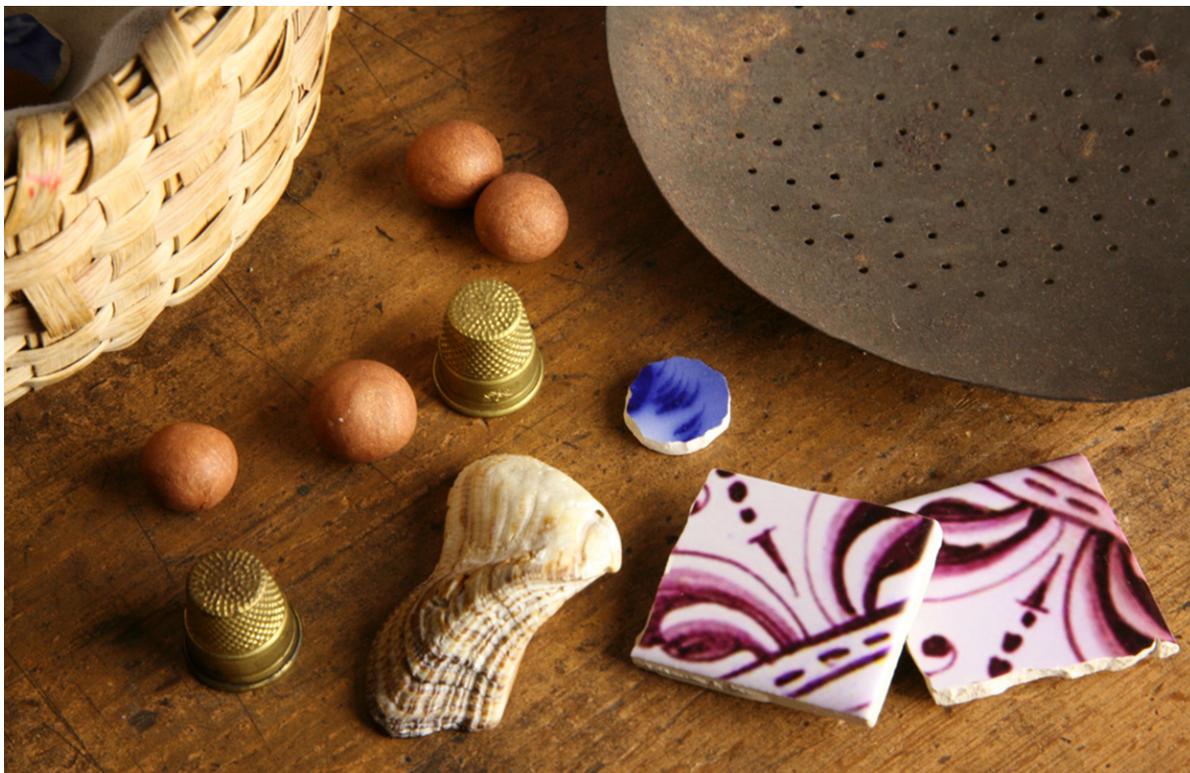
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“The Memory Keepers” in the March-April 2015 issue of Yankee Magazine featured the Royall House and Slave Quarters and our school field trip programs. Thanks to author Howard Mansfield and photographer Doug Mindell for capturing the spirit of our work, and sincere thanks to Yankee for this recognition.