

Stitching Stories: Fabric and Enslaved Lives at the Nathaniel Russell Kitchen House

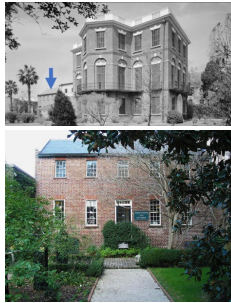
Eleanor Grauke, College of Arts and Sciences 2025



The Kitchen House Project

The Nathaniel Russell House, a National Historic Landmark managed by the Historic Charleston Foundation (HCF), is located at 51 Meeting Street in Charleston, South Carolina. While it is most often known as a sprawling example of antebellum mercantile Charleston wealth, the Penn Museum's Center for the Analysis of Archeological Materials aims to employ the site for an alternative purpose: understanding the lives of enslaved people in the city through the Kitchen House Project.

The home was built by wealthy merchant and trader of enslaved people Nathaniel Russell in 1808. It remained in the extended Russell family until 1857, when it was bought by Governor Allston of SC. During his ownership, the last enslaved people would occupy the kitchen house. In 1870, it was bought by Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy school. After a period of private ownership, the house was bought by HCF in 1955, since when it was opened to the public as a museum.



Research Goal

To utilize a combination of archeological and archival methods to gain greater understanding of the role of cloth in enslaved Charlestonians' lives.

There are three prongs in accomplishing this goal:

1. Facilitate the cleaning, cataloging, and analysis of archeological materials — cloth pieces recovered from the house.
2. Survey all advertisements from *The Charleston Daily Courier* relating to cloth which may have been used to clothe enslaved people.
3. Use information gained from the survey and existing research on the topic of enslaved peoples' clothing to determine the possible purpose of the cloth scraps found.

A Guide to Enslaved Peoples' Clothing in South Carolina

While there has been limited scholarship on the dress of enslaved Charlestonians, there has been some on the clothing of enslaved people in the antebellum South at large, which provides guidance in this project. The Negro Act of 1735 in South Carolina ordered enslaved people to only wear the cheapest of materials. Although this act could not be widely enforced, enslaved people commonly wore plain cottons and poor wools. Often they would be given rations of cloth which would then be sewn rather than being given full garments. However, these simple cloths only constituted most enslaved peoples' workwear — Sunday clothes were adorned with bright colors and patches, often mended hand-me-downs from their enslavers or stolen.

References

Jatkowski, Mary. "Individuals Enslaved at 51 Meeting Street, 1808-1863."

White, Shane, and Graham White. "Slave Clothing and African-American Culture in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries." *Past & Present*, no. 148 (1995): 149-86.

Shaw, Madelyn. *Slave Cloth and Clothing Slaves: Craftsmanship, Commerce, and Industry*. Images courtesy of HCF and the Gibbs Museum.

Mentorship & Funding

Thank you to my mentor, Dr. Katherine Moore, and Dr. Chantel White, Dr. Thomas Tartaron, Dr. Anne Tiballi, and the Historic Charleston Foundation. Thank you to Penn Undergraduate Research Mentorships (PURM) for funding this project.

Acknowledgement

The ultimate purpose of this research is to remember the enslaved people who lived and worked at the Nathaniel Russell House.

Cain, Suky, John, Rinchy Edwards, Momma, Judy, Tib, Renche, Diego, Andrew, George, Pickle, Lydia (shown right), Sue, Nancy, Friday, Fatima, Nancy, Sarah Bordeaux, William-Baron, Stephen Gallant, Moses, Joe Washington, Nellie, Nelson, Nannie, Aleck.



Methods

Archeological

The textiles I studied were recovered from the walls of the kitchen house.



During the time the house was occupied, rats tore off pieces of fabric from garments and scraps and carried them into the walls for nest-making. The rats are key to understanding this project — they not only were the agents of accumulation but also demonstrate the degraded living conditions of the enslaved people.

How do we know this fabric belonged to the enslaved residents?

- No obvious signs of sample contamination to indicate the material is from the past 50-100 years.
- However, this possibility cannot be ruled out and should be considered during the analysis process.

Cleaning, flattening, and storage process:

1. Labelled each item.
2. Cleaned by brushing away dirt with brush.
3. Flattened with humidity applied by conservation pencil and weighted down.
4. Put on acid-free paper in plastic bags for long-term storage.

I intend to collect the following data for analysis:

- Condition
- Color
- Size
- Primary structure
- Material
- Design

Archival

To understand what cloth was available in Charleston, I chose to conduct a survey of cloth advertisements published in *The Charleston Daily Courier*.

What this survey sought to understand:

1. How often were items explicitly advertised for use by enslaved people?
2. What type of cloth was being advertised?

The survey recorded all advertisements for cloth (that may have been bought to clothe enslaved people) in the first issues of January and June for each year from 1808-1815. This date range was chosen because it encompasses the first seven years that the house was occupied, during which 10-18 enslaved people lived and worked there.

For each individual mention* of cloth being sold, I recorded the following information:

- Newspaper issue — date of publication
- Page of advertisement location and title
- Item listed
- Item characteristics and material
- Origin of shipment and seller
- If advertisements explicitly mentions intended use for enslaved people

*This can result in multiple entries per advertisement.

Limitations:

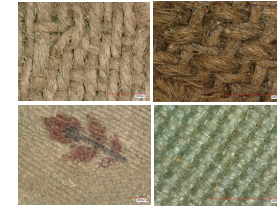
- Covers first seven years of occupancy.
- Trade likely changed most drastically prior to the Civil War.
- One of two major newspapers in the city.

Results

Archeological

Much of what was found in the kitchen house is what might be described as "plains" or cloth suitable for workwear, but there were also select examples of decorative, less functional fabrics, with patterns and/or harder-to-come-by materials.

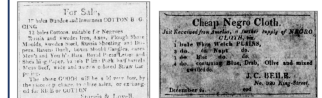
100+ scraps were cleaned, but this section will focus on 18 that I photographed and conducted a preliminary analysis of. Shown below are the results.



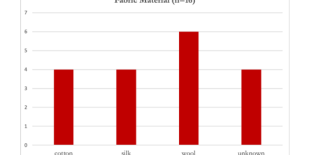
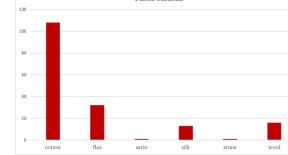
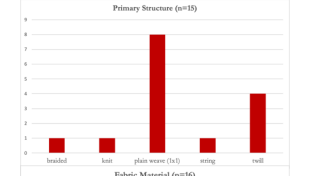
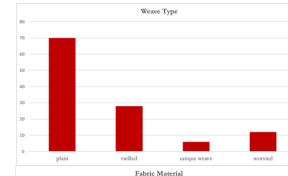
Archival

313 cloth items were ultimately included in the survey. The most common colors were blue, white, and black. The fabrics most commonly were shipped from England, India, and Philadelphia. Many sellers who put these advertisements for cloth in the paper were also advertising the sale of enslaved people.

The graphs shown below illustrate the most common weave types and fabric materials. 14 advertisements explicitly advertised the items as intended for use by enslaved people (see examples below).



(left to right) 1 June 1812, fig. 3; 2 Jan. 1815, fig. 2



Conclusions & Moving Forward

While this research is a start, it opens more paths that have yet to be explored and are crucial in further developing our understanding of enslaved peoples' lives in Charleston. Moving forward, I aim to continue the analysis of the fabric scraps I cleaned, expand the survey to other newspapers and a larger time frame, obtain any personal records of the enslavers of these people, and research the sellers featured in the survey.

In examining the cloth fragments from the Kitchen House alongside the newspaper survey and broader scholarship on enslaved peoples' clothing, we can begin to piece together a picture of the lives of the enslaved people living and working at the Russell House. These three strands of thought — archeological, archival, and historical — converge to illuminate their story. Perhaps the green silks stashed away by the rats which infested their quarters were Sunday clothes, or the twilled plains the workwear of one of the house's occupants.