Episode 808, Story 2: Face Jug

Gwen Wright: Our next case tracks down the mysterious origins of a grimacing clay vessel. October 1858: the American ship *Wanderer* sets sail from Africa, carrying a secret, illegal cargo…almost 500 African men, women and children, shackled in her belly. After six grueling weeks on the Atlantic, the *Wanderer* drops anchor off Georgia's notorious Jekyll Island. The slaves, riddled with disease and hunger, are sold and separated. Now, April Hynes from Washington Crossing, Pennsylvania has a ceramic jug that has been in her family for years, which she suspects may be connected to an African-American past.

April Hynes: I always wondered what secrets this curious jug might hold. Hi Gwen!

Gwen: Hi April! Nice to meet you.

April: Hi! Nice to meet you!

Gwen: Thank you.

April: This is what I wanted to show you.

Gwen: This is fascinating. Where did you find it?

April: Actually my grandfather found it. He was working as a plumber in Germantown, Pennsylvania back in the 1950's, and he was digging a sewer line for what is now a middle school on Loeber Avenue and Mount Pleasant Avenue. And amazingly enough his shovel came across this jug. He brought it home and he assumed that it could possibly be an Indian relic.

Gwen: So what did you think it was, April?

April: I wasn't quite sure. I just began to research online what it could possibly be.

Gwen: She discovered the jug was almost certainly not made by Native Americans, nor had it been made locally.

April: From what I've read, they were made in Edgefield, South Carolina by African Americans in the mid-19th century.

Gwen: What would you like for me to find out about this?

April: I'd like to know could it have been brought up through the Underground Railroad? And what its significance might have been to its owner?

Gwen: Would it be okay if I sit here and examine it more closely?

April: Absolutely.

Gwen: Thanks, April.

April: You're welcome.

Gwen: Well, it's certainly a very striking object. Very strong features, rather simplified, although the nose is very well formed. The expression is rather forbidding, as if it's trying to frighten something away. It's missing one eyelid. I presume that got knocked off at some point. You can see that it was a jug for pouring something out of. And this is actually very well made at the top. There's no indication of where it was made or when. You know I have to admit, I'm a bit skeptical about the idea of the Underground Railroad. Anyone who was a fugitive had such difficult, dangerous conditions, they took almost nothing with them. And something this fragile, to worry about that would have been one more risk. David Barquist is the curator of American Decorative Arts at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. I'm eager to show you this piece. Now this was found buried on the outskirts of Philadelphia. What do you make of that?

David Barquist: Well that's very unusual.

Gwen: David says the vessel is known as a face jug. While he is not an expert on pieces such as these, he confirms what April discovered — that face jugs are most closely associated with the Edgefield region of South Carolina.

Gwen: Ours looks to be in the style of those made by African-Americans in Edgefield around the middle of the 19th century.

David: They're very rare. I don't know of more than 10 or 12 of these. This piece is thrown on a potter's wheel, all of the decoration in it is modeled by hand. This is actually an ash glaze which is done with wood ash. So Gwen these are our face jugs.

Gwen: You have three. David says that face jugs represent some of the earliest folk art by African Americans. But he's never heard of an Edgefield face jug unearthed so far from South Carolina.

David: You would expect these to be closer to home in the South.

Gwen: Now the owner of our jug thinks that it was made before the Civil War and was carried up North as part of the Underground Railroad. Does that seem feasible to you? David explains that during the Civil War, the local potteries, and their slave labor, mass-produced clay wares like pitchers and plates for the Confederate Army.

David: It's more likely these were made after the Civil War when the factories weren't geared up to support the war effort.

Gwen: What do you think was the purpose of these jugs? David says there are different schools of thought on the significance of face jugs, but he believes they served a utilitarian purpose.

David: Well they're jugs. They were meant to be used. African-Americans traditionally took water jugs out into the fields when they were working in agriculture. And that's probably what these were used for.

Gwen: The Germantown Historical Society holds records from the area where this jug was unearthed. If April's jug was carried from South Carolina, there's a chance that the person who brought it north could be listed in these records uncovered by volunteer researcher Sam White.

Sam White: We have the earliest ones we could find.

Gwen: The oldest Germantown map in the collection dates to 1876, 11 years after the Civil War. Using the notes April provided, it doesn't take long to find the exact spot. It's the estate of Samuel Unruh. Just one small house. I would guess this was a working farm and there might have been several laborers living there. I'm going to look up the census records for the area. I pull the records for 1850 through 1900. Oh, here he is. So, Unruh was a farmer. There are two people with a different last name. Joshua. There's no indication of race. One person born in Germany, everyone else born in Pennsylvania. I'm not finding anyone from South Carolina. The jug's design and features are so striking. I want to enlist the help of my fellow detective Tukufu Zuberi.

Tukufu: Hey Gwen! How are you doing?

Gwen: Tukufu's made many trips to the African continent in search of links to modern African-American culture. I'm hoping he knows a potter who can explain how this was made.

Tukufu: Face jugs – alright I'll see who I can find that knows about this…This is my first encounter with a face jug, but the prominent design and the grimace remind me of sculpture I've seen in different parts of Africa. I've tracked down Jim McDowell, one of the few potters around who makes face jugs using 19th century techniques. These are the pictures of the jug that I told you about.

Jim McDowell: These are very rare.

Tukufu: Can we talk about it?

Jim: We can go make some!

Tukufu: Jim comes from a long line of potters who began making ceramics as slaves in 18th century Jamaica. He says the process of making face jugs — or ugly jugs as he calls them — has changed very little.

Jim: This is the wheel that would have been used back in 1800s.

Tukufu: The first step is to throw the pot, which provides a base for the face.

Jim: A guy would sit down here at this wheel, he'd make 30 jugs in a day.

Tukufu: Jim explains how African-American potters divided their labors.

Jim: The face jugs were usually made at the end of the day. When all the work was done. All right. This jug's finished. It's ready now to go and put a face on.

Tukufu: Alright. Let's go do it.

Jim: This piece was made a day or so ago, so it's dry. And we always start off with the nose. When you attach two pieces of clay you have to score and slip it, otherwise they won't attach. Put on the nostril there. And then I blend it in. Your turn. You do an eyeball.

Tukufu: My turn! Let's see. So I draw my eyeball. Then I score it?

Jim: Score it, uh-huh. And put some slip on it.

Tukufu: Now it's my understanding that these jugs were used to carry water in.

Jim: Some of them may have been, but from my perspective they were used as grave markers. The slave potter would have made the jug and given it to a person while they were living and they would put molasses or beans or what ever they had. When they died, because slaves were not allowed to have a grave marker, this jug was placed on the grave site.

Tukufu: Jim believes that this tradition was a synthesis of Christianity and indigenous African beliefs, but he's not sure where in Africa the tradition originated.

Jim: Now that jug is basically finished.

Tukufu: The jug is then left to dry for several days before being dipped into a vat of glaze.

Tukufu: Then, after baking in a wood-burning kiln, the face jug is complete.

Tukufu: It's Beautiful. Ugly.

Jim: Oh, thank you. Thank you.

Tukufu: Why are these face jugs so ugly?

Jim: They thought that if was ugly enough it would scare the devil away from your grave so your soul could go to heaven.

Tukufu: Look, thank you very much.

Jim: Thank you very much too. I enjoyed it.

Gwen: What Tukufu discovered is fascinating. Now I want to see what I can learn in South Carolina. Archaeologist Mark Newell uncovered relics from the old Edgefield potteries. Well I'm eager to show you this face jug Mark. Here you go. What do you think?

Mark Newell: I can tell immediately, there's no doubt, this was made here in the Old Edgefield District of South Carolina.

Gwen: Mark says that historians believe Edgefield is associated with face jugs because of a notorious chapter in U.S. History. In 1858, the Edgefield district received some of the captive Congolese men and women from the slave ship *Wanderer*. This illegal delivery, made fifty years after the slave trade was banished, would be one of the last documented mass shipments of enslaved Africans to the United States.

Mark: Their religious beliefs obviously were very fresh. This was something that they would have wanted to continue to practice and use. Also it was something that they introduced African-Americans to, being fresh from the Congo.

Gwen: Mark says that it was around this time that face jugs began to appear in the area.

Mark: We believe that these particular Congo slaves in the 1850's came here, learned pottery and then adapted these vessels to a prior religious use that they brought from the Congo.

Gwen: Well, were there artifacts in the Congo as part of the religions that have a parallel?

Mark: Absolutely. Previous researches have made an association between an object called and N'kisi Doll and these objects. And we can see a very clear connection as I'd like to show you. This, Gwen, is the ancestor of your face jug. The wide eyes, the open mouth, typical design characteristics which we immediately see similarities for. In the case of the N'kisi Doll the object would have this body cavity in it and the shaman in Africa would put magical substances inside the object and then seal it. And that captures the power and the energy of the substances.

Gwen: So somebody might have put similar substances in here?

Mark: We think the jug was just an ideal vehicle for these magical substances and the face and the eyes, everything matches the N'kisi Doll.

Gwen: So how were these objects used?

Mark: Well we don't know the complete story, but one of the things that we do know is that they were often buried at a door, a back door or a front door because the power of the object would keep evil spirits or evil influences and energies from entering into the house.

Gwen: That makes sense because this one was found buried.

Mark: Why don't you come with me? I've got something I'd like to show you. Well, Gwen, this is what I wanted you to see. The Lewis Miles Pottery, the commercial pottery was over there in the woods, quite a ways away.

Gwen: Mark explains that after the Civil War, former slaves continued to work at the Lewis Miles pottery, making commercial earthenware.

Gwen: But they had a separate kiln where they could create their own items.

Mark: Ten years ago we came to this location and we produced some evidence here that immediately showed us we'd found one of these isolated little spots where a potter was making face jugs.

Gwen: What Mark shows me next connects this site with a discovery 700 miles away. Well April this has been an extraordinary investigation with some major surprises. First of all, there was no evidence that this was carried north as part of the Underground Railroad.

April: Okay.

Gwen: We discovered something truly remarkable in South Carolina. On the extensive site of the former Lewis Miles pottery, former slaves had operated their own kiln, making face jugs. Oh, my! That is so striking!

Mark: It's exactly the same nose. And the neck is identical to your neck. Several years ago I documented a face jug for the Metropolitan Museum. I wanted to show you these photographs because it's clear Gwen.

Gwen: Oh! Look at that! That is the same nose!

Mark: The same neck, the same handle, the same ears and eyes. This jug is clearly the twin of the jug that you're holding, and look! I didn't even notice this, but the potter held this pot in the same position as he held your pot when it was dipped in the glaze. That is amazing.

Gwen: The marks of his fingers there and on here…

April: Oh my gosh!! His thumb—

Gwen: Are the signs of his fingers.

April: Oh, look at that. Ah! Oh my word.

Gwen: I tell April that while we don't know exactly how or why our jug came north, other artifacts recovered from the Lewis Miles pottery site have been dated to between 1867 and 1872. So April, this represents a direct connection between an African-American freedman and his specific African past.

April: You can see why that they were carried up north, 700 miles, you know. If you're going to take something, I'd take that.

Gwen: When the *Wanderer* arrived at Jekyll Island filled with human cargo, it made national news. Within a month, three of the slave runners responsible were arrested and charged with piracy. But a trial in Savannah, Georgia, found the men "not guilty," and no one involved with bringing the enslaved Africans to the United States was ever brought to justice. Survivors of the *Wanderer* continued to live in South Carolina, well into the 20th century.