



Early 19th-century postcard depicting a lucky horseshoe and an old worn boot. Personal collection of M. Chris Manning.

INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

What are concealed shoes?

The practice of displaying and concealing objects and symbols in and around buildings for protection and good luck has been widely documented throughout the world. In Great Britain, shoes and other footwear are frequently found hidden within buildings.

Commonly referred to as *concealment shoes* or *concealed shoes*, the practice appears to have originated in the early 14th century. Although most concealed shoes have been found in Britain, examples have also been reported in Europe and in the former British colonies of Australia, Canada, and the United States (Swann 1996). There are now approximately two thousand known cases of concealed footwear around the world and more than one hundred cases in the United States alone (Geisler 2003).

Concealed shoes are usually old and well-worn, often with holes or repairs. Although most cases of concealed footwear involve single shoes or boots, it is not uncommon to find a matched pair or a deposit containing several odd, unmatched shoes of different styles and sizes. Recently, a deposit of nearly 100 shoes, not a single matched pair among them, was discovered underneath the fireplace of a stone cottage in Britain and is believed to be the largest deposit of concealed footwear found to date (BBC News 2010).

Where are they found?

Examples of concealed footwear have been found in cottages and castles, schools and libraries, churches, factories, and even in government buildings. The most popular location within a building is near a fireplace or chimney, accounting for more than a quarter (26%) of all reported finds. The second most common location for concealed footwear is under the floor or above a ceiling (23%). About 19% are found within walls, while another 19% are found in attics, eaves, and roof spaces. Other places concealed footwear have been found include under stairs, inside cupboards (usually next to a chimney), under or above windows and doors, and in foundations (Swann 1996). Frequently, the exact location of a concealed shoe deposit is not adequately documented and valuable information regarding this little-known folk practice is lost.



Sir John Schorn conjured the Devil into a boot.

Why are they there?

Nobody knows for sure why shoes were concealed in buildings because there are no historic written records describing the practice. The most widely accepted explanation is that shoes served an apotropaic (evil-averting) function, protecting a building and its occupants from evil or harmful forces such as witches, demons, fire and lightning, and just plain bad luck (Geisler 2003:80-1). In the late 13th century, Sir John Schorn, a parish priest from Buckinghamshire, England, is said to have trapped the Devil in a boot. It has been suggested that this astonishing feat inspired others to conceal footwear in their homes for a similar purpose (Merrifield 1987:134-5). Many cultures believe that malignant magical beings such as witches, demons, and ghosts can enter a house through vulnerable openings such as doors, windows, and chimneys. These so-called ‘spiritual openings’ are often where shoes and other magical protective devices are found (for example, a horseshoe hung over a door). One American folklorist working in Illinois in the early 20th century recorded the following belief: “If someone comes to your house and you think they are a witch and you don't want them to come in, lay an old shoe in the door; and if she is a witch, they cannot step over the shoe” (Hyatt 1935:538). In addition to being viewed as spirit traps and repellants of evil, old shoes are also associated with general good luck, a more modern manifestation of an earlier apotropaic function (Hyatt 1935:164).

There is some evidence that old, well-worn shoes required special disposal as they were closely connected to the wearer, having taken on the shape of the individual's foot and thereby containing part of their soul (Daniels and Stevans 1971[1903]:496; Swann 1996). In the United States, it was thought that throwing away or giving away your old shoes or wearing the shoes of another person would invite misfortune (Daniels and Stevans 1971 [1903]:493; Hyatt 1935). Additionally, it was a common belief that old shoes should be burned for good luck and to “keep the witches away” (Hyatt 1935:538). Old shoes, it appears, were considered powerful objects of luck and magic and special treatment or disposal of them was necessary. Perhaps concealing old shoes within a building, especially near the fireplace, was an acceptable method of disposing of such a powerful, personal object (Hyatt 1935:164).



It is likely that several different but overlapping beliefs concerning old shoes were responsible for their concealment within buildings, and it is almost certain that the underlying motivations changed over time (Swann 1996). It is hoped that continued documentation of concealed shoe deposits will shed more light on the beliefs underlying this folk practice.

17th-century illustration of demons hovering around a house (St. George 1998:187)

HIDDEN FOOTSTEPS: ANALYSIS OF A FOLK PRACTICE

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RESEARCH METHODS

The discovery of concealed shoes is almost always circumstantial. They are usually found by do-it-yourself homeowners or professional construction and demolition crews. Usually the finder has no idea of the significance of his or her discovery, and frequently the shoe ends up in a box, on a shelf, or in the trash with little or no documentation. As a result, the details of most shoe finds are not well documented.

In fact, according to the Concealed Shoe Index maintained by the Northampton Museum in Great Britain, only one case of concealed footwear had been reported in Indiana prior to beginning my research—a single woman's shoe discovered in the attic of a building (Geisler 2003:107). No other details of the find are known. Then quite accidentally, I came across a news article describing a shoe found in the Carnegie Library in Muncie. As I began researching concealed shoes, I discovered additional examples from Indiana as well as from other regions of the country. All of the cases were discovered either by word of mouth or as a result of long hours of creative and diligent internet searches followed by a series of email inquiries. None of the examples of concealed shoes in Indiana were documented *in situ*, which isn't surprising considering how few people are aware of the significance of such finds. As a result, many of the details of individual cases are limited. The following section summarizes what is known about each find.

CONCEALED SHOES IN INDIANA

Research has turned up four additional cases of concealed shoe finds in Indiana. It is important to note that none of these finds were widely publicized, which suggests that similar finds may exist that have yet to come to light.

Sullivan House, Madison, IN

The earliest example from Indiana is a cache of shoes from the Sullivan House in Madison. In September 2008, a severe windstorm uprooted a large tree which struck the building and caused extensive damage to the southeast corner of the roof, revealing a pair of shoes that had been deposited between the roof rafters. Then in March of 2010, a larger deposit of shoes was found wedged between the gutter and attic insulation only a few feet from the earlier deposit. This second deposit consisted of five odd women's shoes, one woman's woven house slipper, and a man's Wellington-style boot. All of the shoes have been dated to 1840-50, when it is estimated the box gutter was put on the 1818 Sullivan House (John Staicer, pers. comm. 2011; Main Street Cobbler).

Indiana Statehouse, Indianapolis, IN

Two late nineteenth-century workmen's boots were found at the Indiana Statehouse during renovations in 2008. One of the boots was discovered by a worker under the floorboards in front of a window on the first floor (Mereditth McGovern, pers. comm. 2011). The exact location of the second shoe is unknown at this time.

Carnegie Public Library, Muncie, IN

In 2003, a well-worn boot was found on a hidden ledge behind a gas fireplace mantle in the Carnegie Public Library. A brief note was included inside the boot which indicated that a man by the name of Frank Garrett, a plasterer who worked on the construction of the library in 1903, was responsible for the concealment (Carlson 2003; Gentis 2003; Pearson 2003). The Muncie find is one of the most recent examples of concealed footwear in the United States and one of only two examples that can be positively associated with an individual person (see Geisler 2003:25). By including his name, address, and the date, Frank was laying claim to a centuries-old tradition while leaving his mark on an important public building in Muncie.

Heinzerling Log Home, Garrett, IN

A fourth case of concealed footwear in Indiana consists of three shoes found under the eaves of a log home just south of Garrett, Indiana (Heinzerling 2002). It is unclear if the shoes were associated with the 1837 construction date of the building or with a ca. 1850 addition. The previous owner who discovered the shoes is no longer living, thus it has been difficult to obtain additional details of this particular find.



Two men's work boots found at the Indiana Statehouse in Indianapolis (left and center), from the collection of the Indiana State Museum and Historic Sites; a workman's boot discovered hidden in the Carnegie Public Library in Muncie (right), photo by Shirley Baston Pearson.

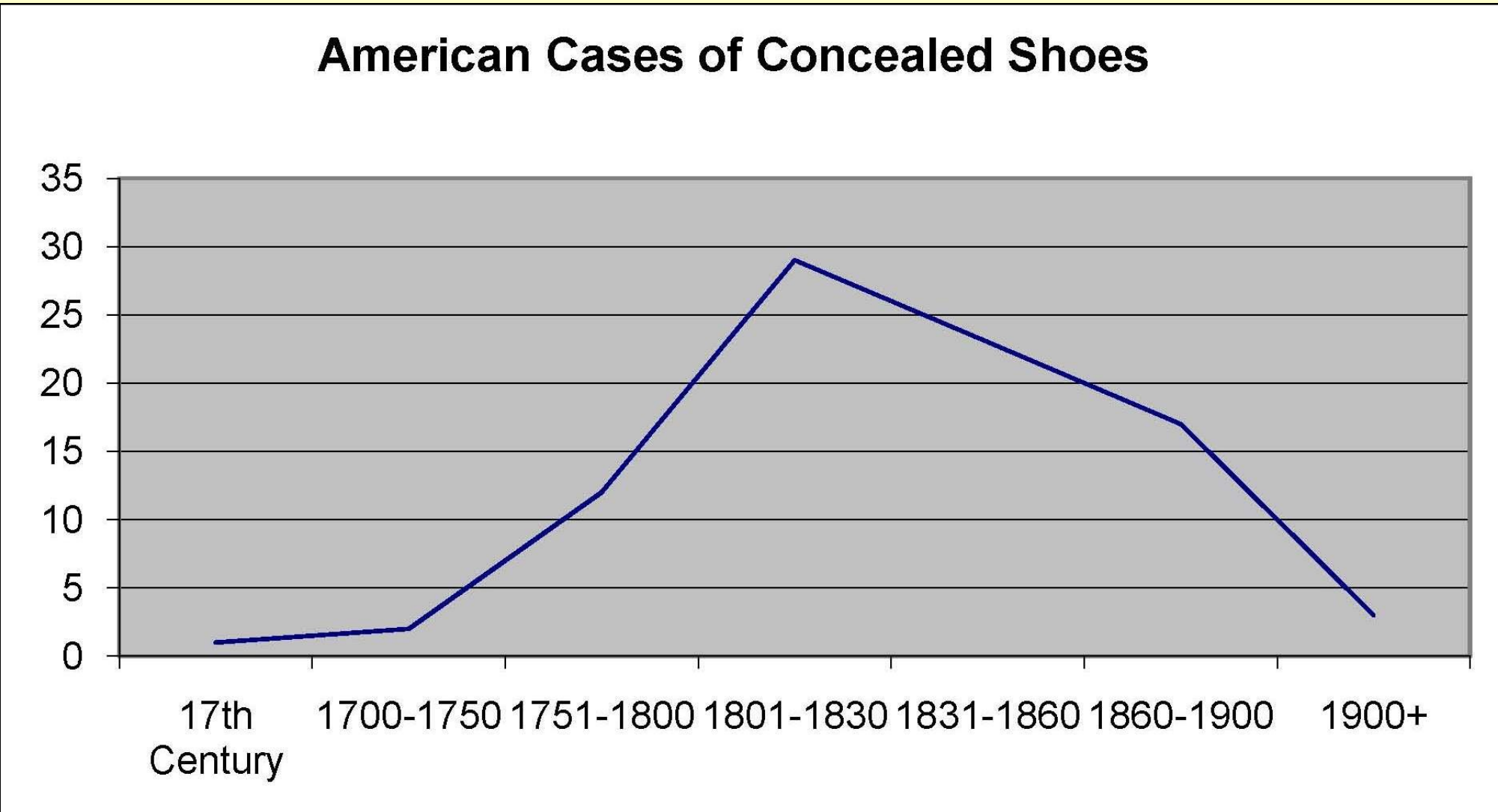


DISCUSSION

How do the Indiana cases compare to existing data on concealed footwear?

In her 2003 Master's thesis, Jessica Geisler compiled a data set of more than 100 cases of concealed footwear in the United States. Her data was obtained in part from the Northampton Concealed Shoe Index, as well as through a search process similar to my own. Her data shows that a large number of American cases date to the early 19th century (1801-1830), tapering off during the later part of the century and all but disappearing by the early 20th century. Overall, Geisler's findings support the research of June Swann, founder of the Concealed Shoe Index and an authority on concealed footwear in Great Britain and Europe, which suggests strong temporal and spatial patterning that has the potential to enrich our understanding of this undocumented folk practice.

Temporal distribution of one hundred and six reported cases of concealed footwear across the United States. After Geisler 2003:88, Figure 11.



How do we know these shoes were deliberately concealed?

Some researchers argue against the claim that shoes were deliberately deposited in buildings for magical or protective purposes, finding it difficult to believe that such a widespread practice would leave virtually no trace in the written record (Carlson 2008). They argue instead that shoes were simply lost, tossed into walls for insulation, disposed of as rubbish, or dragged into place by animals. However, as Merrifield has pointed out, while it is easy to dismiss individual examples, in most cases “they have been deposited in places that are normally accessible only at the time of building or structural alteration, or by taking considerable trouble at other times, for example by raising a floorboard” (Merrifield 1987:133). Furthermore, the sheer number of cases and the obvious patterning strongly suggest that shoes and other footwear were deliberately placed within a structure to serve a specific function. Merrifield adds, “As always, evidence for a custom becomes convincing only when instances are multiplied, as in this case they are in abundance” (Merrifield 1987:133).

In addition, there are numerous examples of shoes found in specially-made cavities that appear to serve no other purpose. The Muncie find is one such example. Other cases of concealed footwear have been found with unusual objects that indicate a ritual or magical function. For example, in London, England, a bricked-up recess near a fireplace in a 17th-century house contained the bodies of four chickens, “two which had been



A child's boot and a copy of the world's smallest Bible found in a chimney in England. (Viegas 2007).

strangled, and two apparently walled-in alive,” a candlestick, a broken glass goblet, and two unmatched shoes (Merrifield 1987:129). A more recent find in Britain included a child's boot with a miniature Bible placed inside (Viegas 2007). It has also been suggested that over time the practice evolved into a builder's tradition along the lines of ‘topping out’ (Geisler 2003; Swann 1996). There is evidence to support this theory, particularly as more examples from 20th-century public buildings are discovered. In addition to the Muncie boot and the Indiana Statehouse examples, concealed footwear have also been found in at least two other state capitol buildings in Ohio and Kansas, as well as in a military barracks in California (Carlson 2007; Geisler 2003; May 2001).

CONCLUSIONS

While anthropologists have long been interested in religion, ritual, magic, and witchcraft in ‘exotic’ cultures, there has been a noticeable lack of comparable interest in magic and ritual in Western cultural traditions. Archaeologists in particular seem reluctant to explore such issues, preferring instead to stick to questions regarding technology, subsistence, political structure, and commerce. This deficiency is in large part the result of the widespread opinion that cognitive aspects of culture are not discernable from the archaeological record.

In the last fifteen years, however, there has been an increasing awareness of the importance of understanding cognitive processes in order to achieve a more complete understanding of a particular cultural group. Deliberately concealed footwear is just once small example of a diverse tradition of magical belief in the historic period, but with literally thousands of cases now documented and more emerging every day, they have the potential to provide valuable insight into cultural practices and corresponding worldviews that are not available in the written record.

Perhaps just as importantly, research of concealed shoes vividly demonstrates the rich data that is available to archaeologists who expand their research to include above-ground material evidence. What is truly needed, however, for research to advance in this area, is more collaboration between archaeologists, folklorists, historic preservationists, and members of the building trades.



Part of the second deposit of shoes found in the Sullivan House, Madison, Indiana. Photo used with permission from Main Street Cobbler.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This poster is just the beginning of my thesis research on concealed apotropaic objects. I hope to locate additional examples of concealed footwear in the United States not previously documented and to assemble a statistically significant data set (>30 new cases) in order to conduct statistical analysis and identify patterns. I also plan to gather data on other types of concealed objects (horseshoes and iron implements, animal remains, and witch bottles) which I will use to construct a methodological and theoretical framework for locating, identifying, and interpreting concealed objects in the United States.

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