

Beneath the Floorboards: Whispers of the Enslaved at Marlpit Hall**At Monmouth County Historical Society's Marlpit Hall****Exhibit Website: <https://www.monmouthhistory.org/beneath-the-floorboards>****DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14713/njs.v8i2.297>**

Beneath the Floorboards: Whispers of the Enslaved at Marlpit Hall is a new permanent exhibit from the Monmouth County Historical Society (MCHA). The exhibit is part of a larger reinterpretation effort across all MCHA's museums that began in 2019 with the aim of highlighting the stories of enslaved African Americans who resided in their colonial-era homes. From 1780 to 1830, at least ten enslaved people lived at Marlpit Hall, four of whom were likely born in the house. *Beneath the Floorboards* tells the stories of seven of these individuals, and places their struggles and lives in the larger context of slavery in Monmouth County and New Jersey. The exhibit features physical objects as well as text panels and replicas of documents from the family's archives.

The first room of the exhibit is the main hall of Marlpit Hall. It introduces visitors to the Taylor family, who owned the home, as well as to the enslaved people who made up their "kitchen family": York, Tom, Mary Ann, Elizabeth, William, Hannah Matilda, Clarisse, Ephraim, and George. Throughout the exhibit, there are life-sized mannequins dressed in period clothing that represent the enslaved members of the household. In this first room, visitors "meet" Tom, an enslaved boy who was sold following the death of Joseph Taylor. The panel with his story includes a runaway advertisement placed by Taylor's son in 1796.

The front right room of the house tells the story of Clarisse Leonard and focuses on the social networks and faith of enslaved people. The main attractions in this room are the objects found underneath the floorboards of Marlpit Hall itself. These objects included shards of pottery, shells, and small animal bones. These objects were connected to protection rituals that derived

from those of various West African tribes. Also in this room are several objects that have been reinterpreted through the lens of slavery, including a collection of earthenware kitchenware.

The bedroom has a beautiful quilt as the centerpiece. This quilt was made specifically for the exhibit and uses colors reminiscent of the objects found under the floorboards. This room features the story of Elizabeth Van Cleaf, who was manumitted but remained with the Taylor's as a domestic servant. Toward the end of her life, she lived in an African American neighborhood known as "Africa" in the area.

The next room is the dining room, where paintings of Taylor family members could be seen looking out at mannequins representing William Van Cleaf and York. Another wall is filled with blown-up copies of runaway slave ads, including several put out by the Taylor's themselves. After their manumission, both William and York struck out on their own, but their fates are unknown to us. The theme of this room is hopes and dreams.

One of the most compelling rooms is the kitchen. Here visitors can see the steep stairs that led up to the third floor, where enslaved people lived. The stairway served as a visible divide between the enslaved and their enslavers. This room speaks about the daily lives of the "kitchen family" and the stories of Ephraim Leonard and Hannah Van Cleaf, both of which have a theme of separated families: Hannah being sold away from her children, and Ephraim having been born to an enslaved woman and freed man.

The final room of the exhibit features the object that helped kick this whole project into motion: a set of shackles. They had originally been unearthed as part of an archaeological dig at Marlpit Hall and were then recently rediscovered among decades-old boxes of artifacts. The shackles' placement in a room with a model and images of Marlpit Hall serves to once again show the contrast between enslaved and enslaver. This room also has three objects that belonged to

Elizabeth Dorn, an enslaved woman from Monmouth County. They are a chair, a worn garment, and a pencil portrait. Seeing these three objects together in one room really emphasizes how few objects there are up until this point. The objects that are featured in other rooms largely belonged not to the people whose stories visitors have been reading, but to the Taylor family. It serves once again to emphasize the line between enslaved and freed.

While the exhibit relies heavily on written panels and has fewer physical objects, this is not a detriment. In fact, it only serves to highlight the objects that have survived and give them more weight and meaning. It is fascinating to see how the classic objects visitors often see at house museums were reinterpreted to tell long-untold stories. The exhibit does not shy away from difficult subjects or try to cover up the gaps in the records, but rather openly embraces those silences and absences. *Beneath the Floorboards* is very well researched and paints a cohesive picture of the lives of the enslaved in Marlpit Hall, Monmouth County, and New Jersey at large.

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