

Things and Patterns – from Pyramiden to Patagonia

Festschrift in honor of Professor
Hein Bjartmann Bjerck

Birgitte Skar, Heidi Breivik og Martin Callanan (red.)



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Salt House

For an Act of Unrelinquished Obligation

Christopher Witmore

ABSTRACT

Taking inspiration from Hein B. Bjerck's work on auto-archaeology, this chapter returns to an object from my family farm in North Carolina, a long-neglected salt house. In working with what has become of this building, something rare in historical literature, it finds its way to themes of entropy, change, memory, and time to weave archaeology into a personal narrative of inheritance, obligation, incongruence, and redemption. In so doing, it embraces Bjerck's evocative approach to the archaeology of home.

Introduction

Even though the well-deserved celebration of Hein B. Bjerck and his career-long contributions to contemporary archaeology, prehistory, comparative studies of human-sea relations, and the creative engagement with scientific modes of articulation occasions this *festschrift*, I want to confess at the outset that the work presented here was inspired by Hein's path-breaking research on the archaeology of home well before I received the timely invitation to contribute (Bjerck 2014, 2022). This chapter returns to my family farm, a 22-acre (8.9-hectare) tract in Laurinburg, North Carolina passed down through my grandmother's family, and childhood home, an early nineteenth-century house renovated by my parents in the 1980s, to undertake the auto-archaeology of a long-neglected salt house. Where an object of my father's aspirations meets the pragmatics of maintaining the property as a working farm, it explores issues of ruination, the barrier between remembrance and object memory, deontology (the study of duty and obligation), renovation, and inheritance. Where the revelation of a deeper past, one that stretches over six generations, interrupts stories passed on to me that drew their coherence from an exclusive connection between family and objects tied to a swatch of hereditary ground, it opens considerations of mnemonic alienation and the role of archaeology in reconciliation.

"Auto-archaeology," for Hein, is "about how you encounter this material world, using the gravity of

your personal experience as a reference and an asset, as a way of peeping behind the horizon of traditional archaeology" (Bjerck 2022:24). What I admire among other attributes in Hein's auto-archaeology is the brave balance that he manages to strike between personal narrative—through his engagement with the home of his father Rolf Bjerck (1923–2009) after his death—and scholarly concerns. By inverting an assumed professional distance, Hein challenges the impersonal in archaeological writing—the withdrawal from the "I"—to create an imaginative narrative account of home, personal objects, and memory that unleashes surprising and profound insights on questions fundamental to all archaeologies (Bjerck 2022:153–55). Hein is certainly not the first to invest in "auto-archaeology" (Kattari and Beltran 2019; also see Kobiałka 2023, Kiddey 2023). We may acknowledge: Fiona Campbell and Jonna Ulin's *BorderLine Archaeology* (2004), particularly Ulin's evocative archaeological exploration of remnants of her grandmother's childhood home; Laurent Olivier's rumination through his mother's lacquered wooden box in the wake of her death (2011); or Christine Finn's excavation, reportage, and art installation focusing on the home of her upbringing (2013).

A satellite building to my childhood home is of no ancillary importance to this endeavor. Salt houses have become exceedingly rare in the American South, and while these strange holdovers of times pre-refrigeration may be listed among other outbuildings as components

of farms or acknowledged as part of the technology of salt and food, they, unlike the better-known “smokehouse” (see Olmert 2009; Sperling 2015), have rarely been discussed in any detail on their own. Given how few remain, given my father’s aspirations for this building, and given deeper family attachments, there is less freedom for me to leave it to ruin. While other salt houses, where they remain, are open to the possibility, such things seldom return as an object to be studied, much less written about (Bjerck 2022:151). Rarer still is the crossover between a sense of duty that I hold to what remains of this building and my identity as a professional archaeologist, obliged as I am to reflect on such objects and write about them for the benefit of others.

A ruining outbuilding

A pine tree is left to grow on the southwestern corner of a salt house to the point of contact. Year after year, the tree exerts more pressure against its foundation. The pier and beam base shifts. Lifted upward, clapboard-sided walls begin to lean under the weight of the tin-covered, timber-frame roof. The accumulation of pine needles, decomposition, and moisture retention add more overburden to a cumbersome crown. The lean increases. Still, the buckled building would not so easily be released from its usefulness as a storehouse. My father shored up the leaning side with door frames and timbers. His repeated small efforts to keep the old salt house upright last for more than a decade. Forced off its footings, the walls eventually give way in high winds under the heavy roof not long after my father’s death in 2009. The salt house, which had stood for more than six family generations (unknown to me at the time), collapses in a thunderstorm.

Ruin had set in decades earlier. Salt used to cure meats, penetrated the wood, dried out the boards of the basin and the floor below. Dark planks, sawn from the heartwood of old pine, turned the color of buttercream. The wood grains softened, and deep cracks formed taking on a texture not unlike that of dried cod. While the salt kept rot at bay, the shifting weight of the building cracked the piers, which are logs from the most tenacious, oil-infused core pine. Season after season, the buildup of needles, leaf litter, and other detritus raised the ground surface to cover the piers and meet the beams. Rot entered where salt had not. Moisture softened the timbers. Woodlice, termites, carpenter ants, and bacteria toiled, burrowed, and consumed. Chinese privet, sweet gum, and greenbrier embraced

the building. Vines spread between siding boards and posts, opening conduits for rainwater. By the summer of 2024, little of the wreckage that remained was suggestive of the salt house’s original purpose. The floorboards had succumbed to decomposition. The saltbox was no more. Only those timbers that had fallen under the roof, so to be protected from rain, remained. Ceiling beams, especially those farther from the door, still bristled with sundry nails and wires, twisted around the beams every few feet. Subtle memories that meat once hung here.

Near these foundations, slaughter was carried out every autumn. The smell of butchery was replaced by crackling roiling in cauldrons of lard. Hams taken from Virginia Duroc-Jersey hogs, sired by Planter Boy from 1918 (ADJSBR 1919:230), were rubbed down with salt then covered in a bed of more salt. Salt drew out the moisture and prolonged the storage of meats. Hams, along with cuts of bacon and fatback, cured in this way were hung from the ceiling beams about the interior. Like the rest of my family, my father, and so many others in Scotland County, North Carolina, referred to this and other such outbuildings as “smokehouses.” Even though the elevated wooden floor of this building had no firebox, and though it was used exclusively for salting pork, the term persisted as a holdover from an earlier mode of curing meat. My father thought of the ruined salt house as a remnant of a “time without refrigeration,” and salted pork, an acquired taste today, was a norm of this time. Indeed, my father could point to where dozens of salt houses once stood in the 1960s along the road on which our farm is located. After refrigeration this building, and others like it, were rendered somewhat superfluous in terms of their use for curing meat. Left waiting, thousands of salt houses across the American South were eventually lost through neglect and indifference.

My father used the old salt house for storage, as is the lot of so many buildings on our all-but-erstwhile farm. Lumber, windows, and shutters removed in the renovations of our home, a two-story, one room deep, central-hallway colonial with two end chimneys that dates from the late 1820s or early 1830s (Glassie 1975:96–7) (Fig. 1), were stored here. Small ceramic pots, Atlas and Ball mason jars, brown glass Clorox bottles of various sizes, one-gallon Owens-Illinois jugs, milk bottles, some labeled Biltmore, are among items left either by my great-grandparents or collected here by my father. There were also sundry items left here after the storage of building materials by



Figure 1. Our family home in 2024. Photo: Christopher Witmore

my father—a rubber garden hose, a commercial-grade, pole-mounted light fixture, and a plastic pump sprayer. Even in such a dormant state, these things, like the salt house that offered itself as a depot for gathering surplus, were rarely released from “the drudgery of being useful” (Benjamin and Jennings 2002:39; Olsen 2010:119–21). Things may simply seem to be freed of the immediacy of human needs (Bjerck 2022:149), but they were always believed to hold some unspecified value, which, to my parents and grandparents’ understanding, was future oriented. When they approached such stored surplus, it was not from the angle of “now,” but rather from that of *not now*—should a need ever arise, these things are there. If a specific purpose never came to fruition, then items would be here for subsequent generations. Thus, I recently used some of the stored wood—a tongue-and-groove plank, over 12 inches wide (the same as those used in a back door of the main house)—to make a closet door. Retaining objects for future possibilities is part of the extended *habitus* of agrarian life.



Figure 2. The salt house after raising the roof in 2020. Photo: Christopher Witmore

My father often expressed his wish to salvage the roof of the salt house, and reuse it, along with all the recoverable timbers, in a new building. Shortly after his death, I had moved all the stored lumber into an old hay barn, sensing the salt house's increasingly precarious situation. This hay barn, infested with termites, rotting under its own weight, was a temporary measure. A tree would later fall through the roof, forcing me to once again move the lumber (and tear apart what remained of the old hay barn for sound boards of use in subsequent construction). My sons helped me raise the roof and some timbers of the salt house onto concrete blocks in April of 2020, for everything here rots from the ground up (Fig. 2). The roof sat on this makeshift scaffold of stacked blocks until we took it apart during the summer of 2024 to reuse it in a pavilion that will form the core of a new barn.

Memories, voluntary and involuntary

Memory, Wendell Berry once mused, “native to this valley, will spread over it like a grove, and memory will grow into legend, legend into song, song into sacrament” (1998:102). Presumably centered upon his own farm in Henry County, Kentucky (see Petrusich 2019), memory takes form as an undifferentiated aggregate. Through narrativization as story, multiplication in verse, and repetition through sacred acts, this memory, as Berry claims, grows with time. And yet, his evocation of memory and what becomes of it appears deliberately impoverished. What this seemingly tireless voice of American agrarian life knowingly treats as a singular totality, a memory that grows with the passing of generations, falls short of the multitude of things, discrete associations, mnemonic forms, and pasts that populate our farm. And even with so many memories, what remains here has forgotten more than it remembers.

I never met my great-grandfather, Postelle Bullard (1876–1959), who bred Duroc-Jersey hogs, and have no memory of the great-grandmother, Katie Ruth Smith (1890–1975), who held me as a baby but would die just before my first birthday. I know nothing of Postelle's mother and father, Elizabeth Ann Adams (1842–1899) and Charles Washington Bullard (1832–1908), beyond the portrait of Charles that was left among my parents' things at the back of an old wardrobe. Charles Washington and Elizabeth acquired the farm in 1879 from Louis P. Gibson and Della Gibson, who are still farther from my associations with this place, even though the Gibson family appears to have purchased the land in 1823 and built the main

house, and likely the salt house, shortly thereafter. Apart from the fact that one of them, George Bullard (1880–1886), died in a tragic accident on the farm, I know scarcely anything about the generation of children who grew up here before my grandmother, Postelle and Katie Ruth's daughter Katie Bullard (1926–2019), and her five siblings. It is through my grandmother's brother, also named Charles Washington Bullard (1909–1990), that the house passed to my parents, C. L. Witmore (1943–2009) and Sylvia Austin Witmore (1939–2018). Hein points out how “the memory value of an heirloom object tends to evaporate between generations, and new memories that are added through the next generations are not strong enough to keep them safe, to keep them remembered, to be recognized when people depart from their belongings” (Bjerck 2022:114). Though it may be far from the picture of a typical heirloom, this is no less the case with the salt house.

I certainly do not recall a time when the salt house was used to cure meat, though even now the smell of fat is retained in the salt- and lipid-saturated wood that remains. When first I encountered that smell, while lifting the roof with my two sons, it triggered a vivid memory of fetching a ham from my grandparents' salt house, located behind their house elsewhere on the farm. With that memory came an image of opening the door and stepping inside to reach for a leg hanging over a yellowed bed of salt. The odor that I encountered while working with my sons was an echo of that very same smell of salt and cured meat from when I was a young boy. My grandmother had sent me outside to retrieve the ham. And upon further reflection I recalled carrying it back inside her house to where she waited in the kitchen. I then watched as she repeatedly cut thin slices from the cushion and fried them in an iron skillet. Like Marcel Proust's tea-soaked crumbs of madeleine cake (1992:63–5), an odor, embedded in wood below the roof, sparked an involuntary memory indicative of the foodways of my childhood; in these, the taste of salt pork and those practical pasts tied to curing meat persisted.

Beyond maintaining their own salt house, which still stands (Fig. 3), my grandparents also reared hogs on the farm. I recall how they kept time through their appetite. Trained into them from their youth, these living clocks demanded two meals a day. Watermelon and cantaloupe rind in summer or dried field corn in winter were mixed with leftovers from family meals into a slop. An oval hollow in the ground under a collapsed roof by a ramshackle field barn still holds the imprint



Figure 3. My grandparent's salt house with my two sons in 2023. Photo: Christopher Witmore

of their habits. During the first week of December, near my grandparents' salt house, my family would, against my fierce objections, slaughter one or two of these hogs. The smell of butchery was quickly replaced by the odor of rinds boiling in cauldrons of vegetable fat over open fires. My grandfather rubbed the hams and belly cuts in salt then buried them under a thick blanket of dry salt in the box for a couple of weeks or more, depending on their weight. My grandmother minced the shoulder and added spices to make sausage, which she packed in collagen casings. In summer, she would slice salt pork from her own cured hams, fry the slices to crisp in a skillet, and serve them with biscuits and fresh tomatoes. Of course, no one else, save for my two brothers, will now recall this. And even they would see our relations to these things from slightly different perspectives. Random scents or tastes might invade their senses to activate involuntary memories, but, as Hein repeatedly reminds us (Bjerck 2022:113–14), they would be entirely theirs, and theirs alone.

Inter canem et lupum: Waiting at twilight

I often think about what else concerning his ancestors my father, who died unexpectedly, never found an opportunity to convey to us. What more did he, or my grandparents, know about the original use of

the old salt house and other objects on the farm? “It is not possible,” as Hein has remarked, “to inherit a memoryscape” (Bjerck 2022:113). It is impossible to hand over the legion idiosyncratic elements of indexical association to erstwhile events, mnemonic objects, whether voluntary or involuntary, and experiences throughout a person's lifeworld “to another person or a new generation” (Bjerck 2022:113). What Hein has called the “fringe of the archaeological record” (Bjerck 2022:113–14) is formed through “abandonment.” To become “abandoned,” for Hein, things must be liberated from their people (Bjerck 2022:23)—through the death of those who kept them, things are released. Across this line where phantoms speak no more, the salt house and the objects it contained leave the domesticated domain of human use, association, and remembrance. Here, beyond the edge of life experience, these things pass *inter canem et lupum*, “between the dog and the wolf.” Across this shadowy margin, as marked out by this old Latin expression between the illuminated zone of the familiar, the domestic, and the vast dark of the unfamiliar, the untamed, our fluency of voluntary recollection within our own personal memoryscapes gives way to the wild (Bjerck 2022:114). And in the wild, those stories that once saturated objects like this salt house are unknown or, if related to us, unverifiable.

Still, those stories tied to indexical memories passed on to me by my family are immensely enriched by an intimate knowledge of the objects and the physical settings where a recalled incident occurred. With reference to the old Clorox bottles stored in the salt house, for example, my grandmother once spoke of her mother's obsession with clean and disinfected floors throughout the original house. On more than one occasion she pointed to the withered and discolored legs of the pie safe she gave my wife and me as a wedding gift. These, for her, offered evidence of her mother's routine acts of scouring; housework that she too shouldered as a young girl. Of course, what is definitive for me, or my living family members—my grandmother's associations, or that my father stored old building materials in the salt house when he renovated our house—would be ambiguous to anyone else. Thus, this margin, *inter canem et lupum*, coincides with the anonymity of the aggregate and the specificity of a person known, as Hein recognizes in “the impassable gap between the archaeological and lived past” (Bjerck 2022:13).

With each passing generation, lived associations slip from our grasp, even as those objects once familiar to them stubbornly endure. I do not know who hammered the nails into the tie beams or by whom the wires were tied over them to suspend hams, slabs of bacon, and fatback. What little my parents, my aunt, Sally Witmore Gardner (1956–2020), and my grandparents related to us of my grandmothers' parents and grandparents, and the Gibsons before them, failed to capture such indexical memories. And yet, given the imperative of auto-archaeology, the aggregated remains of the salt house retain a certain potency—surely one, a few, or more, of my ancestors drove the nails and wrapped the wires for hanging meat? Such is the nature of the Latin expression, for at twilight it is difficult to distinguish between the dog who turns in and the wolf who begins to roam.

It is not that pine rafters, nails, mortise and tenon joints, or Clorox bottles no longer point to those voluntary memories that my father and grandmother could offer. Rather, they are no longer burdened by those memories that once belonged to talkative others. That conscious and willful faculty of human recollection, all too often, silences what is left to things that are left to themselves. For anyone else, the shutters or windows stored in the salt house could only offer suggestions—their dimensions match the window casings on our house—yet they remain silent as to who stored them here, and when. What wreckage remains



Figure 4. Detail of mortise and tenon in foundation beam and posts. Photo: Christopher Witmore

of the salt house, bereft as it is of those who used it, is all that we have left to go on. Among the wolves, out of the light, archaeology, as Hein argues, begins (Bjerck 2022:24). So, what other pasts exist beyond the dazzling radius of life's illumination?

The style of carpentry, building techniques, and components of the salt house point to its construction at some point in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Axe marks indicate that the sills were hand-hewn, while the posts and plates were cut on a vertical mill. These, the sills, posts, and plates, are all connected by mortise and tenon, locked at the corners with hand-carved wooden dowels (Fig. 4). The rafters, measuring 3 x 5 inches (7.6 x 12.7 cm), were set every three feet (91.4 cm) and nailed to the tie beams and a ridge board. The nails are of various sizes; all are iron. Those used to secure the clapboard siding are machine cut with uniform heads, flat points, and shafts that are somewhat irregular. Some of the larger brads used in the rafters are side pinched just below the head and cross-grained. Many have broken due to slag inclusions. These different nails mostly indicate the 1830s, though some of those used to hang meat are clearly later (Wells 1998, Adams 2002). All the wood is heart pine. Offcuts, as suggested by the different thicknesses of the boards, were stored above the ceiling beams. Circular saw marks left from the blade indicate how they were milled at a later point, after the mid-nineteenth century. Likely they were cut with the sawmill that was located here on the farm at the turn of the twentieth century (we still have components of this). Lengths of cardboard were set above these offcuts, perhaps for insulation, or perhaps to keep dust and debris from

falling onto the meat and into the saltbox below. In the roof, long runners were set every few inches across the rafters. Their number is beyond what was necessary for tin panels. Multiple small nails and holes along the lengths of these runners suggest the roof was once covered in cedar shingles—what my grandmother called “shakes,” which meant “to split.” Since the tin was added to replace this older roof, there had been a large amount of shrinkage in the underlying wood. Based on nails used to secure the tin—lead-covered round nails—the roof was likely replaced before the 1940s.

This temporal depth was never part of the stories related to me, or my brothers, by our grandparents, father, and aunt. Where the building extends its own past over six generations of my family and to the Gibsons before us, the stories I know only pertain to the use of the building by Postelle and Katie Ruth. Those things that have accumulated within and around the salt house also point to their period of tenure. The half-gallon bottles of Clorox liquid bleach, for example, have screw tops with solid letters, both with and without grain-textured shoulders. These details date them to between 1940 and 1945.¹ One of the one-gallon Owens-Illinois Glass Co. soda bottles dates to 1931, while the other is stamped Duraglas with a screw lid and was produced in 1941 (Lockhart and Hoenig 2018). Did storage begin at some point in the 1940s? Or were these bottles moved here later? Unlike the Clorox bottles, which were found inside, the soda bottles were partially embedded in the soil under the eastern beam of the salt house. This context reinforces the likelihood that they were left here before my father used the salt house for storage. That the pine tree was allowed to grow so near the doorway, suggests how by that point the old salt house probably already had been consigned to waiting. Now 30 inches (75 cm) in diameter, it is not unlikely that the pine was a sapling well before the passing of Postelle, fifteen years before I was born.

I am aware how through their narrativization, these objects, memories, and relations are packaged into a storyline that ultimately obscures, overshadows, and even obliterates the idiosyncratic aspects of their own pastness (Olsen and Witmore 2026). In narrating the salt house, it takes on strange new contours for me, with a different coherence, and a previously unacknowledged sequence. This provides an enriched sense of depth and connection, to be sure. This also bestows what I have always confronted as a mixed, obscure, and

gathered past with order, lucidity, and potency, as if these qualities were always there. But to fully attribute these new connections—now retroactively placed upon this ruined building, the things it once contained, and my own recollections—to narrative alone would be to give it far too much credit. If the naively given nature of the salt house recedes from my experience before the emergence of an expanded past, then it is also due to those wild things that, even as they roam beyond the light’s edge, retain qualities of their own pastness. These qualities, what Hein frames as archaeological qualities (Bjerck 2022:24), are an inextricable part of our learning.

Of duty, repair, and reassembly

My grandparents were hardworking people who reared animals and crops over two seasons, both summer and winter. Constantly attending to things in need of attention around the farm, I recall how they maintained fence lines, fixed broken equipment, shored up foundations, or trimmed overbrush close to structures outside pastures where their companion animals did this work. When I was old enough to help, I began to acquire know-how through shared labor, where the proper way, lightly vocalized, was learned by doing. Acedia was alien to their habitus, for conditions of use were sustained by incessant toil, and through repetition a sense of care and duty emerged. When having been raised among such people, one passes with difficulty objects calling for repair. In the sense that Alphonso Lingis gives to “directives” (1998), what remains guides me in what to do by needling me with suggestions as to what ought to be done: vines to be pulled from a wall, a loose nail to be hammered in, a few old clapboards to be replaced, an unsecured section of roofing tin to be lashed down. When maintenance becomes visible everywhere through its absence, familial associations and memories are pervasive. Hein, in recollecting his father’s well-stated advice, gives voice to what often had remained unspoken in work with my grandparents: “You must never turn into somebody that doesn’t bother ...” (Bjerck 2022:193).

Whereas those generations who preceded my grandparents were inheritors of a basis for their livelihood as agrarians, those who are left behind are the ones now condemned to assume responsibility, even when they no longer live according to the same *modus vivendi*. We (I am not alone in this) would be on reasona-

1 See: <https://www.thecloroxcompany.com/who-we-are/our-heritage/bottle-guide/>



Figure 5. My brother removing nails from the roofing tin to reveal closely spaced runners that once held shingles. Photo: Christopher Witmore

ble ground were we to absolve ourselves of this farm, which we inherited with the passing of my mother in 2018, my grandmother in 2019, and my aunt in 2020, but we choose not to indulge an image of agrarian inheritance as an excessive burden. Embracing this perspective would, for me, ease the guilt of letting go of my childhood home, but beyond our deep love for this place, I cannot ignore, with all its opportunities and gratifications, the exceedingly rare confluence of agrarian inheritance and archaeological concern. My childhood experiences provide some perspective on those profound changes in the human condition that came with the passing of agriculture from the helm of human cultures in the twentieth century (Witmore 2018, 2020). What persists on the farm re-memembers this world. Though managing a working farm in North Carolina from Texas is not without its significant challenges, we are in a privileged position, to be sure.

I accepted my father's wish to rebuild the old salt house with new purpose as something that simply had to be done. With the collapse of the walls and the loss of the clapboard siding, the decay that set in to

the framework became so advanced that, apart from the timber-framed roof, little of the original building could be saved. After the collapse, numerous small steps were taken—the roof was raised off the ground and new treated posts were purchased—until time could be found. In June of 2024, we set aside a week to take apart what components remained and reassemble them into a pavilion that will form the core of a new barn; this to be completed when time permits. With my brother, Kevin, a builder steeped in timber-frame construction techniques, we graded out a foundation adjacent to an old pumphouse not far from the salt house's original location. Here, I staked out the dimensions of the salt house (12.4 x 15 feet / 3.8 x 4.6 meters), leveled with string, dug the footings for six posts, and filled them with concrete. After the concrete had cured, I fashioned the pillars from two breezeblocks each and affixed post brackets. Upon each pillar, my brother and I placed the posts and attached two top plates lengthways across three posts on each side. We then affixed the beams to the plates, position-



Figure 6. A moment of pause during the construction of the pavilion, with my brother, his daughter, Bella, and me. Photo: Elizabeth Gremillion Witmore

ing them every three feet, so as to match the rafters in the original timber-frame roof.

With my wife, sons, and other family members, we took apart what remained of the old salt house. First the tin, followed by the siding, then the runners, and finally the rafters (Fig. 5). Every item was numbered so as to maintain a fidelity to the original form in its reassembly. We managed to reclaim the two end beams and most of the rafters, which were then reassembled atop the new framework. We also reused the runners and the tin, which despite a few holes was in good shape. What we were not able to save, we replaced with heart pine timbers salvaged from two nineteenth-century farmhouses. Through the process of disassembly,

which is a rudimentary form of excavation, many idiosyncratic details of the salt house's construction were revealed to us—the cut of the timbers, the differences in the nails, the use of cedar shingles. Moments of shared revelation in the presence of the archaeological past added to the gratification that came with working together and cast a beam into the unruly dark.

One should acknowledge how deconstructing and reassembling the salt house is something done not out of a compulsion rooted in necessity, but by choice. It would have been easier to simply build a roof from new materials. Yet, as Seneca pointed out long ago (Letters 120.10), by long force of habit such choices become less guided by explicitly formulated rationales

as to why they should be done. This does not mean that they are mechanical and without reflection, but only that through repetition those overt rationales for why something ought to be are often incarnated as second nature. When I, as an archaeologist, attempt to articulate my sense of obligation to objects like the old salt house, I recognize how such acts are tied both to the realization of my father's wishes and a sense of "doing right" by something on my watch, maintaining it not simply as it is, but rather in terms of what can still be (González-Ruibal 2022:258–61). Thus, I confront both an *ob-ligation*—a word derived from the Latin *ligare* (to bind; to tie)—to keep a building in a state of use, and its *consequences*, that it will offer itself to future possibilities.

As archaeologists we do not often weigh such considerations in terms of deontology, that is, as matters of duty and obligation; rather, we tend to gravitate towards an unequivocal need for roots and nostalgia (Buchli 2010, González-Ruibal 2020). Yet, I have refused to relinquish what remains of the salt house to oblivion, not because I sought "the redemption of past hopes" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002:xv). I neither long for what has been lost, nor seek to restore the salt house with an explicit wish to maintain an absolute fidelity to its supposed original state. (In fact, we used screws, not nails; butt joints, not mortise and tenon. Although, as in the original, dado joints were cut where the beams met on the plates.) To rebuild it as it was, with a commitment to detail preservationism, will bring us no closer to what the salt house was or still is (Harman 2023:65). Once the salt house broke free of its usage as a meat house, once its utility for storage was disrupted by my father's death and the pine tree, it became something else. And, as Hein observes, it was "forever blocked from reentering what [it] came from" (Bjerck 2022:114). Hein does not claim things, as with the salt house, are reducible to their uses or the associations held by those who kept them—quite the contrary. Rather, he recognizes how they exceed their relations by persisting longer than the identity they once had.

Nonetheless, the salt house retains, to borrow Hein's words, its "potential to re-emerge, where [it] will be related to other memories" (Bjerck 2022:114). New memories, both recollective and involuntary, are produced through this activity with my sons, my wife, my brother, and his children, which adds to the joy of its undertaking and reinforces the satisfaction that comes with having accomplished the task at hand. While the new pavilion now recalls for me

these moments of shared labor, by reincorporating the old roof, we maintain cross-generational linkages, extend the craftsmanship of the Gibsons who built it, and play a role in something that, by persisting beyond the bounds of its old parts, continues to provide shelter. Perhaps a root of this engagement falls under Shannon Lee Dawdy's heading of "critical nostalgia" (2016:6–8), for while a new barn is needed for the property to once again operate as a working farm, through the presence of the old it brings both coherence and depth of character as an object that has endured throughout the farm's existence. Though we return some structural functionality to the salt house, this act takes on as much an aesthetic as material sense, for the old roof now exists in tension with its new parts and surroundings. This is also an exercise in prudence, for I neither wish to rob my children nor anyone else of these old things.

All the obligations we shall not fulfill

My father placed the lumber, windows, and shutters into the old salt house when he began renovating our home in the early 1980s—of this I have always felt certain. My grandmother's direct ancestors built and used this building to cure their own meat—this is what I have always been told. In relating what we may have assumed or what has been passed on to us, it is easy to use things as props, as the puppeteer who ventriloquizes through them so they may continue to speak as expected. I cannot definitively know the truth of these associations from beyond the dark margins of my recall. My mother and grandfather also helped my father with the renovations—they could have just as easily placed items here. Now that we know the salt house to be far older than we had supposed, we grasp how it stood at a time when there were unspecified others who also lived among the Gibsons and were enlisted in their labor—they too could have helped to build, and later even shared, the salt house. As Hein shows us, the archaeologist, even in the context of home, is obliged to press those associations related to us beyond our own personal recall into the dark shadows of their uncertainty.

I have long struggled with how to successfully negotiate the image of home passed down to me with what I continue to learn about this place as an archaeologist. That image of a small family farm with an old house at its center relied on a notion of belonging tied to hereditary property, which provided a foundation for familial identity and patrimonial obligation.

Yet, when transposed to the time of the salt house's construction and early use, southern farms like this one, rooted as they are in a pre-Civil War era, were anything but the restricted domain of consanguinity. In truth, this farm is what remains of what was, in its early decades, a plantation with hundreds of acres of land that thrived on exploitation of other human beings in the slave-based economy of the south. After the Civil War (1861–1865), deep inequities continued to be perpetuated with tenant farmers who also labored on this land. Negotiating these incongruous images requires something more than an acknowledgement when it comes to the suffering of Black peoples who through dispossession and indifference were deprived of cross-generational sites of object memory taken for granted by those who have inherited them.

Unlike the salt house, the original slave quarters are long gone. And while no tenant houses remain on the immediate property, I know where one was located near my grandparents' house. The ruins of another tenant house lie across the road in a stand of trees on land passed down through Charles Washington's oldest son, Franklin J. Bullard (1867–1943). Stripped for materials, or left waiting in ruin, the oblivion of these buildings has come about through a combination of choice and indifference—this is how memoricide advances. On the farm, we have benefited from a sense of familiar belonging, which has been denied to others, whose linkages with the ground their ancestors lived on and worked have been severed. Mnemonic alienation is also a matter of inheritance, and where the wreckage of this deeper past accumulates here in the American South as heritage cloistered under patrimony, so too grows resentment.

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Were one to give credence to Walter Benjamin's messianic species of history, then one might say a reckoning was expected. For Benjamin, a weak messianic power is rooted in a promise of redemption that future generations owe those who suffered from oppression, inequity, and apathy in what will be that future's past (Benjamin et al. 2006). What has failed to transfer cross-generationally, what has passed beyond the edge of darkness with death, now falls to objects that persist in possession of a very different kind of past and to those aware of the claim that past has over them. And though anonymity is a shared lot of objects that have endured from the early days of this farm, they, unburdened by human association, may yet offer suggestions, spark associations, spur conversations, prompt other stories, for they too have a claim upon the future, which, like the past, is among us. This store of riches is kept well by the soil on the property. But, as Hein so well demonstrates, it requires an archaeologist to not only unlock it, but also pass it on to others.

While I recognize how rare and how fragile my family's long tenure of this land is, I choose to maintain this place as home, not out of a commitment to what is mine as a matter of inheritance, but rather out of a deep respect for what this shared ground has inherited. Those who worked on this farm alongside my ancestors and the Gibsons before them, who perhaps reared the animals that were slaughtered to supply the meat once cured and stored in the salt house, have a place here too. Meanwhile, a different image of home begins to take shape. I can only hope that the debt that has been paid forward in the form of a reconstituted salt house continues to exist as an example to my sons, my family, and the reader.

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