

HIDDEN GEMS

Fort Shirley's Copper Charm: Investigating Muslim Ethnicity on Pennsylvania's Colonial Frontier

It is diminutive and easily overlooked: a copper charm, one centimeter in diameter, bearing the inscription “No god but Allah” in Arabic. Nonetheless, it is an artifact so exceptional that it has challenged our network of scholars to find an analog for its form and context. The charm is most likely a relic of the mid-eighteenth century, when the first Africans entered central Pennsylvania as slaves, indentured servants, or free men through trading operations and farmsteads, bringing with them their religious beliefs and material culture. While documentation of their Muslim faith exists, the archaeological evidence for their connection to Islam is extremely rare.



Fig. 1: Muslim charm and chain found during excavations at Fort Shirley (36HU94); scale in centimeters.

The inscription on the charm is integral to the *Shahada*, the profession of faith that “there is no god but God” (Allah). The first of the five pillars of Islam, this testimony has been used in both ritual and worship for centuries in the Muslim world. As historian Sultana Afroz writes, the Shahada “is the core of Islam and summarizes the complete belief and submission to Allah.”¹ Much as ornaments made from sheet copper found on the same site are associated with the presence of Native Americans, we see the charm, also manufactured from sheet copper, as an ethnic marker signifying the presence of Muslims in eighteenth-century central Pennsylvania.

Recovered in 2009 during initial survey testing for the archaeological remains of Fort Shirley in present-day Huntingdon County, the charm and its delicate chain were most likely lost between 1753 and 1756 while its owner was in the service of George Croghan.² By 1754, Croghan, Pennsylvania’s preeminent trader, land speculator, and military scout, found himself between the empires of Great Britain and France at the outbreak of the French and Indian War. When violence erupted across the frontier, Croghan isolated himself with an entourage of pro-British Native American refugees, his pack team employees, and several slaves and indentured servants at a place called Aughwick, along a broad floodplain of the creek that bears its name. After Braddock’s defeat, Croghan responded to the threat of frontier attacks by fortifying his trading post at Aughwick, renamed “Fort Shirley” when he turned it over to the Pennsylvania regiment in the spring of 1756.

Forts and trading posts were at the vanguard of Great Britain’s empire, which stretched from the American colonies in the Atlantic region to the Gambia. During the eighteenth century, Africa’s Gold Coast was part of the Islamic world and was the major source of captives for the colonial slave trade.³ Philadelphia, the dominant hub of commerce in colonial Pennsylvania, was home to many merchants who participated heavily in the distribution of everything from trade goods to finished products to African slaves and indentured servants. Prior to the trade’s peak during the

¹ Sultana Afroz, “The Unsung Slaves: Islam in Plantation Jamaica,” *Caribbean Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1995): 30–44.

² Jonathan A. Burns, George John Drobnock, and Jared M. Smith, “Croghan at Aughwick: History, Maps, and Archaeology Collide in the Search for Fort Shirley,” *Pioneer America Society Transactions* 33 (2010): 14–31.

³ Christopher DeCorse, “Tools of Empire: Trade, Slaves, and the British Forts of West Africa,” in *Building the British Atlantic World: Spaces, Places, and Material Culture*, ed. Daniel Maudlin and Bernard L. Herman (Chapel Hill, NC, 2016), 165–87; Raymond A. Silverman and David Owusu-Ansah, “The Presence of Islam among the Akan of Ghana: A Bibliographic Essay,” *History in Africa* 16 (1989): 325–39.

French and Indian War, when the direct source was Africa, slaves for sale in Philadelphia were typically acquired from the West Indies.⁴ Jeremiah Warder, a Quaker proprietor and one of George Croghan's major creditors, was deeded the parcel of land upon which Fort Shirley is located in return for debts due to losses of goods assisting George Washington at Fort Necessity in 1754.⁵ It is through this relationship and Croghan's trading operation that a devout Muslim may have been on the site.

Through archaeological excavation, the charm was recovered in the plow zone of a test pit. The location was later realized to be within the fort's palisade, close to Croghan's trading post and house at Aughwick—structures that predated Fort Shirley's 1755 construction. According to historian Sylviane Anna Diouf, talismans and charms were used to connect enslaved individuals to Allah and to protect them. Although captives were often shipped across the Atlantic naked, small talismans could have remained in their possession. We propose that, thanks to Croghan, Aughwick exhibited great ethnic diversity at this point in Pennsylvania's history. In a May 20, 1755, letter to Governor Morris, Croghan addressed the care of 120 Indian women and children at Aughwick: "I have left no family behind me but my brother and a few negroes, so that if your Honour appoints any person to take care of the Indians, he may live in my house with my brother, who will assist him as much as in his power."⁶ The charm is material evidence of Africans' presence on the colonial frontier, supplementing such written evidence.

Sourcing the origins of the copper used to make the charm may provide more information about its place of production and role in trade. Copper isotopy applied to tracing archeological artifacts has started to gain momentum, and several studies have analyzed different types of artifacts, from processed and native metal to ornate turquoise jewelry.⁷ These

⁴ See Ira Berlin, "Time, Space, and the Evolution of Afro-American Society on British Mainland North America," *American Historical Review* 85 (1980): 44–78; Alan Tully, "Patterns of Slaveholding in Colonial Pennsylvania: Chester and Lancaster Counties, 1729–1758," *Journal of Social History* 6 (1973): 284–305; Darold D. Wax, "Quaker Merchants and the Slave Trade in Colonial Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 86 (1962): 143–59; Wax, "Africans on the Delaware: The Pennsylvania Slave Trade, 1759–1765," *Pennsylvania History* 50 (1983): 38–49.

⁵ Burns et al., "Croghan at Aughwick."

⁶ George Croghan to Robert Morris, May 20, 1755, in Samuel Hazard, ed., *Minutes of the Provincial Council of Pennsylvania, from the Organization to the Termination of the Proprietary Government*, vol. 6 (Harrisburg, PA, 1851), 398–99.

⁷ N. H. Gale et al., "Natural Variations Detected in the Isotopic Composition of Copper: Possible Applications to Archaeology and Geochemistry," *International Journal of Mass Spectrometry* 184 (1999): 1–9; Ryan Mathur et al., "The History of the United States Cent Revealed through

studies show that the processing of the ores does not appear to impact the copper isotope values measured in the final products. We analyzed the copper isotope compositions of a sample of sheet copper traded to native groups and a link of the Islamic charm's chain to compare their points of origin and determine if they match known sources of copper traded in the eighteenth century.⁸ In the mid-eighteenth century, copper in the Americas commonly derived from England, with Cornwall as the predominant source. The copper isotope value of the two artifacts we analyzed matches those of the Cornwall ores; therefore, Cornwall is most likely the source of copper for the charm and chain recovered at the Fort Shirley site. This discovery demonstrates the centrality of British trade to colonial expansion, especially as made possible through such individuals as George Croghan, across the frontier.

Despite the scant tangible evidence of Muslim heritage in the colonial era, this "hidden gem" highlights the potential of discovering more information about people of African and Muslim backgrounds who were brought to Pennsylvania. This charm is a direct physical link to the roots of globalization, as empires manifested themselves through commerce, conflict, and the transhemispheric movement of people, ideas, and materials. Other colonial-era markers of Muslim religion may exist, but published examples are yet to be found in the greater mid-Atlantic region. In highlighting generally unseen African and Muslim traditions, the charm illuminates the spread of Islam halfway around the world and its early presence in colonial Pennsylvania.

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Copper Isotope Fractionation," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 36 (2009): 430–33; Ryan Mathur, Marc Wilson, and Marina L. Parra, "Challenges of Using Copper Isotope Ratios to Trace the Origin of Native Copper Artifacts: An Example from the Keweenaw Peninsula," *Annals of Carnegie Museum* 82 (2014): 241–45; Sharon Hull et al., "A New Approach to Determining the Geological Provenance of Turquoise Artifacts Using Hydrogen and Copper Stable Isotopes," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 35 (2008): 1355–69.

⁸ For the methodology and data reduction for this analysis, see Ryan Mathur et al., "Cu Isotopic Fractionation in the Supergene Environment with and without Bacteria," *Geochimica et Cosmochimica Acta* 69 (2005): 5233–46; and Mathur et al., "Exploration Potential of Cu Isotope Fractionation in Porphyry Copper Deposits," *Journal of Geochemical Exploration* 102 (2009): 1–6.