

Fear & the Challenges of Migration:

Apotropaic Marks as Protective Magic in Colonial New England & Virginian Architecture

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Traditional American Architecture

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In the seventeenth century and onward, British colonists in North America followed magical traditions from their homeland and inscribed them into architecture with apotropaic marks. The word “apotropaic” means “turning away,” and colonists would quite literally carve specific markings into “vulnerable” areas of their homes to turn evil away from them.<sup>1</sup>

“Vulnerable” here means susceptible to supernatural attack. The use of apotropaic marks in the England is extensively documented and studied, and such studies span histories, typologies, ways of identification, and meanings related to such marks. When studying the same topic in the context of American architecture, however, less comprehensive work has been executed.<sup>2</sup>

By tracing the use of apotropaic marks in American colonial architecture, insight into the colonists’ migration experiences can be gleaned.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, PhD and master’s theses have been written on the relationship between apotropaic marks and the fears of people in colonial New England, but less scholarship has been completed on apotropaic marks in the southern colonies, such as Virginia. By building an awareness of apotropaic marks in colonial America, researchers may better make sense of the colonial past, further understand the people who inhabited its architecture, and thus apply the same knowledge and use of the marks in New England to the marks in Virginian colonial architecture.<sup>4</sup> Using English knowledge as a basis, this paper studies the context of apotropaic marks in American architecture to argue that their use is two-fold: first, these marks carried British spiritual traditions into the American colonies, and

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Hoggard, “Supernatural Defenses Activated Through Death,” *Prenature* 11, no. 1 (2022): 132, <https://columbia-illiad-oclc-org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/illiad/zcu/illiad.dll?Action=10&Form=75&Value=1238653>.

<sup>2</sup> Conray, “Behind the Devil’s Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History,” 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ian Evans, Chris M. Manning, and Owen Davies, “The Wider Picture: Parallel Evidence in America and Australia,” in *Physical Evidence for Ritual Acts, Sorcery and Witchcraft in Christian Britain: a Feeling for Magic*, ed. Ronald Hutton (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 232, <https://columbia-illiad-oclc-org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/illiad/zcu/illiad.dll?Action=10&Form=75&Value=1238655>.

<sup>4</sup> Evans, Manning, and Davies, “The Wider Picture: Parallel Evidence in America and Australia,” 241.

second, these marks acted and as a way to quell fears related to living in a new colonial environment with unique challenges. Although many apotropaic artifacts and practices are documented in America, this paper will only discuss such markings in architecture. In addition, this paper will focus on examples from New England and how the fears and challenges of colonial life represented there by apotropaic marks can also be applied to apotropaic marks in a Virginia setting, thereby connecting American colonial architecture across space.

### *Background*

As people from England migrated to the British colonies, they transferred Englishness, English styles, and English customs into the American landscapes.<sup>5</sup> Belief, as well as magical and religious practices were part of this transfer, and many English colonists in New England and Virginia engaged in forms of magic on occasion, if not on a regular basis.<sup>6</sup> Folk and vernacular magic beliefs were pervasive in both places, which can be overlooked when thinking about how British colonialism coincided with the Age of Enlightenment. The idea of the Age of Enlightenment is a fallacy that leads people to believe that a paradigm shift occurred, causing seventeenth- and eighteenth-century people to forgo beliefs in magic and superstition in favor of scientific thought. Yet, the Enlightenment is a construct that fails to recognize the prevalent magical mindset of the British and British colonists during this period.<sup>7</sup>

In particular, in England, there were wide-held beliefs that magical forces could do invisible, spiritual harm which then carried over into the British colonies. As such, people needed to find ways to protect themselves from invisible danger and the negative supernatural

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<sup>5</sup> Evans, Manning, and Davies, "The Wider Picture: Parallel Evidence in America and Australia," 232.

<sup>6</sup> Evans, Manning, and Davies, "The Wider Picture: Parallel Evidence in America and Australia," 234.

<sup>7</sup> Cynthia Kay Riley Augé, "Silent Sentinels: Archaeology, Magic, and the Gendered Control of Domestic Boundaries in New England, 1620-1725," (PhD diss., University of Montana, 2013), 104, <https://columbia-illiad-oclc-org.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/illiad/zcu/illiad.dll?Action=10&Form=75&Value=1239649>.

forces that could be enacted upon them.<sup>8</sup> One of these forms of protection was carving apotropaic marks into different areas of architecture that were believed to be vulnerable to supernatural attack. The use of apotropaic marks is also known as counter-witchcraft, which acts a way to “protect people, their property, and their families from supernatural harm.”<sup>9</sup>



*Common Apotropaic Marks Found in England, Many Later Found in America*<sup>10</sup>

However, apotropaic marks were more than protection against just supernatural harm of witchcraft; they were also believed to protect against general danger, ghosts, fairies, demons, and even fire.<sup>11</sup> Although the research on apotropaic marks in American architecture is in its preliminary stages compared to the extensive work done in the UK and Europe, it is likely that more and more historic structures connected to British colonialism will present apotropaic marks. The prevalence of such markings in England increases the likelihood that they were disseminated into the British colonies.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the distinct similarities between the British

<sup>8</sup> Hoggard, “Supernatural Defenses Activated Through Death,” 132.

<sup>9</sup> Hoggard, “Supernatural Defenses Activated Through Death,” 131.

<sup>10</sup> Augé, *Silent Sentinels: Archaeology, Magic, and the Gendered Control of Domestic Boundaries in New England, 1620-1725*, 206.

<sup>11</sup> Hoggard, “Supernatural Defenses Activated Through Death,” 132.

<sup>12</sup> Evans, Manning, and Davies, “The Wider Picture: Parallel Evidence in America and Australia,” 241.



and American marks makes the compelling case that the marks in the colonies are themselves apotropaic in function.<sup>13</sup>

### *Architectural Placement of Apotropaic Marks*

When constructing colonial homes with apotropaic marks, both building professionals and lay inhabitants would place the marks within the timber of homes.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, however, it is important to note that different systems of carpenter marks were used concurrently on pieces of timber to aid in the construction process of homes. These marks could look like roman numerals or tally marks, and they were practical, not apotropaic.<sup>15</sup> Apotropaic marks for ritual protection, unlike carpenter's marks, were mostly circular and illogical to use for counting. In addition, apotropaic marks were scratched, carved, burned, and chiseled into pieces of timber with less precision than carpenter's marks. They also do not appear in positions that carpenter's marks are usually found, such as near wood joints. Rather, the positions of apotropaic marks were often placed in protective locations, such as on the wood near doorways, openings, and thresholds.

The belief in the cosmology of structures, particularly that of home vernacular architecture in New England, reflects the human body within different aspects of structures.<sup>16</sup> Folklorists have argued that the houses of New Englanders reflected their own fears and anxiety of evil infiltrating their bodies: "Doors represented mouths, windows were eyes, and the hearth and chimney represented the heart or womb."<sup>17</sup> Just like disease, witches and demons were most

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<sup>13</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 28.

<sup>14</sup> Hoggard, "Supernatural Defenses Activated Through Death," 133.

<sup>15</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 12.

<sup>16</sup> Augé, *Silent Sentinels: Archaeology, Magic, and the Gendered Control of Domestic Boundaries in New England, 1620-1725*, 108.

<sup>17</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 18.

likely to attack these “crucial bodily openings.”<sup>18</sup> In addition, as the hearth representing the heart of the house, it also represented the hearts of its inhabitants. As such, houses in colonial New England also stood for the human body with a heart, bones (the wooden frame), and a protective skin (the walls)—all of which were vulnerable to attack from the outside supernatural world.<sup>19</sup> In a more general sense, apotropaic marks typically appeared on spaces where there was an opening to the outside world, such as chimneys, windows, doors, and thresholds.<sup>20</sup> In addition to bodily beliefs imbuing architecture and the vulnerability of openings, Puritans specifically believed that witches and demons could attack people with God’s permission, thereby requiring belief in and miracles from God to be cured.<sup>21</sup> As a result, Puritans and New Englanders in general held magic mentalities alongside their religious commitments with a specific fear of evil spirits infiltrating their domestic spaces, leading to the use of apotropaic marks.<sup>22</sup>

Identifying apotropaic markings in architecture can sometimes be difficult, especially if they have been painted over or obscured. Yet, there are a number of common formations of these marks in America that are identical or very similar to those used in England, allowing for identification.<sup>23</sup> In terms of dating, figuring out the exact moment of inscription into architecture is incredibly difficult. To do so, professionals usually estimate the age of the material, such as

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<sup>18</sup> Conray, “Behind the Devil’s Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History,” 17-18.

<sup>19</sup> Rebekah L. Planto, “Revealing matters: an archaeology of building deposits from the Bacon’s Castle site, Surry County, Virginia,” *Post-Medieval Archaeology* 55, no. 2 (December 2021): 211. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00794236.2021.1972666>.

<sup>20</sup> Hoggard, “Supernatural Defenses Activated Through Death,” 132.

<sup>21</sup> Conray, “Behind the Devil’s Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History,” 20.

<sup>22</sup> Conray, “Behind the Devil’s Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History,” 21.

<sup>23</sup> Conray, “Behind the Devil’s Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History,” 28.

the wood, that a mark is carved into, also known as the *terminus post quem*.<sup>24</sup> With this date in mind, researchers then consider the style of markings and the context in which they would have been carved, such as at the construction of the house or when the inhabitants would have had an increased desire for protection. Different markings also operate for different protective uses.<sup>25</sup>

### *Common Forms of Apotropaic Marks in Colonial American Architecture*

Although there are a number of different styles of apotropaic marks, there are five types commonly found in American architecture: Marian marks, hexafoils, grid patterns, slashes, and scorch marks. Marian marks implore the protection of the Virgin Mary and are carved or inscribed letters *M*, *W*, *double-V*, *R*, *MR*, *AM*, *AMR*, and *P*. These letters correspond to different Latin names for Mary, such as *M* for Maria and *double-V* for Virgo Virginum (Virgin of Virgins).<sup>26</sup> An example of a Marian mark in America, mirroring that of one in Canterbury Cathedral in England, can be seen at the Daniels house in Salem, Massachusetts, which was built in 1667.



*Marian Marks at Canterbury Cathedral (Left) and Daniels House (Right)*<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 55.

<sup>25</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 28.

<sup>26</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 28.

<sup>27</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 29.

Another common apotropaic mark, if not the most common, is the hexafoil. Hexafoils are an ancient symbol hailing from Mycenaean Greece that moved into the Roman world where it was later used in medieval England as a protective symbol within churches.<sup>28</sup> They are usually a circle with a six-pointed, flower-like or sun-like shape on the inside. Hexafoils are related to daisies, the sun, and the protection of Jesus Christ as he is the “light of the world.” As such, the hexafoil symbol, like Marian marks, call upon the protection of a Christian, religious figure.<sup>29</sup> Such symbols have been found in many colonial New England houses, such as the Clemence-Irons House, built 1691, in Rhode Island.



*Hexafoil in the Clemence-Irons House, Rhode Island.*<sup>30</sup>

In addition to Marian marks and hexafoils, grid patterns, drawn like checkerboard or patterns of haphazard crisscrossing lines are apotropaic marks that act as “demon traps.”<sup>31</sup> Like a net, these checkerboards were believed to catch and entangle evil spirits, demons, and witches, working similar to that of a pentagram.<sup>32</sup> Like grid patterns, apotropaic slashes, which appear as an array of slashed lines, do not seem to serve a specific religious purpose. Instead, they are

<sup>28</sup> Conray, “Behind the Devil’s Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History,” 33.

<sup>29</sup> Conray, “Behind the Devil’s Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History,” 34.

<sup>30</sup> Conray, “Behind the Devil’s Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History,” 32.

<sup>31</sup> Conray, “Behind the Devil’s Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History,” 36.

<sup>32</sup> Conray, “Behind the Devil’s Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History,” 37.

thought to impale demonic spirits that attempt to enter a home through a door or chimney.<sup>33</sup>

Although slash marks can be initially confused with carpenter's marks, they are easy to distinguish based on the "number of slashes present, their depth and precision, their context, and their position." Usually, the slashes appear in large numbers unsuitable for counting and architectural construction, they are shallow and/or not precise, and they are usually close to other protective symbols.<sup>34</sup> Finally scorch marks are apotropaic marks made with fire to project against fire; they are made by holding a candle against timber, purposefully burning it. By doing so, the house would be protected from fire, which was a large threat to colonial architecture. Though scorch marks do not necessarily protect against supernatural attacks like the other apotropaic marks, they were usually used in tandem with them.<sup>35</sup>

#### *General Context for Apotropaic Marks in New England*

The apotropaic marks that appear on vernacular buildings in New England from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are quite similar to those documented in the United Kingdom.<sup>36</sup> These marks represent a reaction to the challenges of becoming New Englanders with the high stress of migration from England; such stressors include the environment, new cultural contact, and community conflicts. Alongside the Christian, supernatural worldview of these neo-New Englanders, the people turned to "traditional magical practices" as strategies to meditate their new lives and decrease their fears in their new geographic and social space.<sup>37</sup> Along with individuals losing family members over the course of their journey to the colonies,

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<sup>33</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 40.

<sup>34</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 39.

<sup>35</sup> Black and Karow, "Apotropaic Symbols at Timberneck."

<sup>36</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 8.

<sup>37</sup> Augé, *Silent Sentinels: Archaeology, Magic, and the Gendered Control of Domestic Boundaries in New England, 1620-1725*, 97-98.

many also became quite ill and were faced with the already harrowing challenges of survival in colonial New England. Threats of wild forests and the animals in them were treacherous and frightening for the colonists.<sup>38</sup> The darkness of the wild forest was also a setting associated with witchcraft, devils, fairies, and so on. In addition, the dark forest provided cover for criminals and Native Americans who were viewed as threats to the colonists.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, night air could be sickening and cause illness and death, according to beliefs at the time.<sup>40</sup> New England colonists also vilified Native Americans, ascribing them with barbaric and devil-like qualities to appear as superior themselves. As a result, by ascribing witchcraft and demonism to Native Americans and the forest, the New England colonists justify their violence, fears, and protection against them, including their use of apotropaic marks in their architecture.<sup>41</sup>

In tandem, Puritan communities, as well as other New England colonists, specifically grappled with internal conflict and strife. For instance, for Puritans, the social structure and hierarchy of a society based on virtue led to conflict and tensions inside the community all while the colonists were dealing with the aforementioned environmental, supernatural, and Native American stressors. It is important to note that the majority of these colonists' beliefs entangled both Christian ideas and pre-Christian medieval ideas of the universe as hosting supernatural forces that were both good and evil unrelated to Christ.<sup>42</sup> Such beliefs experienced pushback from strict religious authorities, yet they continued to practice folk magic. Ultimately, New

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<sup>38</sup> Augé, *Silent Sentinels: Archaeology, Magic, and the Gendered Control of Domestic Boundaries in New England, 1620-1725*," 137.

<sup>39</sup> Augé, *Silent Sentinels: Archaeology, Magic, and the Gendered Control of Domestic Boundaries in New England, 1620-1725*," 138.

<sup>40</sup> Augé, *Silent Sentinels: Archaeology, Magic, and the Gendered Control of Domestic Boundaries in New England, 1620-1725*," 139.

<sup>41</sup> Augé, *Silent Sentinels: Archaeology, Magic, and the Gendered Control of Domestic Boundaries in New England, 1620-1725*," 143.

<sup>42</sup> Augé, *Silent Sentinels: Archaeology, Magic, and the Gendered Control of Domestic Boundaries in New England, 1620-1725*," 101.

Englanders did not choose between magic or religion but rather incorporated the two together.<sup>43</sup> Yet, because of the wide popular knowledge and representations of their simple clothing, homes, and furniture, many people incorrectly assume that their lives were without ornament. However, a wide range of decorations, such as the carved and recurring apotropaic symbols, indicate a rich spiritual life framed by the supernatural.<sup>44</sup>

Although the majority of research on how colonial stressors relate to apotropaic marks and the beliefs of New Englanders, such ideas could also apply to colonists in Virginia. With English backgrounds and similar fears of Native American attacks and new environments, all while holding onto both Christian and pre-Christian beliefs, Virginian colonists also turned to apotropaic marks in their architecture. As such, though there were regional differences, and life in Virginia was different than that of New England, the same concepts of fear and the challenges of a new environment could have included the use of apotropaic markings.

<b>Women's Fears</b>	<b>Shared Fears</b>	<b>Men's Fears</b>
Death in childbirth	God's wrath	Occupational injury/death
Infant mortality	Witchcraft	Crop failure, loss of livestock
Inability to provide food, clothing, comfort	Other supernatural attack	Financial failure
Inability to teach and raise socially successful offspring	Inability to assure family's health/well-being	Inability to provide for family (shelter, security, stability, inheritance)
Inability to protect house, yard, foodstuffs	Property boundary violation	Inability to protect house, stables, barns, fields
Sexual assault	Identity boundary violation	Sociopolitical failure, lack of public authority and respect
Incompetency in female tasks	Inability to successfully conform to gender expectations	Incompetency in male tasks
Witchcraft accusation/slander	Theft	Slander
Old age/widowhood perils	Environmental dangers (storms, fire, forest, night, etc.)	
Indian abduction	Indian attack	
Physical abuse		
Theft by servants		
Attack by live-in servants		

*Compiled Table of Fears Experienced by New England Colonists*<sup>45</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 14.

<sup>44</sup> Augé, *Silent Sentinels: Archaeology, Magic, and the Gendered Control of Domestic Boundaries in New England, 1620-1725*," 124-125.

<sup>45</sup> Augé, *Silent Sentinels: Archaeology, Magic, and the Gendered Control of Domestic Boundaries in New England, 1620-1725*," 65.

It cannot be assumed that all New Englanders shared the same beliefs, worldviews, and practices; however, the continuation and proliferation of British spiritual practices and rituals should be considered as apotropaic marks are found across the region.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, the lives of individuals in New England had different stressors and fears. Yet, there were common fears and beliefs shared amongst these people that contributed to their use of apotropaic marks. In addition, across colonial New England, practicing magic was against the law, yet evidence survives demonstrating that the carving of protective marks into the frames, wood, and structure of buildings did occur, among other practices.<sup>47</sup> From this evidence, apotropaic marks functioned as a means to quell the fears of people living in colonial New England who were living in a new environment. The use of magic, in general and in the form of markings, always posed some risk to the user. However, it is clear that the benefit outweighed the cost in colonial New England based on the abundance of apotropaic marks and other related apotropaic artifacts not mentioned in this paper.<sup>48</sup>

### *Two Examples of Apotropaic Marks in Colonial New England Houses*

Looking specifically at New England houses, there are many cases in which a number of apotropaic marks exist in different styles and on different architectural features. At the Fairbanks house in Dedham, Massachusetts, which was initially constructed in 1641, there are two apotropaic marks.<sup>49</sup> As more additions were added to the house post-1641, more apotropaic marks were added. In the first structure, there is a Marian mark and a hexafoil near the fireplace

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<sup>46</sup> Augé, *Silent Sentinels: Archaeology, Magic, and the Gendered Control of Domestic Boundaries in New England, 1620-1725*,” 129.

<sup>47</sup> Conray, “Behind the Devil’s Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History,” 5.

<sup>48</sup> Augé, *Silent Sentinels: Archaeology, Magic, and the Gendered Control of Domestic Boundaries in New England, 1620-1725*,” 124.

<sup>49</sup> Conray, “Behind the Devil’s Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History,” 42.



and chimney, which have been established as important and vulnerable parts of a house open to the outside world of evil. Because of the political tensions in Dedham at the time of construction, and because the Fairbanks family lost two close relatives during wars with Native Americans, the family did have many fears that could have necessitated carving apotropaic marks into their home.<sup>50</sup> In later additions to the house, there is an *R* Marian mark for Regina, a *double-V* Marian mark for Virgo Virginum, slash marks, four concentric circles, and a grid demon-trap. These marks, done by later generations of the Fairbanks, could have been created to carry on family tradition. More likely, however, these marks were made in reaction to family anxiety and grief after one of the members was convicted and executed for murder in 1801.<sup>51</sup>



*Apotropaic Marks inside the Fairbanks House in Dedham, Massachusetts*<sup>52</sup>

Inside another house, the Jackson House in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, built 1664, there are two apotropaic marks: one set of concentric circles and one hexafoil. Although

<sup>50</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 55-56.

<sup>51</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 59.

<sup>52</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 60.

concentric circles are less common, they are said to operate like hexafoils as they bring light into homes, especially in the places in which they are vulnerable. The concentric circles are on a wall facing the house's fireplace and chimney opening, which follows suit with apotropaic marks protecting openings to the outside world. Although in an unusual location as it is not on or facing an opening, the hexafoil in the Jackson house cannot be mistaken for a carpenter's mark or other shape.<sup>53</sup> Like the Fairbanks house, the pressures and stress of everyday life along with fear related to migration may have caused the drawing of such marks.



*Apotropaic Marks inside the Jackson House: Portsmouth, New Hampshire*<sup>54</sup>

In particular, stressors related to social life and witchcraft could have influenced the Jackson family to inscribe apotropaic marks in their home. At the time of the construction, there were nine official legal complaints of witchcraft in the nearby area. One case specifically mentioned a supernatural attack on a tavern in which hundreds of flying stones were pelted at the building by unseen forces, causing extensive damage inside and outside of the building, going so far as to fracture the owner's skull.<sup>55</sup> With accusations of witchcraft, Portsmouth society was likely tense and laden with suspicion. The Jacksons could have been fearful of spiritual attacks and decided

<sup>53</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 68.

<sup>54</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 69.

<sup>55</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 70.

to employ protective markings.<sup>56</sup> In addition, one of the Jackson's children, John, suffered from a mental disorder. Because mental illnesses in colonial New England were frequently associated with witchcraft, the Jackson's may have thought John's mind was afflicted by the devil, thus leading to the need for protection.<sup>57</sup>

The Fairbanks House and Jackson House stand as just two examples of many colonial New England houses that contain apotropaic marks. What is important here is the relation between their use in architecture as the architecture is representative of their fears, stressors, and lives in colonial America. The need for protection and the decision to choose this specific form of ritual protection indicates their fears around Native American attacks, supernatural harm both through invasion and mental illness, and ultimately the fear of witchcraft.<sup>58</sup> Though less thoroughly documented and examined, it is plausible that colonial houses in Virginia also utilize apotropaic marks for protection, which in-turn acts as a representation of their fears as colonists.

#### *Two Examples of Apotropaic Marks in Colonial Virginian Houses*

In Virginian colonial homes, there is evidence of apotropaic marks from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, but little research has been done to suggest if the marks relate to or demonstrate the struggles or fears of the people who carved them.<sup>59</sup> However, based on the scholarship surrounding apotropaic marks in New England, the same basic ideas of the fears and challenges of migration and colonial life could be ascribed to those in colonial Virginia with English roots. For example, Timberneck is a house that was built around 1793 in Gloucester

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<sup>56</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 71.

<sup>57</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 73.

<sup>58</sup> Conray, "Behind the Devil's Shield: Ritual Protection Marks on the Vernacular Architecture of Colonial New England a Thesis in History," 91.

<sup>59</sup> Black and Karow, "Apotropaic Symbols at Timberneck."

County, Virginia that contains apotropaic marks hidden in the home's beams and rafters. In 2022, stabilization and dendrochronology were completed at Timberneck, revealing signs of potential apotropaic marks in the basement's support beams and doorways. Using the *terminus post quem* practice, experts determined that many of the markings at Timberneck were likely carved during the initial constitution of the house.<sup>60</sup>



*A Hexafoil and Scorch Marks at Timberneck in Gloucester County, Virginia*<sup>61</sup>

There are many examples of Marian marks and hexafoils at Timberneck in the cellar, on the dining room's fireplace mantle, on the upstairs banister, and on the front door of an 1850s addition to the house. Beyond Marian marks and hexafoils, Timberneck demonstrates the use of scorch marks; there are six scorch marks in the cellar, including marks on the main support beam of the house that would have likely been one of the first to be placed during the home's construction. The abundance of apotropaic marks at Timberneck suggests salient beliefs in their protective value, especially as they were placed near openings like doorways and mantles which would presumably protect the inhabitants from evil entering the home. Furthermore, the placement of scorch marks to protect from fire on one of the first laid beams of the home

<sup>60</sup> Black and Karow, "Apotropaic Symbols at Timberneck."

<sup>61</sup> Black and Karow, "Apotropaic Symbols at Timberneck."

indicates the fear of fire in colonial Virginia, similar to the colonial New Englander's fear of social struggle or witchcraft as denoted by the apotropaic marks in homes in that region.

Though only discussed in the context of Facebook posts and a YouTube video, there is evidence for apotropaic marks at Stratford Hall in Stratford, Virginia, built in 1738. Such informal analysis still reflects the fears of colonial life in Virginia through apotropaic marks. In a Women's History Month Facebook post, Stratford Hall's account included a picture of a hexafoil in the home's nursery, writing "Since the child mortality rate was so high during this time period, these marks were likely engraved here as a protection for young children who were nursed in this room."<sup>62</sup>



*Image from Stratford Hall's Facebook Post<sup>63</sup>*

In a similar fashion, a YouTube Video entitled "Stratford's Spirits: Witch Marks and Conjure during the Lee Era" discusses the myriad of apotropaic marks on the home's exterior, particularly on the exterior of the school master's room and the nursery. The video discusses how the home had several infant deaths, and because the people who lived at the home were very superstitious and believed that the supernatural world influenced everyday life, they placed Marian marks, grid marks, and daisy wheels (meaning hexafoils) inside and outside of Stratford

<sup>62</sup> Stratford Hall, "Apotropaic Markings Carved into the Floorboard of the Nursery," *Facebook*, last modified March 22, 2020, accessed November 10, 2023, <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10163266992435578&set=a.476298065577>.

<sup>63</sup> Stratford Hall, *Facebook*, "Apotropaic Markings Carved into the Floorboard of the Nursery."



Hall.<sup>64</sup> These marks at Stratford Hall clearly indicate the deep fears of colonial Virginians, like that of those in New England: fears of infant death and supernatural invasion in the home. More than simply believing Christianity, the people in this colony took extra magical measures to protect themselves from the challenges of colonial life.



*Exterior Apotropaic Marks at Stratford Hall,*

*from YouTube Video<sup>65</sup>*

It is important to note that it is commonly argued that Bacon's Castle in Surry County, Virginia exemplifies apotropaic marks, specifically hexafoils. Bacon's Castle was constructed between 1665 and 1675 and later went through major renovations in the 1740s and 1750s.<sup>66</sup> The carvings of hexafoils are very visible on the main summer beam in the home, and because of the visibility and formality of the carvings, architectural and preservation experts argue the hexafoil seems to be simply decorative and a coincidence, rather than an actual protective mark.<sup>67</sup> Despite this coincidence, other forms of protective magic unrelated to architecture have been found in Bacon's Castle, such as the use of animal remains and witch bottles in protective ritual practices;

<sup>64</sup> "Stratford's Spirits: Witch Marks and Conjure during the Lee Era." *YouTube*, uploaded by Stratford Hall, September 16, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsrKQfiO2kE>.

<sup>65</sup> *YouTube*, "Stratford's Spirits: Witch Marks and Conjure during the Lee Era."

<sup>66</sup> Planto, "Revealing matters: an archaeology of building deposits from the Bacon's Castle site, Surry County, Virginia," 211.

<sup>67</sup> Planto, "Revealing matters: an archaeology of building deposits from the Bacon's Castle site, Surry County, Virginia," 231.

however more work needs to be done to prove the use of apotropaic marks in the structure as a whole.<sup>68</sup>

In essence, apotropaic marks in colonial American architecture serve multiple functions: first, inhabitants of colonial America carried magical traditions with them to from England and thus believed the marks protected them from certain threats, both supernatural and tangible. Second, by using these marks for protection, the marks themselves exemplify the fears and the common struggles migrants faced (such as witchcraft, Native American attacks, fire, and many more) and how they took measures to sooth such fears. By way of analyzing these topics in the context of New England, where much scholarship has been focused, the use of architectural apotropaic marks and their representations of protection and colonial life can be applied to the similar architectural apotropaic marks in Virginia that have been studied to a lesser extent and with less academic rigor. Through just a small architectural detail in many colonial American homes, apotropaic marks hold stories and information within them, shedding light in lives past through the built environment.

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<sup>68</sup> Planto, "Revealing matters: an archaeology of building deposits from the Bacon's Castle site, Surry County, Virginia," 232.

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