

THE PAST IS

prologue

AMERICAN ICON

By
Gabriella M. Petrick

Life of Pie



How did
a humble
dessert
become a
recipe for
democracy?



IN THE EARLY 1900s, the United States was at war—over pie. On one side were the traditionalists, who saw pie as “an article of necessity in every household as much as the bed and cook stove,” according to a *Chicago Daily Tribune* report in 1899. On the other side were the food reformers, who wanted to break this unhealthy and corrupting habit. “Pie really is an American evil,” Kate Masterson wrote in the *New York Times* in 1902. It is an “unmoral food,” she warned, offering advice for spotting pie eaters: They have “sallow complexions” and “lusterless or unnaturally bright eyes” and, of course, they “are all dyspeptic.” “No great man,” she wrote, “was ever fond of pie.”

Those were fighting words. Pie eaters traced their love of the dish back to the founding fathers—a particular pumpkin pie recipe credited to the Adams family was said by the *Kansas City Star* to have “raised a well-fed race of jurists, scholars, orators and Presidents”—and still further back to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The pie tradition of the New England colonies had come from old England with the settlers, who transformed the savory kidney and mincemeat pies of the British Isles into sweet pies filled with fruits that grew well along the Atlantic Coast. The crusts changed, too. They were lighter and flakier because lard from pigs was more abundant in the Colonies than tallow from cows. (Sugar and spices were imported to the Colonies from Britain, which controlled most trade.) In 1892, Rudyard Kipling described the Northeast as “the great American pie belt,” a title that traditionalists claimed proudly. As the population moved west, the pie recipes did, too.

By the turn of the century, Americans were eating more apple pie than any other variety. Apples, first brought to the continent by the colonists, grew well across large swaths of the country and could be



By mid-century, pie was big business. Demand was highest on Thanksgiving, Christmas and Washington's Birthday.

stored through the winter, unlike most other fresh fruits. The phrase “as American as apple pie” would not be coined until a 1924 advertisement in the *Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, Times* for men's suits that bucked English fashion trends. But the idea was already so deeply ingrained that pie eating became a way for the country's newest arrivals—now mainly from Central, Southern and Eastern Europe—to assimilate. “Every American is born with an appetite

for pie,” a New York newspaper opined in 1895. As for the immigrant, the paper wrote, “his Americanism, in fact, may be tested in his taste for pie.”

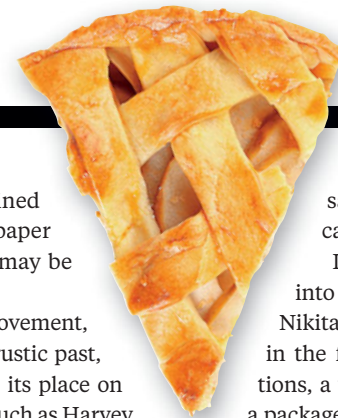
To the growing food reform movement, though, pie was a remnant of our rustic past, before the United States had taken its place on the international stage. Advocates such as Harvey Wiley—now best known for his support of the Pure Food and Drug Act of 1906—called for a simpler and lighter diet, focused on Northern European cuisines. Pie eaters (code for immigrants and the lower classes,

in the language of the food reformers) were a drag on society. Elizabeth Fulton, a home economist at Kansas State Normal School, believed pie eating, like alcoholism, was a cause of divorce. She implored homemakers to “return to fresh fruit.”

The reformers might have won the battle, too, if not for the outbreak of World War I.

Now pie eating was patriotic. “As soon as an American boy goes to any foreign country he at once begins to languish for American pie,” a *Boston Daily Globe* editorial professed in 1918. The craving, the *Globe* wrote, was a hunger for democracy itself: “Patrick Henry might as well have

“PATRICK HENRY MIGHT AS WELL HAVE SAID ‘GIVE ME PIE OR GIVE ME DEATH’ BECAUSE WHAT IS LIBERTY WITHOUT PIE?”



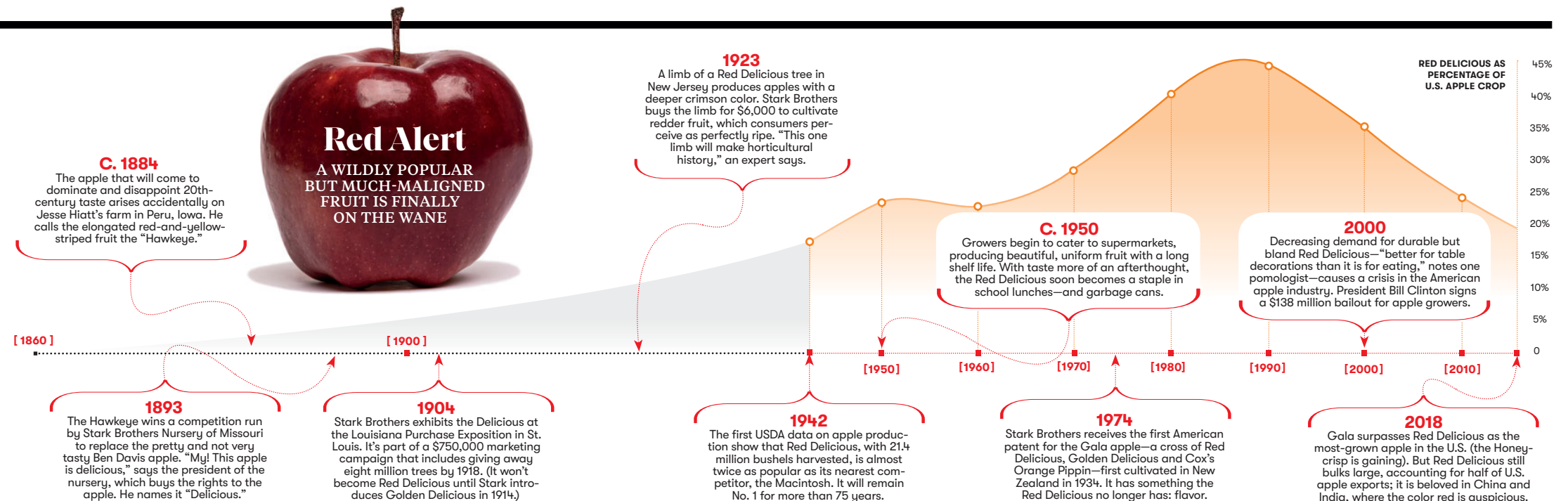
said ‘Give me pie or give me death’ because what is liberty without pie?’”

It maintained its symbolic significance into the Cold War. When Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev visited New York City in the fall of 1960 to address the United Nations, a woman named Virginia McCleary sent a package from her Texas home to Khrushchev's residence on Park Avenue. The bomb squad was called to examine the five-pound delivery. Inside was an apple pie. The pastry, McCleary said, would introduce Khrushchev to American values: “The Communist pie is nothing but crust. In America we have an upper crust and a lower crust but it's what's between—the middle class—that gives the real flavor.”

Today apple pie tastes like nostalgia, as in the unforgettable (try as one might) 1974 General Motors jingle “Baseball, hot dogs, apple pie and Chevrolet, they go together in the good ol' USA.” The company revived it in 2012 as the nation emerged from the financial crisis and the lingering menace of 9/11.

Despite the current fad for locally grown fresh foods that are low carb, keto-friendly and gluten-free, we still have a soft spot for this classic dessert: About 186 million pies of all sorts are purchased every year at the nation's grocery stores alone. The ingredients have evolved over the years in step with waves of immigrants—think mango, Asian pear and banana split—but America's undisputed favorite is still apple pie.

P. 7: ALAMY; ISTOCK; SHUTTERSTOCK (4); THIS SPREAD: GETTY; ALAMY; SHUTTERSTOCK



BREATHING ROOMS

Dramatic new photographs bring acclaimed artists back to life



WHEN ADRIEN BROOM first visited the former Long Island home of Jackson Pollock and his wife, the painter Lee Krasner, she was transfixed by the splattered floorboards in Pollock's studio, a relic of the modernist's signature technique. "You see the borders of some of the most famous works to come out of America," Broom says, "and they all merge together to create something so special that is only in this one place." Conjuring such moments

▲
"The paint went all over, and of course some of it went off the canvas," the photographer says of Pollock's technique, re-enacted here in his studio.

for her photography series *Holding Space*, Broom recruits actors to imagine life in richly suggestive historic dwellings, such as those of Mark Twain, the arts patron Florence Griswold and the photographer Alice Austen. Seeing their quotidian belongings humanizes their one-time occupants. "These people have become legendary—godlike," she says. "But here is a bedroom with a tiny little bed, and this is their bathroom! It's inspirational because they created wonderful work, but they were still just people." ♦

ADRIEN BROOM



No image of Henrietta Wood survives today, but her story is recorded in court filings, including the verdict slip above.

The Nation's Unsettled Account

In 1870 Henrietta Wood sued for reparations—and won the largest verdict ever awarded for slavery

O **N APRIL 17, 1878**, twelve white jurors entered a federal courtroom in Cincinnati, Ohio, to deliver the verdict in a now-forgotten lawsuit about American slavery. The plaintiff was Henrietta Wood, described by a reporter at the time as “a spectacled negro woman, apparently sixty years old.” The defendant was Zebulon Ward, a white man who had enslaved Wood 25 years before. She was suing him for \$20,000 in reparations. Two days earlier, the jury had watched as Wood took the ➔

stand; her son, Arthur, who lived in Chicago, was in the courtroom. Born into bondage in Kentucky, Wood testified, she had been granted her freedom in Cincinnati in 1848, but five years later she was kidnapped by Ward, who sold her, and she ended up enslaved on a Texas plantation until after the Civil War. She finally returned to Cincinnati in 1869, a free woman. She had not forgotten Ward and sued him the following year.

The trial began only after eight years of litigation, leaving Wood to wonder if she would ever get justice. Now, she watched nervously as the 12 jurors returned to their seats. Finally, they announced a verdict that few expected: “We, the Jury in the above entitled cause, do find for the plaintiff and assess her damages in the premises at Two thousand five hundred dollars.”

Though a fraction of what Wood had asked for, the amount would be worth nearly \$65,000 today. It remains the largest known sum ever granted by a U.S. court in restitution for slavery.

But Wood’s name never made it into the history books. When she died in 1912, her suit was already forgotten by all except her son. Today, it remains virtually unknown, even as reparations for slavery are once again in the headlines.

I first learned of Wood from two interviews she gave to reporters in the 1870s. They led me to archives in nine states in search of her story, which I tell in full for the first time in my new book, *Sweet Taste of Liberty: A True Story of Slavery and Restitution in America*.

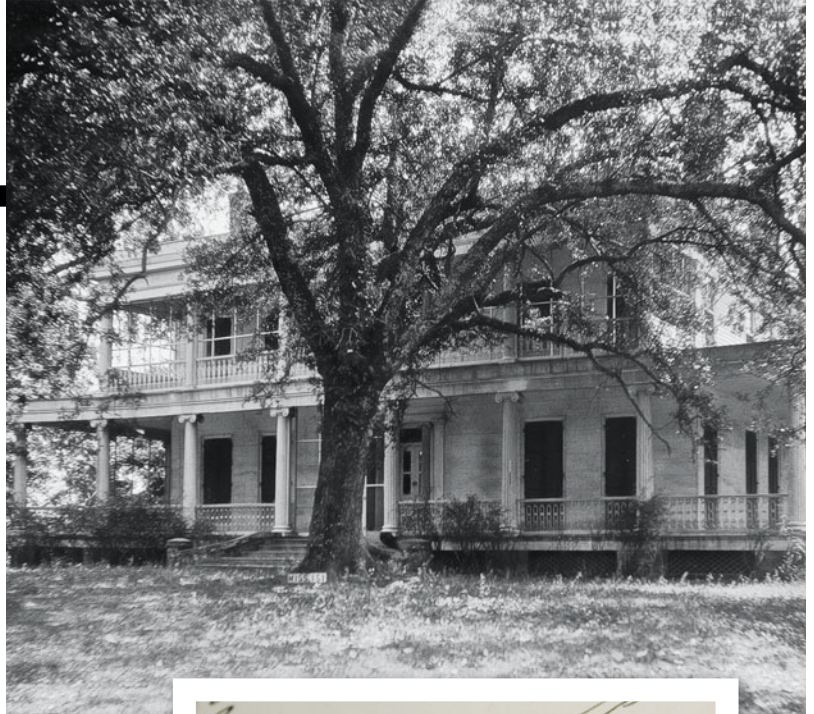
HENRIETTA WOOD’S STORY began two centuries ago with her birth in northern Kentucky.

“I can’t quite tell my age,” Wood recalled in a newspaper interview in 1876, but she knew she was born enslaved to the Tousey family between 1818 and

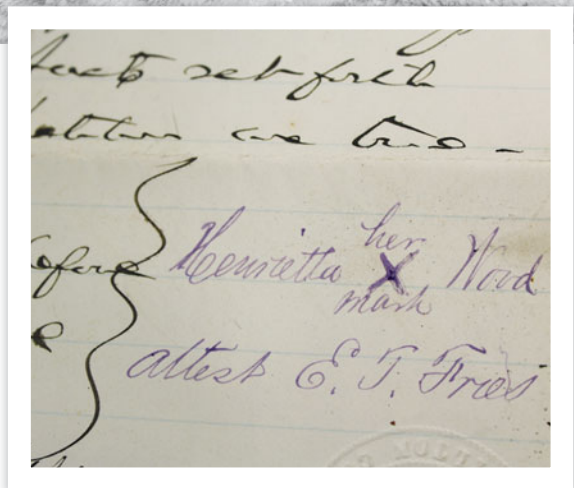
“
**MY MISTRESS GAVE ME
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 ”

1820. In 1834, the teenager was bought by a merchant in Louisville and taken from her family. She was soon sold again, to a French immigrant, William Cirode, who took her to New Orleans.

Cirode returned to France in 1844, abandoning his wife, Jane, who eventually took Wood with her to Ohio, a free state. Then, in 1848, Jane Cirode went to a county courthouse and registered Wood as free.



▲
 Brandon Hall, where Wood toiled as a slave in the 1850s, as it looked in 1936. Right, Wood’s mark on an affidavit from Wood v. Ward.



TOP: LIBRARY OF CONGRESS; BOTTOM: W. CALEB MCDANIEL

“My mistress gave me my freedom,” Wood later said, “and my papers were recorded.” Wood spent the next several years performing domestic work around Cincinnati. She would one day recall that period of her life as a “sweet taste of liberty.”

All the while, however, there were people conspiring to take her freedom away. Cirode’s daughter and son-in-law, Josephine and Robert White, still lived in Kentucky and disagreed with Jane Cirode’s manumission of Wood; they viewed her as their inheritance. By the 1850s, the interstate slave trade was booming, and the Whites saw dollar signs whenever they thought of Wood. All they needed was someone to do the dirty work of enslaving her again.

Zebulon Ward was their man. A native Kentuckian who had recently moved to Covington, just across the Ohio River from Cincinnati, Ward became a deputy sheriff in 1853. The Whites lived in Covington, too, and in the spring of 1853 they convinced Ward to pay them \$300 for the right to sell Wood and pocket the proceeds himself—provided he could get her.

Gangs worked throughout the antebellum period to capture free black men, women and children and

smuggle them into the South, under the cover of the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, which required the return of runaway slaves. Ward began to plot with a group of these notorious “slave catchers.” The gang located Wood’s employer in Cincinnati, a boardinghouse keeper named Rebecca Boyd, and paid her to join their scheme. One Sunday afternoon in April 1853, Boyd tricked Wood into taking a carriage ride across the river. And when the carriage finally rolled to a stop outside of Covington, Ward’s men were waiting.

It would be 16 years before Wood set foot in Ohio again.

She spent the first nights of her captivity locked inside two roadside inns. Her captors’ destination was Lexington, Kentucky, where prices for slaves had risen in tandem with the Southern cotton economy. After 1815, as white settlers rushed into the lower Mississippi River Valley, many looked to purchase slaves to cultivate the region’s most profitable crop. Slave traders met the demand by buying slaves in Virginia, Kentucky and Maryland and selling them in the cotton states. Between 1820 and 1860, nearly one million people were sold “down the river.”

Ward planned to make Wood the latest victim of this trade, but she resolved to fight. Wood secretly told her story to a sympathetic innkeeper who followed her to Lexington, where a lawsuit was filed on

her behalf asserting that she was free. Wood was never allowed to testify, however, and Ward denied her claims. Her official freedom papers, at a courthouse in Cincinnati, had been destroyed in an 1849 fire, and her kidnappers had confiscated her personal copy. The case was eventually dismissed. In the eyes of Kentucky law, Wood was a slave.

The freedom suit had prevented Ward from selling Wood for nearly two years, but in 1855, he took her to a Kentucky slave-trading firm that did business in Natchez, Mississippi. The traders put Wood up for sale at Natchez’s infamous Forks of the Road slave market. Gerard Brandon, one of the largest slaveholders in the South, bought Wood and took her to his house, Brandon Hall, on the Natchez Trace. “Brandon was

The Harrowing Life of Henrietta Wood

A BRAVE WOMAN’S TORTUOUS PATH FROM SLAVERY TO FREEDOM—AND BACK



C. 1820
TOUSEYTOWN, KENTUCKY
Wood is born enslaved to the Tousey family.

1834
LOUISVILLE
Henry Forsyth purchases Wood, separating her from her family.

1837-1838
NEW ORLEANS
William Cirode buys Wood and moves her to Louisiana.

1844
LOUISVILLE
Jane Cirode, William’s wife, takes Wood to Kentucky.

1847-1848
CINCINNATI
Jane Cirode takes Wood to Ohio, registers her as free.

1853
COVINGTON, KENTUCKY
Zebulon Ward kidnaps and re-enslaves Wood.

1854
LEXINGTON
Wood loses a lawsuit for her freedom.

1855
NATCHEZ, MISSISSIPPI
Gerard Brandon purchases Wood, forces her to work in the fields.

1863
ROBERTSON COUNTY, TEXAS
Brandon flees to Texas with some 300 slaves, including Wood and her son, after the Emancipation Proclamation.

1866
NATCHEZ
Wood returns with Brandon and gains her freedom.

1869-1870
CINCINNATI
Wood moves to Ohio and files a lawsuit against Ward.

1912
CHICAGO
Wood dies at about age 92.

MAP: ERITREA DORCELY

a very rich man,” Wood later said. He owned 700 to 800 slaves on several plantations, and he “put me to work at once in the cotton field,” she said. “I sowed the cotton, hoed the cotton, and picked the cotton. I worked under the meanest overseers, and got flogged and flogged, until I thought I should die.”

“
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 THOUGHT I SHOULD DIE.**
 ”

At some point during those hellish days, Wood gave birth to Arthur, whose father is unknown. She was later removed from the cotton fields and put to work in Brandon’s house.

The Civil War began, followed in 1863 by the Emancipation Proclamation, but Wood’s ordeal continued. On July 1, 1863, just days before the U.S. Army arrived

to free thousands of people around Natchez, Brandon, determined to defy emancipation, forced some 300 slaves to march 400 miles to Texas, far beyond the reach of federal soldiers. Wood was among them. Brandon kept her enslaved on a cotton plantation until well after the war. Even “Juneteenth,” the day in June 1865 when Union soldiers arrived in Texas to enforce emancipation, did not liberate Wood. It wasn’t until she returned to Mississippi with Brandon in 1866 that she gained her freedom; she continued to work for Brandon, now promised a salary of \$10 a month, but she would say she was never paid.

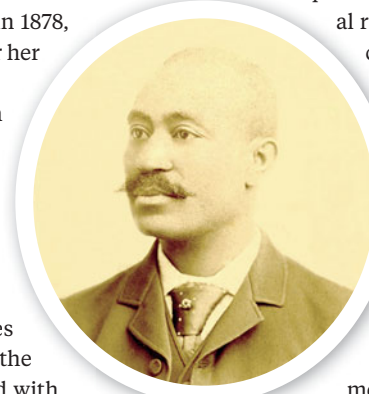
It was four years after the Confederate surrender before Wood was able to return up the river, where she tried to locate long-lost members of her family in Kentucky. Whether she succeeded in that quest is unknown—but she did find a lawyer, Harvey Myers. He helped Wood file a lawsuit in Cincinnati against Ward, now a wealthy man living in Lexington. The postwar constitutional amendments that abolished slavery and extended national citizenship to ex-slaves enabled Wood to pursue Ward in federal court.

Ward’s lawyers stalled, claiming that her failed an-

tebellum suit for freedom proved his innocence. They also said that Ward’s alleged crimes had occurred too far in the past—a recurring argument against reparations. Wood suffered another, unexpected setback in 1874 when her lawyer was murdered by a client’s husband in an unrelated divorce case. Then, in 1878, jurors ruled that Ward should pay Wood for her enslavement.

A record now at the National Archives in Chicago confirms that he did, in 1879.

WOOD’S VICTORY BRIEFLY MADE her lawsuit national news. Not everyone agreed with the verdict, but the facts of her horrific story were widely accepted as credible. The *New York Times* observed, “Files of newspapers of the five years following the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law are filled with stories of the kidnapping of free men in free States.” (In fact, free black Northerners had been kidnapped for years before the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.) Some newspapers even predicted that lawsuits like hers would proliferate. As one put it, Wood’s award



▲
 Arthur H. Simms,
 Wood’s son,
 photographed in
 1883 or 1884, at
 about age 27.

was “not a liberal equivalent for the loss of liberty” she had suffered, but it would “be applicable to a great many cases yet untried.”

Yet *Wood v. Ward* did not set a sweeping legal precedent. Because the award was small, procedural rules prevented Ward from appealing to higher courts where the verdict might have been more widely noticed. Even the judge who presided over Wood’s case, Phillip Swing, viewed it narrowly. “Fortunately for this country the institution of slavery has passed away,” he had instructed the jurors, “and we should not bring our particular ideas of the legality or morality of an institution of that character into Court or the jury-box.” He had cautioned the jurors against an excessive award, claiming—falsely—that many former slaveholders already regretted slavery.

Swing also told the jurors to focus on Wood’s kidnapping in assessing the case, and the vast majority of freed people could not show, as Wood did, that they had been re-enslaved. But Wood and her lawyers had argued that the case was about much ●

DAVID M. BLACKMAN

more than damages from abduction. By suing Ward for the wages she had lost while owned by Brandon, her lawyers made clear that a verdict for Wood was an acknowledgment of the evils of slavery itself.

Few white Americans wished to dwell on those evils. By 1878, white Northerners were retreating from Reconstruction. Many newspapers described Wood's suit as an "old case" or a "relic of slavery times," consigning stories like hers to a fading past. "Not so many complications of a legal nature arise out of the old relations of master and slave as might have been expected," the *New York Tribune* argued with barely concealed relief.

Wood was an early contributor to a long tradition of formerly enslaved people and their descendants demanding redress. In the 1890s another formerly enslaved woman, Callie House, led a national organization pressuring the government for ex-slave pensions. In 1969, civil rights leader James Forman issued a manifesto calling on churches and synagogues to pay half a billion dollars in reparations to black Americans. Today, many reparations advocates look to legislation, targeting governments for their complicity in slavery and white supremacy. They note that disfranchisement and segregation only worsened the racial wealth gap, which was established under slavery and remains today. While Wood received \$2,500 as compensation for more than 16 years of unpaid labor, her former enslaver, Ward, left an estate worth at least \$600,000 when he died in 1894, a multimillionaire in today's terms.

But Wood's award, however insufficient, was not ineffectual. After her suit, she moved with her son to Chicago. With help from his mother's court-ordered compensation, Arthur bought a house, started a family and paid for his own schooling. In 1889, he was one of the first African-American graduates of what became Northwestern University's School of Law. When he died in 1951, after a long career as a lawyer, he left behind a large clan of descendants who were able to launch professional careers of their own, even as redlining and other racially discriminatory practices put a chokehold on the South Side neighborhoods where they lived. For them, the money Henrietta Wood demanded for her enslavement made a long-lasting difference. ♦

Literature

How to Read Like Mark Twain

STEP ONE: PRETEND YOU DON'T LIKE BOOKS

By Terena Bell

I have no liking for novels or stories," Mark Twain once wrote—and often repeated.

You'd have to be as gullible as the boys who whitewashed Tom Sawyer's fence to believe the famous writer didn't read, but the 19th-century literati still fell for it, dismissing Twain as unsophisticated. "Even today there are those who look down their nose at Twain as an unrefined upstart," says Alan Gribben, a professor at Auburn University.

In truth, Twain was a voracious reader, and Gribben has spent almost 50 years compiling a list of the 3,000 books in Twain's library, which was scattered after his death. The scholar has also zeroed in on hundreds of works that influenced Twain's writing, including these titles:

MOST OF CHARLES DICKENS

"My brother used to try to get me to read Dickens, long ago," Twain said the year before his death. "I couldn't do it." Actually, though, young Twain knew some Dickens novels by heart. Echoes

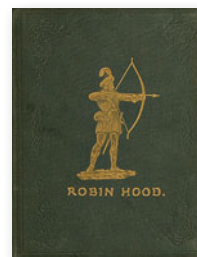
of *Our Mutual Friend* can be found in *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.



ASTRONOMY BOOKS

Gribben says Twain "read and annotated every popular book published on astronomy"—and it shows in works such as his *Captain Stormfield's Visit to Heaven*. Twain was also inspired by the

poet-astronomer Omar Khayyám, writing a poem in Khayyám's style.



ROBIN HOOD AND HIS MERRY FORESTERS

Throughout *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Tom and his friend Joe Harper act out scenes from *Robin Hood*. Gribben discovered that

the characters are quoting a specific version of the tale, Joseph Cundall's 1841 classic, which Twain may have read as a child. "We used to undress & play Robin Hood in our shirt-tails," Twain reminisced in a letter.

ABOLITIONIST LITERATURE

Before writing *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*—which uses the n-word 215 times—Twain read antislavery novels and slave narratives, including William Still's

Underground Railroad. Twain captured the vernacular of the antebellum South, but it didn't reflect his views when he completed the book in 1884, says Gribben, who edited a 2011 version of *Huckleberry Finn* without the slur.



PARADISE LOST

In 1900, Twain applied his much-quoted maxim about classics to John Milton's *Paradise Lost*. It was, Twain said in a lecture, "something everybody wants to have read and nobody wants to read." Except

Twain, who read it, loved it and bought a second copy for his wife. He also wrote his own versions of the story.

War and Piece

A lowly chunk of earth is a telltale trace of the devastating weapon that would change the world forever



▲
A clump of trinitite, formed of desert sand and the imponderable heat of a nuclear explosion.

THE FIRST ATOMIC BOMB ever exploded was a test device, insouciantly nicknamed the Gadget. In mid-July 1945, American scientists had trucked the five-ton mechanism from their secret laboratory at Los Alamos, New Mexico, 230 miles south, to a place known to the scientists as Trinity in a stretch of southern New Mexico desert called the Jornada del Muerto—the journey of death. There they hoisted it into a corrugated-steel shelter on a 100-foot steel tower, connected the tangle of electric cables that would detonate its shell of high explosives, and waited tensely through a night of lightning and heavy rain before retreating to a blockhouse five and a half miles away to begin the test countdown.

The rain stopped and just at dawn on July 16, 1945, the explosion delivered a multiplying nuclear chain reaction in a sphere of plutonium no larger than a baseball that yielded an explosive force equivalent to about 19,000 tons of TNT. The 100-million-degree fireball vaporized the steel tower down to its footings, swirled up desert sand, melted it and rained down splashes of greenish glass before rising rapidly to form the world's first nuclear mushroom cloud.

No one commented on the glass at the time—its creation was the least of the Gadget's spectacular effects—but visitors to the site after the war noticed the unusual scattering of glassy mineral that sur-

rounded the shallow bomb crater and began collecting pieces as souvenirs. "A lake of green jade," *Time* magazine described it in September 1945. "The glass takes strange shapes—lopsided marbles, knobby sheets a quarter-inch thick, broken, thin-walled bubbles, green, wormlike forms." (Today, several samples of the substance, including the ones pictured here, reside at the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History.) At first no one knew what to call the material. Someone named it "Alamogordo glass" because the test site was near that town. A 1946 ad in *Mechanix Illustrated* offered jewelry made of "'atomsite,' the atomic-fused glass from the Trinity Site." But the "-ite" suffix asked for something more specific than "atoms": The whole world was made of atoms. At Los Alamos they turned to the site itself for a name—Trinitite. Still, where did "Trinity" come from?

J. Robert Oppenheimer, the charismatic theoretical physicist who had directed the Los Alamos Laboratory where the first atomic bombs were designed and built, was something of a Renaissance man, a poet as well as a scientist and administrator. It was he who had named the desert site "Trinity." The domineering U.S. Army Corps of Engineers officer who had steered the Manhattan Project, Brig. Gen. Leslie R. Groves, later asked Oppenheimer why he picked such a strange name for a bomb testing range.

"Why I chose the name is not clear," Oppenheimer responded, "but I know what thoughts were in my mind. There is a poem of John Donne, written just ●

before his death, which I know and love. From it a quotation:

As West and East

*In all flat Maps—and I am one—are one,
So death doth touch the Resurrection.*

“That still does not make a Trinity,” Oppenheimer continued, “but in another, better known devotional poem, Donne opens, ‘*Batter my heart, three person’d God;—*.’ Beyond this, I have no clues whatever.”

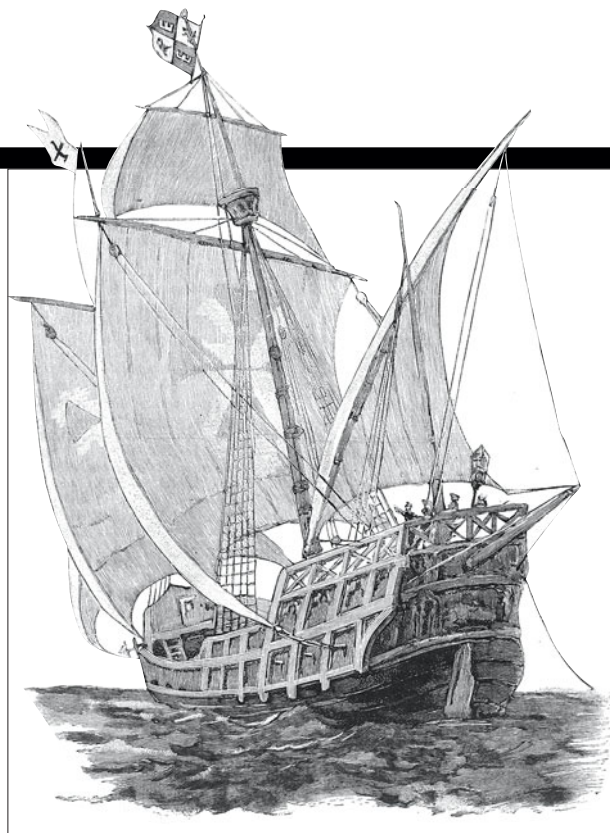
Oppenheimer could be obscure, not to say patronizing. Certainly he knew why he chose to name the test site after a poem by the pre-eminent metaphysical poet of Jacobean England, though he may not have cared to reveal himself to the gruff, no-nonsense Groves.

So the lopsided marbles and the knobby sheets became Trinitite. It was primarily quartz and feldspar, tinted sea green with minerals in the desert sand, with droplets of condensed plutonium sealed into it. Once the site was opened, after the war, collectors picked it up in chunks; local rock shops sold it and still do. Concerned for its residual radioactivity, the Army bulldozed the site in 1952 and made collecting Trinitite illegal. What’s sold today was collected before the ban. Unless you eat it, scientists report, it isn’t dangerous anymore.

I bought a piece once as a birthday gift for a friend, the actor Paul Newman. Paul had been a 20-year-old rear gunner on a two-man Navy torpedo bomber, training for the invasion of Japan, when the second and third atomic bombs after Trinity exploded over Japan and did their part to end a war that killed more than 60 million human beings. “I was one of those who said thank god for the atomic bomb,” Paul told me ruefully.

He liked the Trinitite. It was a dusting of something he believed had spared his life along with the lives of at least tens of thousands of his comrades and hundreds of thousands of Japanese soldiers and civilians. Oppenheimer informed Groves in August 1945 that Los Alamos could probably produce at least six bombs a month by October if the Japanese continued the war.

To this day at Trinity, worker ants mending their tunnels push beads of Trinitite up into the sunlight, a memento mori in ravishing green glass. ♦



Exploration

Riches of the Spanish Main

A DEEP DIVE INTO THE ARCHIVES YIELDS HUNDREDS OF LONG-FORGOTTEN SHIPWRECKS

By Amy Crawford

FOR FOUR CENTURIES, Spain’s prodigious naval power built an empire that stretched around the globe. But not every military or merchant voyage ended well. In the first analysis of its kind by a former colonial power, Spain’s Ministry of Culture has identified 681 shipwrecks in the Caribbean and along the southern Atlantic coast of the United States. They date from 1492, when Christopher Columbus’ *Santa María* hit a sandbar near modern-day Haiti, to 1898, when the U.S. Navy sank the *Plutón* off the coast of Cuba during the Spanish-American War.

Carlos León Amores, an archaeologist, led a research team that spent five years sifting through Spanish archives to identify the doomed vessels, less than a quarter of which have been precisely located. More than 90 percent foundered in storms; only about 2 percent were sunk by pirates or rival navies. More than 50,000 people perished, some of them enslaved Africans.

The ships carried diverse cargoes, from food and weapons to religious objects, but it’s the glittering products of Spain’s New World colonies that have long attracted interest from historians and fortune seekers. Already the government’s unpublished list is being called “the world’s largest treasure map.” But León Amores cautions that Spain is actually trying to stymie treasure hunters by laying claim to its “underwater cultural heritage.”

It’s not the first official shot across the bow. In 2012, Spain won a lawsuit against a U.S. salvage firm, which was forced to return 17 tons of gold and silver coins discovered in the wreck of the frigate *Nuestra Señora de las Mercedes*, sunk by the British near Portugal in 1804. Spanish authorities are currently embroiled in a dispute with the Colombian government and another U.S. firm over the 1708 wreck of the galleon *San José*, which carried gold, silver and emeralds that could be worth billions.

Still, the value of centuries-old wrecks is more than monetary. Each ship that sank between the Old World and the New is evidence of the beginnings of globalization. The real treasure is a better understanding of this powerful economic force that continues to shape the world today. ♦