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NEWS RELEASE

Aug. 10, 2005

Contact: Caleb Hutchins, UM history and secondary education student, (406) 542-2257.

FAMILY TRINKET LEADS UM STUDENT INTO HISTORICAL RESEARCH

MISSOULA —

It was just a trinket -- a brass dress fastener from the early 1800s that's smaller than a penny. But this tiny artifact led Caleb Hutchins, a University of Montana student from **Kalispell**, on an exciting journey into his family's past.

Hutchins, a senior majoring in history and secondary education, said the fist-shaped dress fastener was found in the tool chest of his great-great-great-grandfather Charles H. Harvey.

When Hutchins started investigating the artifact, he learned it was a rare find.

"These items have been identified by historians and in certain slave narratives as important in slave religion, acting as a ward against evil," he said.

Similar dress fasteners, which can be worn as a charm, had been found at former slavery sites in Tennessee and Virginia, including the Hermitage -- Andrew Jackson's home in Tennessee. But how did it get into the tool chest of Hutchins' ancestor?

UM's Office of Research and Development funded a trip by the UM student to Washington, D.C., to find out more. He was there June 7-26.

Hutchins visited with John Michael Vlach of George Washington University, a leading authority on the material culture of slavery. Vlach said the fist-shaped trinket was probably a knock-off of an Italian *figa* -- a hand-shaped amulet from ancient times -- and such trinkets may have been carried by traders passing through the southern plantation region.

-more-

Hutchins worked closely with several historians at the Smithsonian Institute during his stay, including Fath Davis Ruffins, an authority on the underground railroad. Ruffins said there was little evidence to connect his particular piece to slavery. She suggested the fastener might have belonged to Charles H. Harvey's late wife, Nancy, who died shortly after childbirth, and that Charles kept it for sentimental value.

"The general consensus from the people I worked with was that the full truth may never be revealed," Hutchins said, "but there was indeed some purpose for a carpenter to place a dress fastener inside his tool chest."

According to Wilbur Siebert, author of "Underground Railroad: From Slavery to Freedom," Hutchins learned there was a small spur of the Underground Railroad that ran through **Nottingham, N.H.** Charles Harvey lived in Nottingham until the 1870 census.

"Perhaps there was a family endeavor to help runaway slaves, and the charm was acquired by those means," Hutchins said. "This is pure speculation though."

The UM student intends to continue his quest to learn about the artifact by accessing prominent historians. He also is delving through records, trying to find mentions of the piece as a dress adornment and possibly its manufacturer.

"In the end, I have learned about as much as most other historians about these pieces," he said. "Perhaps the knowledge to be gained from this is that these items are not exclusive to slave sites and may have had a broader distribution other than just in the South."

History Professor Ken Lockridge was one of several UM faculty members who helped Hutchins get in touch with the proper experts and obtain funding for his trip. Lockridge said, "It's a marvelous occasion when an undergraduate does de facto archaeology on his own. He's investigating a great historical problem -- especially for African-Americans."

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Note: A digital image of the artifact is available by e-mailing cary.shimek@umontana.edu.

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