

Episode 1: Hemp in the Bluegrass

“Hemp for Victory” Campaign: Hemp for mooring ships; hemp for tow lines; hemp for tackle and gear; hemp for countless naval uses both on ship and shore...Hemp for victory!

Ronald Regan: Leading medical researchers are coming to the conclusion that marijuana...pot...grass whatever you want to call it is probably the most dangerous drug in the United States...

Mitch McConnell: I do not have any plans to endorse the legalization of marijuana. These are two entirely separate plants. Hemp is an incredibly diversified crop. It could end up in your food, it could end up in your medicine, it could end up in the dashboard of your car.

Alie Kilts: Hold up. Mitch McConnell just told us to do what with hemp?

Ava Robinson: You heard him. He wants us to make cars out of hemp, but he’s about 80 years behind Henry Ford. Clearly, the United States government has been changing its mind for decades on what cannabis is, what to call it, and if it’s useful enough to keep around.

Alie: This plant has been on quite the rollercoaster. It was on top of the world when it starred in the “Hemp for Victory” campaign during WWII. But, a few decades later, presidents like Nixon and Regan made marijuana “public enemy number one.” Now, the government has yet again begun to see the plant’s potential...I mean, you’ve probably noticed, cannabis is booming.

Ava: Welcome to Trace Material, a new podcast from Parsons Healthy Materials Lab. Each season we’ll be breaking down the building blocks of our constructed environment...one material at a time. Starting with...you guessed it, hemp! I’m your host Ava.

Alie: And I’m Alie...join us as we take a deep dive into all things hemp and come out the other side with a solution that could change the way we live. But before we dig into hemp’s reported thousands of uses, we need to cover some basics.

Ava: Cannabis 101, if you will.

Alie: Right. So, hemp and marijuana are two varieties of the same plant, cannabis. Marijuana has been bred to be a psychoactive plant, while hemp has been bred to produce fibers, seed and oil for industrial use, without any psychoactive properties. Our focus is on industrial hemp, but the destinies of the two subspecies are inextricably linked. Now, as you may have guessed, things are a tad more complicated than that. We’ll be covering Cannabis 102 in a later episode.

Ava: In this first episode, we’re going back in time to before this plant was considered controversial. To explain where we are today, and why it’s such a hot button issue, we’re going to trace hemp’s history in the United States by looking back at the early American hemp

economy. Who benefited and who suffered? Now, it's important to note here, although indigenous peoples had been working with hemp-like plants for centuries before European colonists arrived, cannabis itself did travel across the Atlantic with early European settlers.

Alie: For much of American history, hemp was considered a “cash crop.” Farms all across the country grew acres of hemp used for a wide variety of products: Abraham Lincoln used hemp oil in his lamps, and people often dressed themselves in homespun hemp, and even an early draft of the Declaration of Independence was written on hemp paper.

Ava: Small farmers commonly grew it for personal use. Hemp could be found in patches behind farmhouses from Pennsylvania to Georgia. But, more often, it could be found being farmed in large, industrial plantations. Hemp is known to be a very labor-intensive crop, that, until the Emancipation Proclamation, was primarily farmed by enslaved African Americans.

Alie: And that, that's the history we're most interested in here. As soon as we started doing research into hemp's past, we knew we had to talk about slavery. We set out to find a place where hemp was farmed by enslaved people with a historian there willing to tell us about it. Now it may--or may not--surprise you, many historic plantations focus more on the families that owned the land versus those forced to work it. Fortunately, we found Farmington Historic Plantation.

Kathy Nichols: It's awfully hot for September in Kentucky...If you come out here and you leave without understanding how that house was built and how the money was made, then I have completely failed at my job. And that's just what it boils down to.

Ava: That's Kathy Nichols, Executive Director of Farmington Historic Plantation in Louisville, KY.

Once a thriving 550-acre hemp plantation, Farmington now sits sandwiched between a sprawling subdivision and Interstate 264. The 18-acre historic site pales in comparison to its heyday. But as we drove up the narrow driveway, through a tunnel of trees, the bustle of suburban Louisville gave way to a seemingly idyllic landscape.

Kathy Nichols: Like most historic house museums in the South that were plantations, Farmington opened in 1959 as Louisville's first historic house museum. And like most house museums at the time, it was Farmington Historic Home and you came and you heard about the lives of the Speed family. Very elegant lives for the time period. You probably heard nothing about the enslaved African Americans.

Ava: The Speed family owned Farmington Plantation, but they aren't the sole focus of the history that Kathy and her colleagues talk about. They've worked hard to forefront the role that slavery played in Kentucky's history. As we toured the plantation house, we saw stately bedrooms and a grand dining room, but Kathy always made sure to call our attention to what she called “the architecture of slavery.” The house was designed and built to be maintained by

enslaved hands. Tucked away behind its walls are hidden staircases and dumbwaiters that reveal the infrastructure that fueled the Speed family's elegant lives.

Kathy Nichols: 2005 the board made a decision to make sure that everyone who came to Farmington knew exactly what Farmington was and the best way to do that was through the name instead of Farmington Historic Home, Farmington Historic Plantation.

Ava: As we looked out over the back garden, Kathy explained that 19th-century American history is more complicated than people who were for slavery and people were against slavery.

Kathy Nichols: An emancipationist is to someone who believes it's wrong and should be changed. An abolitionist wants it abolished immediately and intends to do something about it now. Again, emancipation is a platform, Kentucky slaveholders claim, and I suspect it was something like this slavery's wrong, but we're burdened with this economic system and we can't do anything about it. You don't see a great cry for the government to do something about it. Something should be done about it, but nothing ever seems to get done about it. But James Speed, the grandfather, ran for the Kentucky legislature on emancipationist platform and was defeated. And hemp, by the way, is the reason slavery is entrenched in Kentucky. It's the only crop that requires that kind of labor force that's grown in the bluegrass.

Ava: So the Speed family, who owned Farmington Plantation, they were emancipationists, even while owning slaves.

Kathy Nichols: I mean you have to think about it, even though there's humans, slavery at its core is an economic institution.

Ava: It's hard to imagine how the Speed family could accept an institution like slavery while knowing how immoral it was. But Kathy made the point that an entire economy was built off the labor of enslaved people. Maybe it's easier to imagine when we consider that we're still complicit in a society that values profit over people.

Kathy Nichols: You need to think of Farmington and other big plantations as sort of the forerunner of Agri-industry. These slaves are the machine. And so if you have a brick house in Kentucky, it's typical that the mud was dug by enslaved hands. It was formed into the bricks by enslaved hands. And then those bricks were laid into the walls by the same enslaved hands and to a house, you can't get much more significant than that. And certainly, everything at Farmington that was physically prepared was done by enslaved people.

Ava: Hemp isn't the cash crop we think of when we think of American slavery, right? Usually, we imagine people working in the cotton fields of Alabama or the rice fields of the Carolinas. Kathy explained why hemp became the primary crop farmed on Kentucky plantations.

Kathy Nichols: They tried tobacco, early tobacco really didn't do well in this part of Kentucky. It was only the development of Burley tobacco in the late 19th century that allowed Kentucky farmers to massively grow tobacco the way they did. So hemp was an ideal crop for Kentucky. It's very labor intensive during the harvest and production. But planting, easy, growing season, easy. And it's ideal for the conditions in Kentucky in the 19th century. There were no pests, molds, fungi that would destroy a hemp crop.

Ava: We ended our tour in the basement.

Kathy Nichols: And now's the hemp room!

Ava: Not to be confused with where hemp was actually processed--that didn't happen in the main house--this is the part of the tour where the museum showcases tools and machines used on the plantation.

Kathy Nichols: You take a plowed field and you spread the hemp broadcasts. So you're just throwing it on the field and by the time it's about knee-high, it grows so thick that weeds can't grow up among it. A good crop of hemp is 12 to 15 foot tall.

Ava: But that image of the Alabama cotton fields and the people who worked in them that we just reminded you of? Those were the plantations that Farmington was sending their product to. All of these industries were related, and it's likely that every business in the United States in the mid-19th century was somehow, even if distantly, interacting with and making a profit from, slavery.

Kathy Nichols: But most Kentucky hemp was bound for the Southern cotton market and literally woven into cordage to bill cotton bales or woven into cloth for those white bags that you've seen people pick cotton into. By the time John Speed died, really by the mid-1830s, Farmington was fully integrated. They were sending finished product to market from Farmington. We had a rope walk, a hemp weaving factory, and a hemp barn...

Ava: We spent hours talking to Kathy and walking around Farmington with her. But, Kathy isn't the only steward of Farmington's history.

Cassandra Sea: Yeah, the very same thing that brought prosperity to the family that raised hemp was the same thing that whip the slaves that broke the hemp and that was just the, it was just crazy, the cycle.

Alie: That's Cassandra. She spent the afternoon with us and shared her very personal connection to Farmington.

Cassandra Sea: My name is Cassandra Sea. My maiden name was Cassandra Swan. So I'm Casandra Swan Sea. My connection to Farmington is that my husband is the descendant of

David and Martha Spencer who were held here when, not John Speed was here, but after John Speed died, Peachy his daughter lived here. And far as we know, David and Martha came with them.

Alie: Cassandra's dedicated the last couple decades to pouring over census data, searching through archives and compiling family oral histories in order to piece together her lineage.

Cassandra Sea: Herbert had a number of children: Will was the oldest boy. Miss Anna. Aunt Jule, Jule Weaver. And her husband was the last Kentucky Tuskegee Airmen. Jule Titus was married...

Alie: And as you might guess, she's hit roadblocks that would be familiar to many African Americans who have tried to trace their family's history.

Cassandra Sea: This is Willie May Bard. No those are, those are...I got things straight...I confused myself...

Alie: But, she's followed it back to Farmington where David and Martha Spencer were enslaved by the Speed family.

Cassandra Sea: We haven't really substantiated how or who they were before. Some, some of us think that they might've been already in the family somehow. They may have been a gift at the wedding. We, we really just don't know how...

Here's what I always say, two things I always say: there's you can do about history except not repeat it, especially if it was bad, and the other thing is, history is history.

Alie: Although the Speed's profited off the hemp grown at Farmington, it was Cassandra's family, the Spencers, who farmed, and possibly experimented with hemp. This piqued our interest because the whole reason we started this podcast was to learn about hemp's potential as a building material. David Spencer was known for his extremely strong mortar and plasterwork. At Farmington, he had building with hemp figured out a century and a half back.

Cassandra Sea: Well, the story was that he made mortar and he had a—all we knew is there was a secret ingredient in his mortar to make it stronger. And everybody assumed that it was buttermilk and, and because they didn't know anything about hemp or anything.

Alie: Our best guess is that he was using hemp milk, or the sap from hemp, to help bind the mortar.

Cassandra Sea: A lot of people think that slaves were mindless, the reality was, if you go back further if you to Africa, they were builders. They did a lot of different things that we don't know anything about, because the education system has kind of nullified it.

Alie: Another reason we thought Farmington was such a compelling site to visit, is that they have begun to grow hemp again. And unlike other historic sites growing hemp, they're actively involving the descendants of the families who were forced to work this land. They see hemp's history as inextricably linked to the history of slavery and want to educate their fellow Kentuckians on hemp's not-so-glorious past.

Kathy Nichols: Well on a really emotional repetition of history this year was that Casandra's son Benjamin planted the first hemp seed in our field.

Cassandra Sea: Don't make me cry.

Kathy Nichols: We were all out there crying.

Cassandra Sea: Oh, they used to make jokes about that. And that's why that's a miracle because Benjamin if anything, he ran away from that history. He didn't, all three of my sons except Christopher. Christopher's, our gentle giant. But my oldest son and my baby boy, they saw black history as kind of a detrimental. They were...Benjamin was more power to the people and Tyler could care less. He didn't care one way or the other.

Kathy Nichols: But they bought into the version of history that white historians had been selling African-Americans, that they need to be embarrassed of their slave history.

Alie: Cassandra's late husband knew the history of hemp and slavery in Kentucky, and the manner in which the crop returned to the state didn't sit well with him.

Cassandra Sea: And, and he, he felt like, and this is funny, but he, he said "They shouldn't have hemp. They shouldn't do anything with hemp without us being in the forefront. Somebody needs to get out there and be..." you know, he was really that, that was something, he was really adamant about.

Alie: If you haven't been following the news around the 2018 Farm Bill, Kentucky Senator Mitch McConnell has been campaigning for hemp's return to his state, and for big business to come with it.

Cassandra Sea: When the legislation when they were kicking that around at first, you know, Oh, there's something wrong with that picture that here we are struggling, you know, he really started building an appreciation for, we need to find out what we can do. You know, we need to find out if, if anybody else thinks like we think and the fact that the reason why hemp was such a big deal was because of the back of your ancestors.

But when Benjamin was out here, he had them seeds in his hand and he was planting them...I think something changed. I think it might not have changed, but it came out. I had never heard him say "self reparations." And when he said it, it seemed like he had had an epiphany... "You

do, you, you don't wait for somebody to give you something. You do it yourself. You get the knowledge.” And I didn't know he felt like that. I didn't know he felt like that the day he was planting them seeds.

Kathy Nichols: Yeah. He was talking about it in relationship to the hemp. That, that was giving him back his power. He said, I call that self reparations. But it also, to me in the context he used it as was more than just him doing something for himself, it was a healing.

Cassandra Sea: Yeah. He said it connected honor to his ancestors.

Alie: Hemp is returning to Kentucky and not just at Farmington, where they are growing a small amount for educational purposes. More often than not, its large businesses and “big ag” that have started to invest in this new-again crop. Many of those businesses have the same goal as the Speed's did when they started their farm, to make as much money as possible, no matter the cost. And it's that behavior and belief that led to emancipationists running a plantation.

Ava: We want to make sure we understand the story of hemp in the United States so that the history that happened at Farmington remains history. In 19th century Kentucky enslaved African Americans were harmed in the growing of hemp and wealthy white families profited. In many ways, hemp has the potential to be a new beginning. It doesn't have to be shuffled into big agriculture and have its only purpose be to create profit for those who are already wealthy. If we think about hemp being the crop that entrenched slavery in Kentucky in the 19th century, how will we think about it in the 21st? Could it be something radically new?

Alie: Before we get to those questions, we have some more history to tackle in Episode 2. Did you ever wonder how hemp went from being a cash crop to illegal? Next time, we'll get into cannabis's long and winding journey in the United States.

Ava: Trace Material is a project of Parsons Healthy Materials Lab at the New School. It is produced by Alie Kilts, me Ava Robinson and Burgess Brown and the whole HML team. Thank you to Kathy Nichols and Cassandra Sea for lending their voices, thoughts and experiences to this episode. And special thanks to friends of healthier materials who help make this possible. Our theme music is "Rainbow Road" by Cardiod. Additional music from A.A. Alto, Lobo Loco, and Blue Dot Sessions.