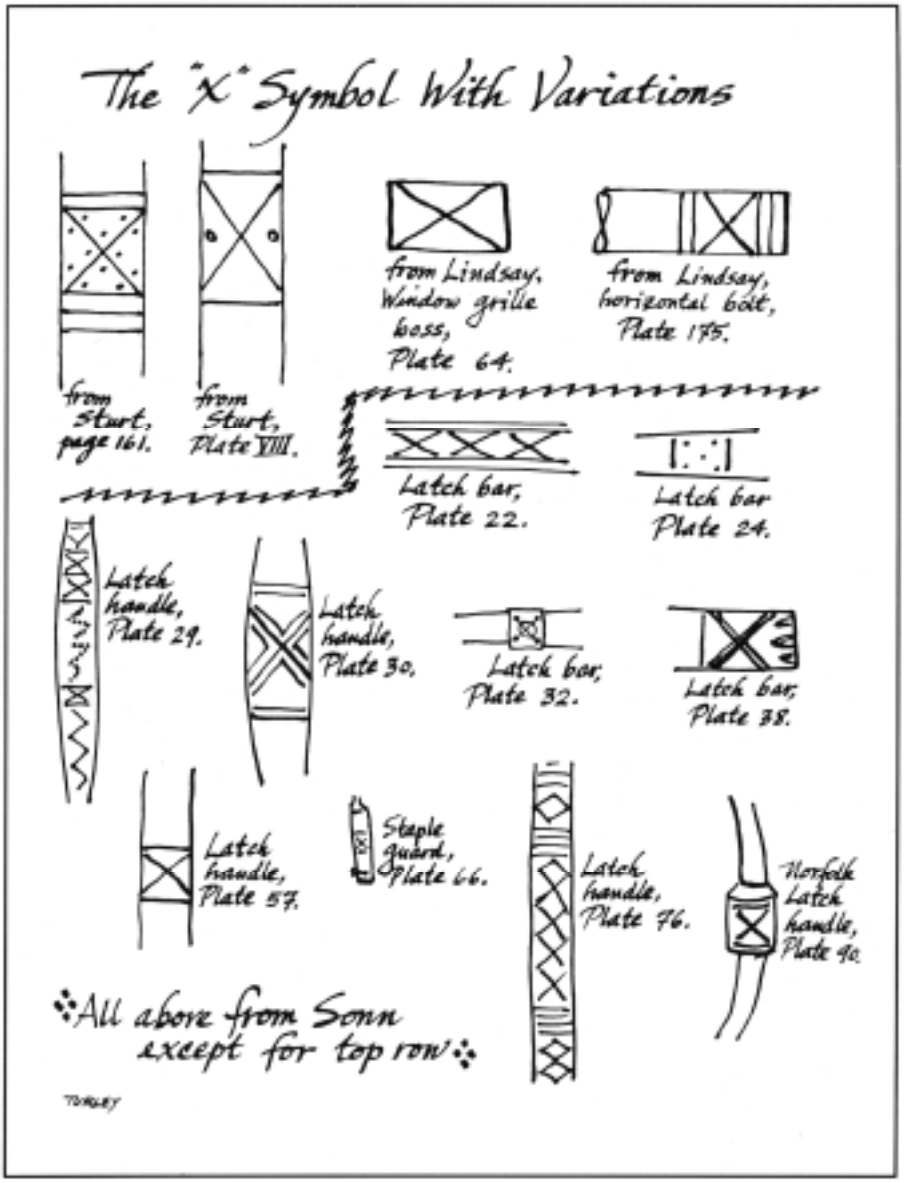
Hex Signs on I ronwork?

FRANK TURLEY
SANTA FE, NM

Some of us are familiar with the Pennsylvania Dutch (Deutsch) hex signs that are found on the sides of barns. They are usually large, circular, multicolored, and multifarious. It has come to my attention that there may be similarly intentioned hex signs filed or stamped on occidental ironwork. Admittedly, the designs on the ironwork are much less elaborate than the barn paintings.

My first clue as to the signs' possible import came from a paragraph in Sturt's The Wheelwright's Shop, in which the blacksmith, Will Hammond, filed and punched patterns on "certain flat inches of waggon iron-work." Sturt depicts the design as shown in the illustration. Sturt claims this to be a tradition from the long-ago past and claims that Hammond never deviated from the pattern, or neglected it, or originated any part of it.



In the States, we find similar markings on colonial and early post-colonial ironwork, most commonly on entry way hardware. I have seen various forms of this X sign on latch handles, Albany/Dutch beam anchors, latch bars, horizontal bolts, and on one modern Portuguese vertical door bolt.

I admit to not having thoroughly researched this small phenomenon, but my theory goes that, if these symbols are pre-Christian, the X would suggest the barring of witches, warlocks, and their spells from entry to a building, wagon, or cart. At a later time, X came to stand for Christ or Christian. In this sense, one would still use it to keep the devil out.

Does my theory hold up, or am I whistling in the dark? My hope is that some enterprising readers will do further research on this subject.

Shall we, as contemporary smiths, include these symbols on some of our iron projects? About that I have to say this: "It won't do any harm, and it might do some good."

The following books show some of these X symbols.

Lindsay, John Seymour, An Anatomy of English Wrought Iron, New York, Taplinger, 1965.
Sonn, Albert H., Early American Wrought Iron, New York, Bonanza, 1979.
Sturt, George, The Wheelwright's Shop, Cambridge, England, University, 1963.

This article originally appeared in the Spring issue of the Anvil's Ring, 1989