

NATIVE AMERICAN STONE CELTS FROM COLONIAL CONTEXTS IN THE 17TH CENTURY SETTLEMENT OF PROVIDENCE, MARYLAND

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Introduction

Archeologists often discover Native American artifacts while excavating historic period European sites. Given the human propensity to occupy favorable geographic locations, it should not be surprising that both indigenous people and the 17th century Europeans frequently occupied the same spots. Determinants like the distance to potable water, a level, well-drained living surface, and access to various resources would all operate in a similar fashion for either population.

While each of the eight known sites associated with the 1649 Puritan settlement of Providence (Figure 1) has produced a few stray sherds of aboriginal pottery, a handful of flakes, and an occasional projectile point, none has been discovered in areas of high prehistoric artifact density. Clearly, based on low numbers of these artifacts, English colonial home lots are not situated in proximity to the larger prehistoric villages or base camps. In fact, even the ubiquitous smaller prehistoric oyster processing campsites in the area, while usually nearby, are always some distance removed from the principal 17th century occupations.

Some Native American artifacts recovered from the Providence Settlement, however, seem to suggest, or perhaps even require, an explanation other than simply spatial co-occurrence. In a 1995 report on the early settlement, Luckenbach (1995) suggested one such possibility while speculating that some of the Late Woodland period aboriginal pottery recovered from 17th century feature contexts might be related to their use as containers for traded corn. Several documentary references exist referring to “Indian Pots of Corn” almost as if the term denoted a unit of measure for this important trade commodity (e.g., Inventory of Thomas Homewood [MSA 1679]).

In addition, an occasional ceramic tobacco pipe of clear Native American origin is recovered from such colonial feature contexts. The presence of these pipes is usually attributed to the same trade network, or perhaps to loss by an indigenous visitor to the site. The Puritans clearly sought out and nurtured contact with the Iroquoian-speaking Susquehannocks—particularly in regards to the fur trade. This alliance is reflected in both the written and material records, as the two groups signed a treaty in 1652,¹ and Susquehannock style pipes have been recovered at a

number of Providence home sites (Fausz 1988:48; for archeological examples, see Luckenbach, Cox, and Kille 2002). The treaty also notes that the parties exchanged several “presents, gifts and tokens of friendship”—objects that may have found their way into the archeological record (Archives of Maryland III: 273-278).

An even more remarkable artifact type found at these sites is the Late Woodland polished stone axe head or celt. The first such object from Providence was discovered within the footprint of the main house at Burle’s Town Land (18AN826). At the time, it was noted that several such celts had been recovered from a surface collection at the 17th century home site at Old Colony Cove (18AN408), but the internal discussion never ventured past the suggestion that Europeans kept these objects as oddities or curiosities.

In recent years, however, the recovery of additional celts from other colonial features at Homewood’s Lot (18AN871), and the Merriday period cellar at the Swan Cove site (18AN934), has prompted archeologists at the *Lost Towns Project* to consider the question more seriously. Did such objects serve some purpose other than colonial curios? Their relatively regular appearance on these Providence sites, and the absence of other objects like gorgets or bannerstones, began to suggest the possibility that settlers were actually obtaining axes from Native American sources—and perhaps using them.

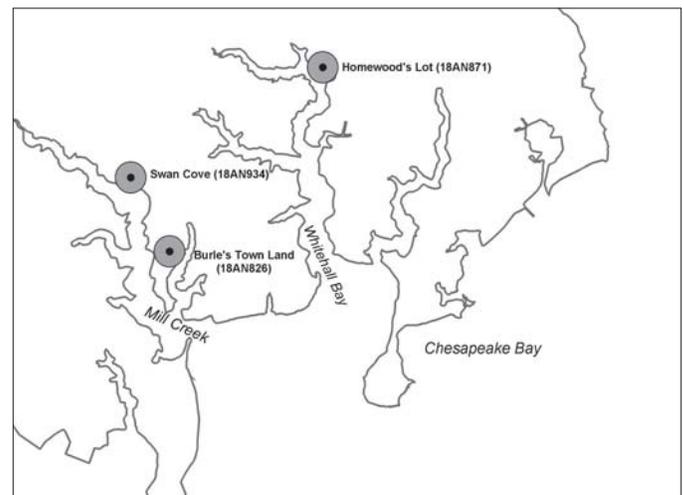


FIGURE 1. Providence sites yielding stone celts.

The Sites

To date, three Providence sites have yielded four celts from clear contexts. These sites have all undergone extensive archeological explorations by Anne Arundel County's *Lost Towns Project* over the course of the last decade.

Burle's Town Land (18AN826)

Between 1991 and 1995, Anne Arundel County's *Lost Towns Project* unearthed the remains of a large earthfast 17th century building in the St. Margaret's area of Anne Arundel County, Maryland. Over the course of several field seasons, excavators removed and screened artifact-laden soils from the highly stratified dwelling house site, revealing a pattern of post holes. Those post holes delineate the outline of a large dwelling house belonging to government functionary and planter Robert Burle and his wife Elizabeth Burle. The Burle family occupied the site from sometime after 1649 to the late 1670s or early 1680s. The remains of a small outbuilding were also uncovered during the excavations.

Information gleaned from the artifacts found within and around the building have enabled archeologists to reconstruct a rich picture of 17th century life at the site, as well as to determine the details of the building plan itself. Numerous architectural materials, including imported Dutch lead- and tin-glazed tiles, yellow bricks, lead casement windows, and pan tiles, indicate that the home was well-appointed and comfortable (Moser et al. 2003). In addition, a wide variety of other artifacts—ceramic and glass vessels, tobacco pipes, buttons, beads, gun flints, and faunal remains—provide information about daily life, trade, and foodways on the site (Luckenbach 1995).

The celt recovered from Burle's Town Land (Figure 2) was located within the footprint of the northeast corner of a small closet or lean-to extension to the house. It was recovered from an unplowed, intact context well below ground surface. The celt is small, and executed in dark-gray quartzite. It weighs 5.76 ounces (163 g) and measures 3.22 inches (8.2 cm) by 1.80 inches (4.6 cm). Viewed from the sides, it is shaped roughly like a trapezoid, although the edges are rounded. One side exhibits polishing, extending from the working edge to 1.76 inches (4.5 cm); the other side exhibits considerably more polishing, which extends 2.54 inches (6.5 cm) from the working edge. Viewed from the top, the object appears like an elongated oval, with the distal end appearing to terminate in a more acute angle than the proximal one. At its widest point it measures 1.12 inches (2.9 cm). The working or distal end of the celt is sharpened to a point that seems to have dulled somewhat by use. Macroscopically visible use-wear marks are present along this edge. The distal



FIGURE 2. Stone celt from Burle's Town Land.

end shows evidence of battering, as if the user had driven the object with a hammer, or had used the distal end as a tool.

Swan Cove (18AN934)

The Swan Cove site has achieved some notoriety as the pipe kiln site of Emmanuel Drue, who occupied the land during the 1660s (Luckenbach 1995, 2004; Gadsby 2002). However, by the 1690s the site was occupied by planter Henry Merriday. Merriday had by 1707 "long been seated" on the property (Luckenbach and Cox 2002:48).

Archeological excavations within the portion of the site believed to have been occupied by Merriday and his family located the remains of at least one post-in-the-ground building, including two trash-filled cellars. *Lost Towns Project* researchers excavated one post hole from that house, as well as the southeastern half of the northernmost cellar, Feature 18. This cellar, which measured 6 feet square, was excavated to its base at 4.5 feet below ground surface. Over 11,000 objects were recovered from this ashy deposit, including faunal materials, ceramics, and a large collection of iron artifacts. The presence of North Devon Sgraffito and Manganese Mottled Earthenwares in the deposit, along with the absence of later English Brown or White Salt-Glazed Stoneware, dates the deposit to the close of the 17th century or the very early years of the 18th century. Additionally, the presence of 24 aboriginal sherds of low-fired earthenware suggests possible contact with nearby Native American traders. One such sherd was located in Stratum F of the feature, near a greenstone celt (Figure 3).

The celt is executed in olive-colored greenstone with round and sub-round black flecks in its matrix. It

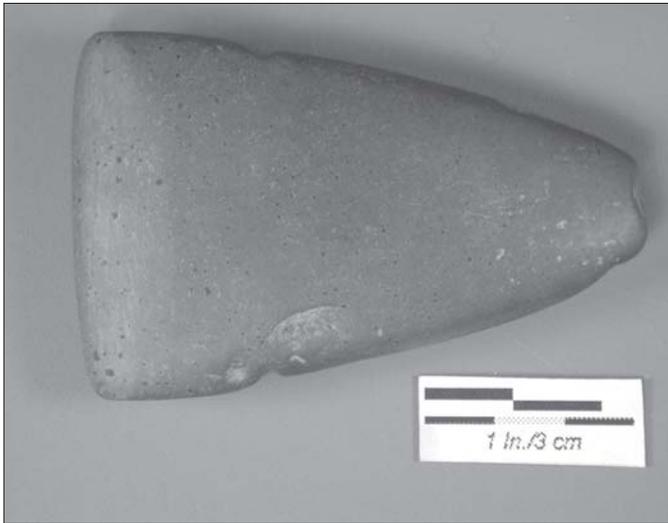


FIGURE 3. Stone celt from the Swan Cove site.

weighs 3.71 ounces (105 g). Viewed from the side, the object is shaped like an isosceles triangle, truncated at the proximal vertex. It is 3.19 inches (8.1 cm) long and 1.97 inches (5.0 cm) high. Two small notches are present, 0.05 inches (1 mm) deep, positioned on the long sides (top and bottom) of the axe 1.0 inch (2.5 cm) from the working or blade edge. Small, semi-circular scars are visible adjacent to those notches on one side. On the other, one larger scar is present near one of the notches. Another shallow notch, 0.02 inches (<1 mm) deep is present 0.15 inches (4 mm) from the proximal end of the object. Some areas of one side have a brownish-white concretion adhering to them. This concretion is absent from the other side. Longitudinal scars, probably the result of sharpening, are present on the tapered portion of the blade. Some latitudinal scarring is also present on the face of the blade. Viewed from the top, the celt is a slender oval shape, 0.64 inches (1.7 cm) thick. The proximal end of the celt shows some evidence of battering. Microscopic examination of the blade shows some small notches and spalls in the blade surface.

Homewood's Lot (18AN871)

Two field seasons of intensive investigation at Homewood's Lot have revealed numerous features relating to the 17th and 18th century occupation there. For the first century of the site's occupation, the Homewood family made its residence there, building at least 29 buildings on the property by the 1750s. Included in the known archaeological resources on the property are two sealed deposits, sheet middens, and post holes from the first 25 years of the site's occupation, as well as numerous features relating to the 18th century occupation of the site. Eighteenth century features include the filled cellar of a large

brick dwelling house, the H-shaped fireplace and small filled cellar associated with a large service building (kitchen/laundry), a filled well, and a brick-lined drain that extends from the well, through the service building in the direction of nearby Whitehall Creek. Determining the age of these features is not by any means a difficult task. However, readers should note that with such a dense concentration of deposits, it is inevitable that some materials dating to the early occupation of the site will be present in later features. For this reason, while the two celts found at Homewood's Lot possess very specific provenience within 18th century features, the dating of their initial discard is somewhat less certain.

The trash deposits from both the well and the kitchen/laundry cellar at Homewood's Lot contained Native American celts. Unlike the filled cellar at Swan Cove, which was filled over an extended period of time with debris from the hearth, the 18th century features at Homewood's Lot were filled quickly after the destruction of one or more buildings on the site. The age of the well is unknown, as its extreme depth made the risk and cost of excavating its lowest strata prohibitive. Deposits that were excavated, however, contained materials dating from the middle decades of the 18th century. Stratum D, from which a celt was recovered, contained creamware but no pearlware, suggesting a deposition date sometime in the third quarter of the 18th century. Also recovered from this feature was a single, gray chert triangular projectile point.

The small brick-lined cellar, from which excavators recovered a second celt, is associated with the service building and the brick drain. The deposition sequence from this feature is similar to that of the well, but this feature was excavated all the way to a brick floor at the feature's base. Again, all deposits dated to the middle decades of the 18th century, but stratum A—which contained the celt—contained creamware and scratch-blue decorated white salt-glazed stoneware and date the deposit to the third quarter of the 18th century.

The first celt (Figure 4), recovered from the well, is composed of a worn greenstone weighing 13.8 ounces (390 g). Viewed from the side, it roughly trapezoid-shaped, with rounded corners. This is the only one of the four axes discussed whose distal (blade) end is narrower than the proximal end. It is 4.05 inches (10.3 cm) long, 2.45 inches (6.2 cm) high, and 1.5 in (3.7 cm) wide. This trapezoid shape is interrupted by a shallow longitudinal groove that surrounds the entire axe head near the proximal end. The groove is 0.73 inches (1.8 cm) from peak to peak, and is 0.08 inches (2 mm) deep. The center of the groove is 1.06 inches (2.7 cm) from the proximal surface end of the object. Viewed from the side, the celt is roughly the shape of a pointed archway. The proximal end of the celt shows evidence of battering. A large, 1.7-inch (44 cm) high scar runs longitudinally along one side. Macroscopic use-wear,



FIGURE 4. First stone celt from Homewood's Lot.

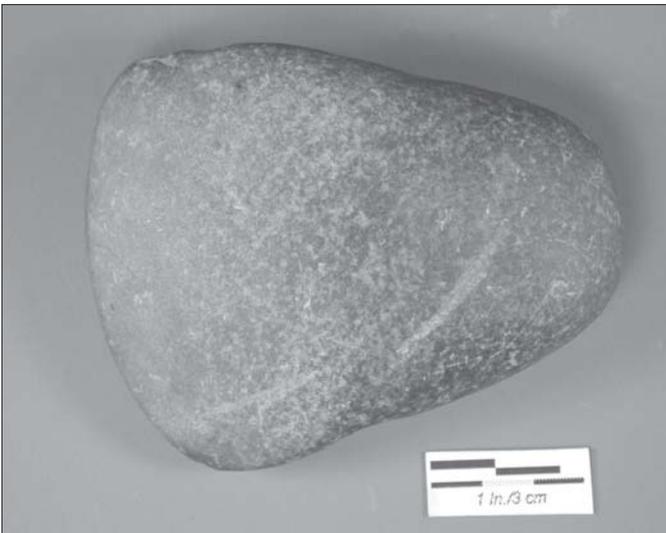


FIGURE 5. Second stone celt from Homewood's Lot.

including a large chip, is visible along the working blade. Most of one side of the object is covered with an unknown brownish concretion similar to that of the specimen from Swan Cove.

The second celt from Homewood's Lot is relatively large (Figure 5), weighing 11.9 ounces (338 g). It is made of greenstone. Viewed from the side, it is shaped like a rounded, truncated scalene triangle. It is 3.95 inches (10.1 cm) long, 3.0 inches (7.6 cm) high, and 1.20 inches (3.1 cm) wide. Some polishing is evident near the working end. Two notches are present (2.39 inches/6.1 cm and 0.93-inches/2.4 cm from the working edge respectively) along one of the long edges of the celt. On the other long edge only one notch is situated 1.21 inches (3.2 cm) from

the blade. Some use-wear is visible macroscopically, and one surface of the object has a few concretions adhering to it.

Old Colony Cove (18AN408)

Although not a part of the Providence settlement, the Old Colony Cove site was mentioned in the introduction as a factor in the evolution of thought described in this paper. Located in southern Anne Arundel County near the 17th century town of Herrington, Old Colony Cove is represented by a surface collection made by avocational archeologist Dick Johnson.

Old Colony Cove is included here because the collection includes no less than five small polished celts (three greenstone, two siltstone; see Figure 6) that were found in direct association with a concentration of 17th century artifacts from the plowzone. Obviously, since these were not excavated from clear contexts like the other celts described here, these may simply be strays from previous occupations. In fact, a grooved axe was also recovered from the plowed field. The number of celts recovered in the area of the house site is, however, highly notable.

Morphology

One clue about an object's use is resident in its morphology. Three of the celts in this study that come from good contexts exhibit some kind of battering on the proximal end. This seems to indicate either that at some point these tools were used proximally (e.g., as a hammer), or that they were driven with some sort of object into another material. Whether this activity occurred at the hands of the colonists is, of course, unknown. It is possible, however, that stone axe heads served as substi-

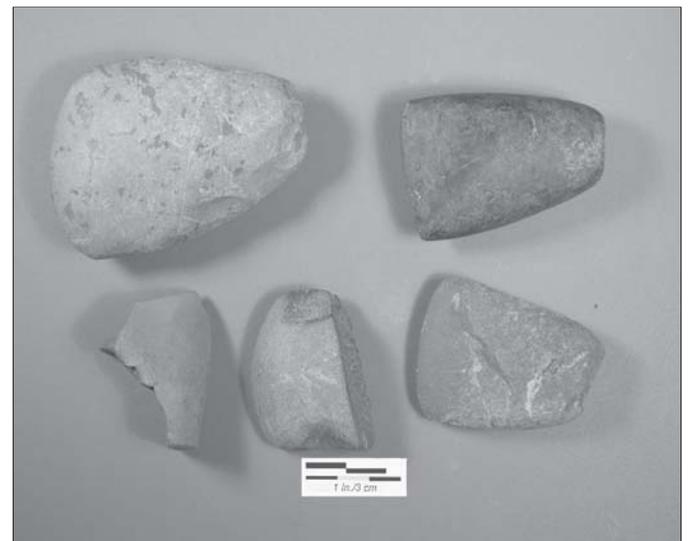


FIGURE 6. Stone celts and celt fragments from the Old Colony Cove site.

tutes for iron wedges when they were scarce, or even that they were thought to possess some quality that made them more useful as wedges or chisels for woodworking.

The limited sample size represented in this study renders it resistant to any meaningful statistical analysis, but as a larger body of data is accumulated, it may be possible to draw some conclusions about changing morphology over the course of the colonial period. Table 1 is offered to give the reader some sense of the range of characteristics for these objects without the pretense of a formal statistical analysis. As it stands, the two celts recovered from 17th century contexts are much smaller, lighter, and more finely worked than those from the 18th century. If such a change were found to hold true for a number of celts, one might deduce that their manufacturers changed the way that they were making them in response to their own changing culture, or even in response to the demands of those with whom they were trading.

Conclusions

The occurrence of Late Woodland celts on these 17th century European home sites raises a number of questions. Most particularly what, if anything, are their social implications? Clearly, they represent an encounter between two cultures, whether those cultures are contemporary or not. But by what mechanism have these specimens come to arrive on the European colonial home lots? Do they come in the same trade as the corn? Are they excavated from the upper layers of soil by the hoes of agricultural workers? Are they kept as curiosities, objects of fetish, or museum pieces? Are they wielded as a weapon? Are they better than iron for performing some woodworking function? Consideration of the archeological context of

these objects can help to spur some inferences about their role in the lives of colonial settlers.

Without the aid of relevant ethnohistory, no certain answers about their origins can be made. However, one can perhaps infer from the archeological association of several sherds of Late Woodland pottery with one of the celts (at Swan Cove) that some of these items may have made their way to the colonists through trade. Fausz (1988:77) notes that at the end of the 17th century, the Susquehannock population was being drastically reduced by disease at the same time that the Susquehannock economy was becoming near totally dependant on European trade. At this time, he continues, the Susquehannocks all but abandoned the manufacture of traditional items, including weapons. It is in roughly the same era that the archeological remains of celts are found at Providence. The favorable trade relationship between the settlers of Anne Arundel County and the Susquehannocks presents some grounds for suspicion that the objects may have even been intended specifically as trade items—whether symbolic or utilitarian.

What symbolic value might they possess? Trigger (1989:53) notes that prior to the Age of Discovery in Europe, those who found tools made by their prehistoric ancestors simply considered them to be objects of supernatural origin—“elf bolts” or “thunder stones.” Beginning in the 15th century, scholars began to theorize that stone tools were human made, but the extent to which this knowledge passed into vernacular awareness is difficult to judge. Maryland’s colonists must have approached such objects with a fairly complex attitude. The Puritans of Providence, for instance, inhabited a world fraught with supernatural peril, in which “wonders” of all kinds occurred every day

TABLE 1. Measurement data from selected celts.

SITE	CONTEXT	CHRONOLOGY				LENGTH (CM)	HEIGHT (CM)	WIDTH (CM)	WEIGHT (GRAMS)	MATERIAL	HAFTING	BLADE WEAR	PROXIMAL BATTERING
		OPEN	MEDIAN	CLOSE	RANGE								
18AN826 Burle’s Town Land	17 th century dwelling house	1649	1662.5	1676	27	8.2	4.6	2.9	163	quartzite	none	macro	yes
18AN934 Swan Cove	Late 17 th century cellar	1690	1700	1710	20	8.1	5.0	1.7	105	green- stone	3 notches	micro	yes
18AN871 Homewood’s Lot	18 th century well	1762	1768.5	1775	13	10.3	6.2	3.8	390	green- stone	3 notches	macro	yes
18AN871 Homewood’s Lot	18 th century brick cellar	1762	1768.5	1775	13	10.1	7.6	3.1	338	green- stone	groove	macro	no

(Hall 1989:71).

On the other hand, these colonists had direct experience with American Indians, who made effective use of stone tools and weapons. This mixing of the natural world with the supernatural must have held some draw for colonists who sought whatever advantage they could in their hostile new homeland. The four celts that have been recovered from sealed contexts were found among discarded debris: in trash-filled storage pits in two cases, in a filled well in one instance, and finally, in a sheet-midden deposit beneath the floorboards of a structure. Such contextual information does not seem to imply that such objects were fetishized or curated, but rather that they were treated like other material culture objects—that is they were discarded, presumably when they were no longer of use.

The archeological recovery of an object such as an Archaic period projectile point, first fashioned thousands of years ago, from a 17th century trash midden evokes only two reasonably plausible explanations. Either it is simply included as a stray object from some previous human occupation at the same location or, more intriguingly, it was acquired by the colonial occupants as an object of curiosity. There is one important factor that seems to diminish the likelihood of the latter explanation. Perhaps the most visually dramatic artifacts available from the area's prehistoric sites are decorated and polished gorgets, bannerstones, and large Late Archaic period fully grooved axes. Although examples of such impressive objects have been recovered from the same fields as Providence sites, none of these has as of yet been excavated from 17th century contexts.

This seems to suggest that the occurrence of such artifacts as projectile points may be more likely attributed to stray objects from previous occupations than collected objects associated with colonists. This is particularly true considering the agriculturally based colonial population of 17th century Anne Arundel County, who would have had a thorough intimacy with the daily toil of hoeing or plowing gardens and tobacco plantations. Clearly they were not collecting every stone artifact that they encountered. Thus, polished stone celts might also represent something other than curios.

While curiosity or coincidences are still considered by the authors to be the most likely explanations for the occurrence of Late Woodland polished celts in colonial contexts, in the instance of these objects it is felt that at least two additional explanations need to be retained. Given the general contemporaneity of these objects with the colonial occupation, it should be remembered that they could have been acquired as hafted (and decorated?) ethnographic objects through trade, or even have served some functional purpose.

Notes

1. The power of this alliance should not be underestimated. While a 1638 law granted settlers rights to limited trade with Indians without penalty from the Lord Proprietor, the Providence settlers felt it necessary to codify their relationship with their Susquehannock allies. After Parliamentary forces removed Lord Baltimore's government from control of Maryland in 1652, they signed a treaty between Providence's parliamentary commissioners and five Susquehannock leaders. The two groups promised to be "in amity ...for Ever, to the End of The World, And ...from henceforward they doe promise and agree to walk together and carry one towards another all things as friends...."

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