

# A LONDON TOWN BURIAL: A STUDY IN PAST AND PRESENT CUSTOMS

*Lisa E. Plumley and Erin N. Cullen*

## Abstract

During the fall of 2002, archeologists excavating colonial features at Historic London Town (18AN48) in Edgewater, Maryland discovered a burial shaft containing the remains of a six-year-old child. Dating to the first half of the eighteenth century, the interment appears to have been placed between the floor joists of a structure that once stood adjacent to a main thoroughfare of the town. Research conducted by archeologists for Anne Arundel County's *Lost Towns Project* indicates that the burial of a child under the floorboards of a home, and frequently beneath the sleeping space, was a common practice in both western Africa and the Caribbean, the latter of which was a major trading partner with London Town. Data from these and other international excavations have led archeologists to conclude that the child was a slave. This paper discusses the discovery of this burial and its connections to African traditions, as well as the steps taken to appropriately identify and honor the child after excavations ceased.

## Introduction

For over a decade, Anne Arundel County's *Lost Towns Project* volunteers and staff have been excavating the site of London Town, a tobacco port town established in 1683 that lies approximately eight miles southwest of present-day Annapolis (Figure 1). Of particular interest to the project is an area adjacent to Scott Street, a major road that led directly to the town's ferry landing, which enabled individuals to cross the South River. After removing the plowzone from an area measuring over 150 by 80 feet, archeologists identified over 100 posts and other features that once supported fences, animal pens, and structures. The crew excavated these features in order to understand the structure, organization, and populations of the town—and in order to facilitate the reconstruction of the buildings on the park.

In October of 2002, archeologists were bisecting features in an area of the property known as "The Carpenter's Shop," identifying one structure and a fence line dating to the eighteenth century, as well as several fence lines and tree plantings dating to the Almshouse occupation of the property (1824-1965). It was at this time that archeologists discovered the first and only grave shaft, colonial or otherwise, in this section of the county-owned

park. This paper will discuss the history of London Town, as well as these latest excavations that have shed light on an aspect of the town's lifestyle that previously had not been considered. This paper will also discuss the flurry of activity that ensued around London Town Park after the discovery of the young child's remains.

## London Town

Soils prime for tobacco planting and a close proximity to water brought colonists to the land now known as London Town in Edgewater, Maryland. Plantations were scattered along the shore, allowing for boats to dock and exchange tobacco for goods brought from England. The land known as "Scorton" was granted to George Westall from Lord Baltimore in 1658, which was then sold to William Burgess, Sr. in 1673. In 1683, the Maryland General Assembly passed "An Act for Advancing the Trade of Tobacco" to promote town formation in the county and assure the colony's success. One of these towns was located on the Scorton property, and became known as the Town of London. Composed of 100 lots divided into approximately one acre each, the act required a lot purchaser to build a minimum of one 20-foot structure on the property or forfeit the property (Cox et al. 1997). The congregation of five roads and two ferries ensured the town's initial success. By the 1730s, 40 to 50 lots were purchased and London Town thrived (Kerns 1999). Merchants began moving to the town around 1715, no doubt attracted by the transportation network. There were tavern, inn, and ordinary keepers, carpenters, sail makers, ship builders, merchants, ferry masters, skilled and unskilled slaves and servants, and rope-makers that made up the population of the town (Kerns 1999). The town bustled with sailors and sea captains, lingering and gossiping about politics while their boats were loaded with tobacco.

Economic depressions in Maryland, caused by failing tobacco crops, began in the late seventeenth century and continued throughout the eighteenth. This led the Maryland Assembly to establish tobacco inspection stations in 1747, yet London Town was not included among them. Baltimore was becoming an important port town with a much more diversified economy, including wheat and iron ore, and Annapolis was increasingly important as a government center. A series of wars, including the French and Indian War, King George's War, and the Revolutionary War, depressed trade. A combination of all these fac-



FIGURE 1. A view of London Town by artist Lee Boynton.

tors caused merchants to leave London Town, with none arriving to replace them (Kerns 1999).

While the town was in decline around the 1760s, William Brown, a ferryman, innkeeper, and carpenter, began building a brick house overlooking the South River. Brown borrowed money, mortgaged other lots he owned, and went into huge debt building the house. In 1785, Brown's debtors foreclosed. In 1793, John Hoskins Stone purchased the house at auction. Stone, the governor of Maryland between 1794 and 1797, probably let the house to tenants. Stone died, and his heirs lost the house at auction in 1806. Edward Hall, the new owner of the property, sold it to James and Mary Larrimore very soon after. The Larrimore family lived in the house until 1823 (Persinger and Gibb 1996).

Around 1823, Larrimore agreed to sell the Georgian edifice and ten surrounding acres to the "Trustees of the Poor of Anne Arundel County" for use as an almshouse. Although the sale was not finalized until 1828, the deed

states the county was already using the building as an almshouse (MSA 1828). Created to house the indigent, elderly, and ill, the population of the structure in 1830 was diverse; it housed white and black, young and old. Several structures were built over the 145 years the almshouse was in use, including a structure built to house African American residents (circa 1830-1910) and a "men's dormitory" (1911 to today) (Read et al. 1995). The dormitory is now used today as the London Town Visitors Center. In 1906, Maryland passed a state law stating that all almshouses should be called "county homes," mainly because "they were no longer places for people down on their luck, now they were for the elderly and the chronically ill" (Rothman 1996:26). In an oral history taken in 1977, Edward Larrimore, descendant of the seller of the house in 1828 and superintendent of the property in 1965, stated that 14 people lived in the county home when it closed its doors as a result of the passage of the Welfare Act of 1965 (Shomette 1977).

### Lot 86

Located in the heart of London Town was Scott Street, the road leading to a ferry that operated throughout the life of the town. Historians for the *Lost Towns Project* have reconstructed portions of the town's layout using physical descriptions of the plots in land deeds. Based on these reconstructions, it appears that adjacent to Scott Street were lots 86, 87, and a "bank lot." The earliest mention of Lot 86, the general location of current excavations, is found in David Macklefish's will. Dated 1709, his will states, "I give unto my youngest daughter Jane Mackelfish one lot lying in London Town formerly taken up by Ann Lambeth..." (MSA 1711). While not specifically cited as Lot 86, a later reference in 1723 establishes the property as this lot (MSA 1723). David Macklefish, a major landowner in London Town during its initial period, may have leased the lot to Ann Lambeth, who in her will dated 1703 left her estate to Quakers living in London Town and the "western shore." In addition, she freed what was possibly a family of slaves or indentured servants, consisting of a man, woman, and two children, and released a black female after her "servitude" was fulfilled (MSA 1703).

Jane (Macklefish) Burgess and her husband John sold the lot to Stephen West, Sr. in 1723 (MSA 1723). Stephen West, Sr. was a prominent merchant, ferry and ordinary (inn) keeper (Kerns 1999), and he held slaves to operate these businesses. He was the second owner of Rumney's Tavern, a business located on the adjacent Lot 87. West is the most likely individual to have built the structure now known as the Carpenter's Shop. William Brown purchased the land in 1758, although he was probably renting the property for at least five years prior. The deed states:

Beginning on the side of Scotts Street near the North East Corner of a House now in the occupation of Elizabeth Robertson and Running thence a Course about West North West between the said Robertson House and a Workshop of the said William Brown for the length of about nine perches to a Live Parsimmon Stump standing in a valley at the Back of the said Robertson Garden the said stump being deemed to Stand on the side of a Lot number Seventy Four...

(MSA 1758)

Especially interesting is the mention of Elizabeth Robertson, who, although no additional information regarding this woman is available, is apparently leasing part of the property. The description of Lot 86 also notes the presence of Brown's workshop. William Brown was a prominent carpenter (*Maryland Gazette* June 28, 1753)

and owned slaves who were also carpenters (*Maryland Gazette* June 14, 1753). This lot history, while incomplete, clearly demonstrates that individuals who owned the land did not necessarily live on it, which is especially important when considering the findings on the property in the fall of 2002.

### *Lost Towns Project Archeology*

For over ten years, Anne Arundel County's *Lost Towns Project* archeologists have been excavating the area comprising Lots 86 and 87 (Moser et al. 1997). Research interests have centered on the layout and inhabitants of the town, including what types of structures lined Scott Street, who lived in and/or operated these structures, what types of divisions of property existed, how the space was used, and types of quality of life individuals led—especially in relation to the types of services provided to the town.

The crew established a grid over County Park property using the northwest corner of the circa 1760 brick structure as the datum point. Archeologists and volunteers removed the plowzone in five by five-foot units, with depths ranging from 0.75 to 1.00 feet below ground surface. Subsoil and disturbances were recorded on provenience cards for each individual unit. Features were copied onto a smaller-scale site map to aid further analysis based on size, orientation, and surface artifact inclusions like coal and brick. To date, archeologists, students, and volunteers have excavated plowzone from an area of 150 by 80 feet along the eastern edge of the county property lines, revealing over 150 features.

Excavation of the features at London Town began in 1999. Many were discovered to be the result of ground disturbances relating to the almshouse use of the property. Nineteenth-century fence lines and tree and shrubbery plantings lie throughout the easternmost area of the site. The remainder of the field was plowed and used for kitchen gardens and crops during that time. Most of the features, however, relate to the activity on Scott Street during the Town period. Fence lines and ditches dating from the eighteenth century have been located and excavated. Most important are the postholes, representing three earthfast structures that have also been identified. Archeologists excavated an early eighteenth-century earthen cellar (ca. 1690-1730) filled with drinking vessels and pottery that, when paired with archival documents, shows evidence of a tavern. Another structure, apparently unheated, stood in the center of the excavation area, while the third identified building stood on the corner of Scott and Macklefish Streets (Figure 2).

Feature excavation methodology included bisecting each feature (segmenting them into halves or quarters), and then photo documenting and drawing each. Af-

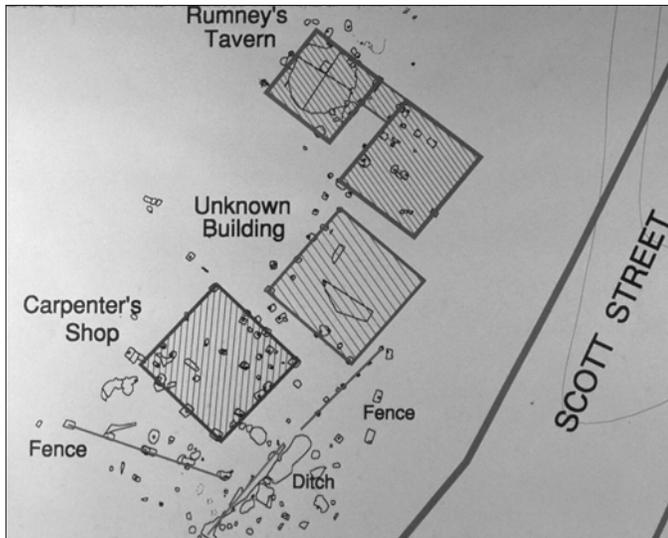


FIGURE 2. Map showing the Carpenter's Shop in relation to Scott Street and Rumney's Tavern.

ter the excavation of the entire feature, all of the soils recovered were water-screened through 1/16-inch wire mesh. Excavation of the features in this way has assisted the interpretation of the area adjacent to Scott Street.

### The Burial

For the past two years, feature excavations have been focused on the southernmost quarter of Lot 86, next to Scott Street. A minimum of 45 features was recorded in the area of the structure, all of which needed to be investigated to identify feature type and relative time period. Known historically as Lot 86, excavators have identified the layout of one main structure in this area. The main structure was 28 by 28-feet, with two additional joists at ten-foot intervals. The door faced Scott Street. The presence of white salt-glazed stoneware in the holes for the corner posts date the structure to the second quarter of the eighteenth century. For public interpretation reasons, the building is called "The Carpenter's Shop" because William Brown, the owner of the property in the 1750s, was using it as such, and owned slaves that were carpenters. This interpretation enables docents to discuss the use of historical documents with archeological data, as well as the industry and craft in the town.

In October of 2002, archeologists were excavating features in the area of the Carpenter's Shop. The crew began excavating Feature 14, which measured 3.8 by 1.2 feet and was thought to be a post hole, although it contained no mold. Two other features in close proximity had similar measurements. Feature 19 measured 3.5 by 1.0 feet (Figure 3), while Feature 9 measured 3.5 by 1.5

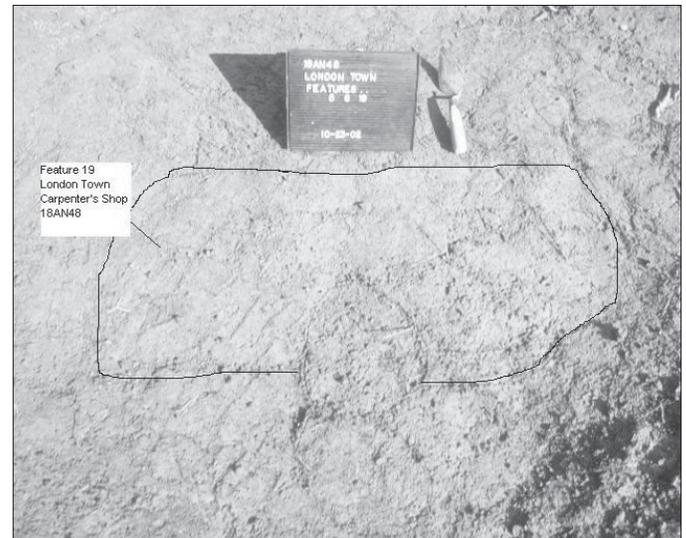


FIGURE 3. Feature 19, a post hole and mold.



FIGURE 4. Cross-section of Feature 14, burial.

feet. Both of these, however, did contain post molds. Once Feature 14 was noted as being slightly different than the neighboring features, it was then prepared for excavation, bisected lengthwise, leaving excavators approximately half a foot to excavate the 1.3-foot deep feature. The profile of the feature revealed 0.20 feet of darker soil at the base of the hole, which was recorded through photographs and a profile drawing (Figure 4). The darker soil in this excavated half of the feature was mixed with the soil removed from above.

Excavation of the second half of the feature commenced after appropriate documentation of the profile. Staff archeologist Jordan Swank removed the first foot of the unexcavated half, stopping at the slight change in soil from mottled brown silty clay to a more homogeneous dark grayish brown (10YR4/2) silt. Rising from the surface of the soil change were three small human teeth. All excavations stopped at this discovery. The interface was care-

fully cleaned using both trowel and brush. This surface revealed more teeth, a stain representing a coffin outline, evidence of coffin nails, and “shadows” that represented deteriorated human bone. Archeologists composed detailed drawings of Feature 14, and concluded that this feature was a burial. Photographs were taken with a “macro” lens, allowing archeologists to document the burial in as close a detail as possible (Figure 5).

The coffin outline measured 3.5 feet long by approximately 1-foot wide. Based on highly decomposed bone at the cranium and legs, archeologists estimate the body was approximately three feet tall. The grave shaft contained cobalt-decorated tin-glaze, three English Brown salt-glazed stoneware fragments, and one slip-dipped white salt-glazed stoneware fragment, setting the burial in the early to mid-eighteenth century (Figure 6). The orientation of the grave matches that of the Carpenter’s Shop floorboards precisely. The grave, which faces in an easterly direction (meaning that if the child were to rise out of the coffin it would be facing east) was clearly laying within the confines of the building. It contained artifacts that are contemporaneous with those found in the postholes of the structure, and maintains an identical orientation with both the building and Scott Street. Based on these statements, it appears that the body was buried beneath the structure, while it was still standing—under the floorboards.



FIGURE 6. Artifacts from the grave shaft, including (larger) English Brown salt-glazed stoneware, cobalt-decorated tin-glaze, and a slip-dipped white salt-glazed stoneware sherd.

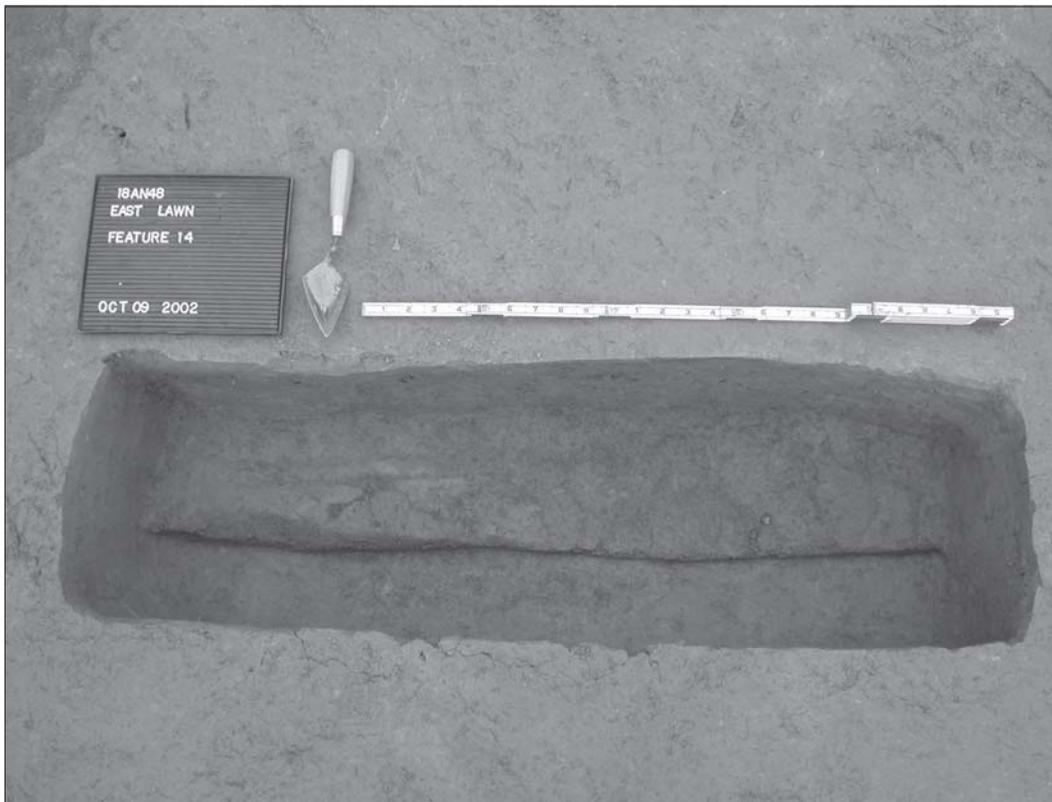


FIGURE 5. Feature 14, burial, during excavation.

While archeologists documented the body, Anne Arundel County Archaeologist Al Luckenbach contacted the State's Attorney to obtain permission to remove the teeth from the burial for future study.

### Caribbean Connections

In from the field, researchers scoured archeology and anthropology journals, library databases, and the Internet for any evidence of the tradition of burying the dead under the floorboards of buildings. Meanwhile, many hypotheses were being formulated about determining race from teeth, and if it was even possible. Basic modern-day growth charts told us the child was no more than six or seven years old, but we hoped further study would allow us to learn more about this individual.

The first person that was contacted to examine the teeth was Matthew Skinner, a doctoral student of Paleopathology at George Washington University. Skinner has excavated mass-grave sites for many years, and offered his professional services pro-bono to examine these human teeth. After studying the tooth enamel Skinner categorized the 14 teeth that were found, but was not able to determine from which side of the jaw they came; since the roots were non-existent, there was no curving to determine their direction of growth. He could not find any features on the teeth that would indicate the ancestry of this individual, and determined that there were no shovel-shaped incisors present in the collection. There was also no evidence found of any artificial deformation, occupational stress, or developmental stress.

Leaving the *Lost Towns Project* with unanswered questions, a second opinion was sought on the mysterious teeth of London Town. Shara Bailey, a postdoctoral research associate at George Washington University, who also works with Matthew Skinner, examined the child's teeth. In her research she stated that "there is no diagnostic morphology on the teeth that are preserved," and that based on the dental pattern observed, "the slight shoveling, combined with the slight double shoveling, straight labial surface, lack of a Carabelli's cusp, presence of five cusps on the lower M1's and presence of Maxillary premolar accessory ridges," it is possible that the child could have derived from some sort of Northeast Asian ancestry, but that it was difficult to tell from the condition of the teeth.

Many other experts, such as Doug Ubelaker from the Smithsonian and various professors at Howard University, who have worked on the New York City African Burial Ground Project, say that it is not possible to tell the race of someone just from looking at their tooth enamel. After taking in all of this information, the burial's context and orientation were considered paramount—instead of relying on the eroded teeth—to tell the story of this individual.

The child's coffin, which lies within the confines of the structure on lot 86, is oriented in an easterly direction, in a fashion which suggests the child had been buried beneath the floorboards and between the floor joists. When looking at the maps drawn of the structure and the burial, it is easy to see that the floor joists were laying in an east-west direction (Figure 7). Extensive research concludes that it was highly unlikely that anyone of European descent would have practiced this type of burial, but that this was not true for other cultures. The strongest link to this tradition stemmed from tribes located in western Africa, including modern-day Ghana, Benin, Nigeria, and Cameroon. This custom was transplanted to Barbados and Jamaica with individuals sold into slavery. Handler and Lange (1999), in their book *Plantation Slavery in Barbados*, state that in 1788 a governor reported that:

Negroes are superstitiously attached to the burial places of their ancestors and friends. These are generally as near as can be to the houses in which they live. It is frequent to inter a near relation under the bed-place on which they sleep, an unwholesome and dangerous practice which they would think it the utmost tyranny to alter. These houses are in many estates injudiciously placed in unwholesome situations, where the Negroes are perpetually, in spite of every care, decreasing; and to remove their habitations unto healthier spots, has been found, from that very attachment I have mentioned above, a most dangerous experiment.

(Handler and Lange 1999:174)

Family members of the deceased in Barbados and West Africa believed that if you were to unearth the dead or not place them in a location that was close to their home that they would come back to haunt you, and that their spirits could not rest until they were buried properly, meaning near their family, their home, or close to the things that they most loved and cherished. Documentary evidence in Barbados had established that "most slaves were buried in either plantation communal burial grounds or under houses in the slave villages" (Handler and Lange 1999:104).

Handler and Lange (1999:196) also note that in some instances, when digging a grave in a communal burial ground "if they were to find a stone that they could not easily get out, they would conclude that the deceased is unwilling to be buried there, and therefore dig somewhere else (it is not known if this custom was also practiced when attempting to bury a loved one under the floorboards of a house)."

According to Mechelle Kerns-Nocerito (Kerns 1999), former *Lost Towns* historian, "nearly one-third of the trade with Annapolis was with the Caribbean, almost half of which was with Barbados." This is the second most numerous port of origin after London, England. The

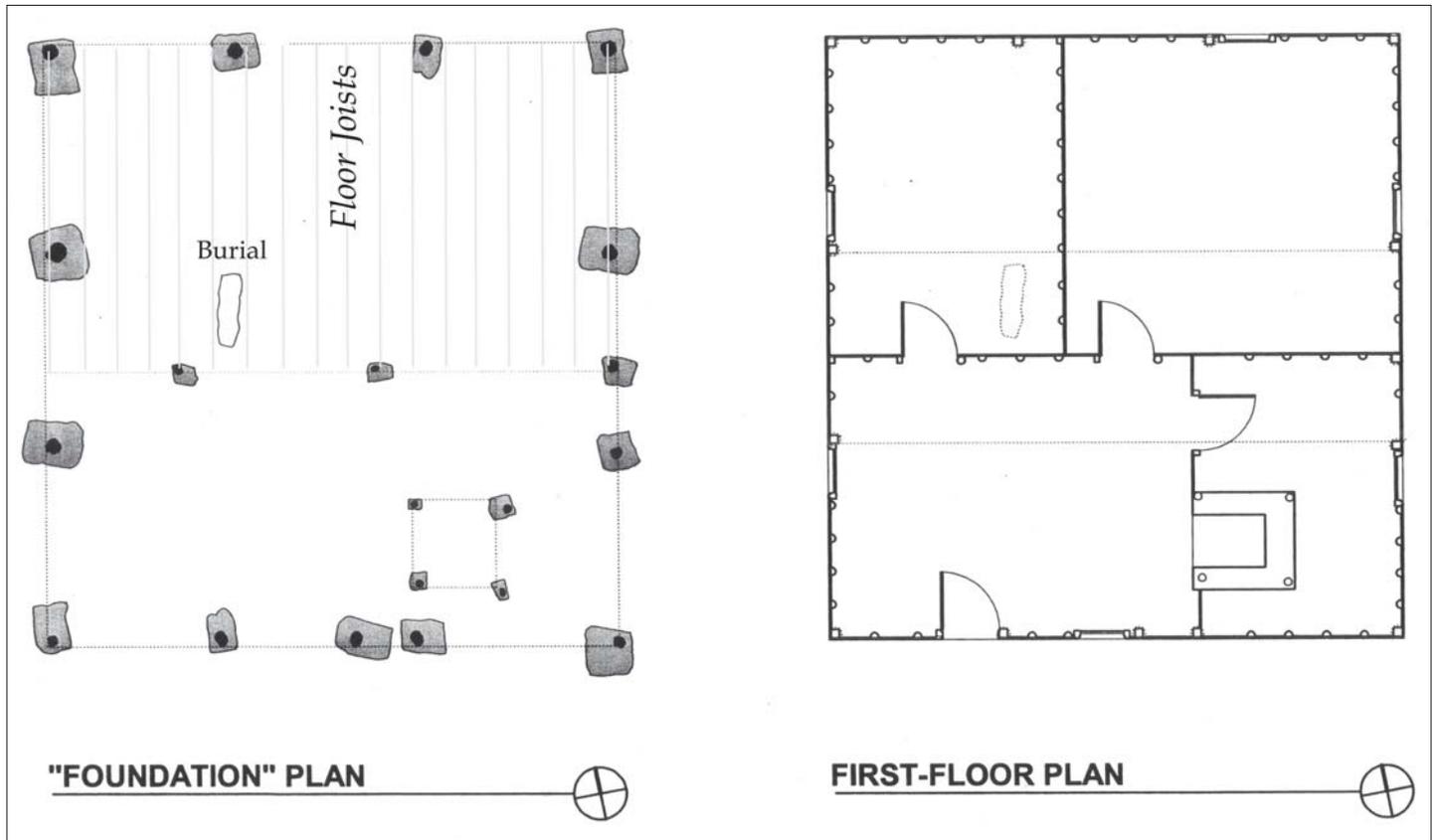


FIGURE 7. Architectural renderings of the Carpenter's Shop, showing burial location within the structure, between the floor joists; north is to the right on each plan. (Courtesy of Willie Graham, *The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation*)

most common "import" coming into Anne Arundel County from Barbados was slaves. Ships carrying over 200 "souls" to London Town are noted in contemporary newspaper advertisements, and in some of the wills from the town we also see that many of the landowners purchased slaves. At the time of Stephen West's death in 1752, he was known to have had at least seven slaves, five females (Phillis, Rachel, Maria, Dinah and Patience) and two males (Job and Ned) which were left, in his will, to his children (MSA 1752). West presumably had some of his slaves working and living in the Carpenter's Shop during its tenure, and could have also had some of them tending to the merchants and captains that would have been guests at Rumney's Tavern. From these lines of evidence, it seems quite likely that the child buried beneath the floorboards of the structure at London Town was the child of one of these transported slaves.

### A Celebration of Heritage

As described, archeologists consulted various professionals regarding different aspects of the burial, such as the position of the grave, the condition of the teeth, state burial laws, and the eventual disposition of the child.

After all of this information was evaluated, it was concluded that there was an overwhelming likelihood that this child must have been a slave of London Town. There were many meetings held discussing this burial, and a decision was made to put this child to rest again, in a fashion similar to the one that was originally conducted in the eighteenth century. The child would be reburied in the exact place it was discovered, based on the knowledge that Historic London Town plans to eventually reconstruct the building that once stood over the grave. This proposal led the *Lost Towns Project*, along with important leaders in the African American community, such as Carl Snowden, assistant to the County Executive, the Alex Haley Foundation, and the NAACP in Anne Arundel County, to conduct a reinterment ceremony for this unknown child—sending this child's soul to a place of rest, while helping people understand the mourning process that was involved in a typical West African or Caribbean burial (Figure 8).

The reinterment ceremony was held at London Town in Anne Arundel County on May 8, 2003. While re-enactors carried a new coffin through the grassy field, up to the frame structure of the eighteenth century building, people could hear the beating of drums in the background. It seemed to take them back to a different place in time, a

place with exotic culture and feeling. It was a major media event with different news stations trying to get a first hand glimpse of the London Town burial; between the trees and along the aisle they were waiting to hear the story of this unknown child. As everyone took their seats, facing the burial shaft, they began to hear the story of the child, which was conveyed to the audience by Master of Ceremony, Carl Snowden. It was easy to tell that many of the people with looks of amazement, and tears of sadness on their faces, began to feel like they were part of this child's life.

Al Luckenbach, director of the *Lost Towns Project*, concluded his part of the ceremony with the thought that:

“we are returning the earthly remains of this child to its original resting-place and when this building is reconstructed it will remain where its mother always intended, under the floorboards.”

Then began the invocation, conducted by Reverend Dr. Walter E. Middlebrooks. Prayers were said for this child as the reenactors carried a handmade wooden bier (coffin) down the aisle towards the burial shaft, with the drums again beating in the background, the meditation began:

“O God,...take away the arrogance and hatred which infect our hearts; break down the walls that separate us; unite us in bonds of love; and work through our struggle and confusion to accomplish your purposes on earth; that, in your good time, all nations and races may serve you in harmony...”

While the scripture was being read, the skies began to open up and the rain poured down, and after the reading was finished the rain had ceased. Carl Snowden later pointed out to everyone that in West Africa rain was a sign that the spirits were content and that they were



FIGURE 8. Re-enactors at the reinterment ceremony.

resting in peace with their ancestors before them. By returning these remains back to their original resting-place, we are celebrating this child's heritage, and the traditions and customs of those that came before us.

### Conclusions

Even though the plantation slaves in Barbados faced resistance from their masters, and from those who did not share the same beliefs, their funeral practices remained one of the most important aspects of their lives. There were more resources spent on funerals than there were on any other traditions in slave life, they were often both elaborate and expensive, with some of the money even coming from the masters of the plantations to acquire coffins for the deceased. Attending the funeral of any deceased relative or friend was considered the highest of compliments that you could have bestowed upon them. This was their final moment, before passing over into the afterlife, where their soul would forever be moving through space (Handler and Lange 1999).

Many traditions have been lost over time, especially those of the displaced African American community. During the times of slavery many were in fear of their masters, their beliefs were considered "heathenish" (Handler and Lange 1999), and they were to be forgotten, or they were living amongst others that did not have the same traditions or cultural practices. Some people, fortunately, did take a part of their homeland with them, and were lucky enough to live with others that had the same belief systems; in this case traditions thrived in their close-knit community and would have passed down through generations. The African Burial Ground Project that was conducted in New York City, starting in 1992, unearthed quartz crystals and shells that were buried with human remains, which points to a variety of African society's burial customs (Blakey 1998). The practice of placing shells with the burial remains can be tracked back to the Bakongo belief that the seashell encloses the soul's immortal presence. The Bakongo people of Africa entered into America on slave ships headed to Georgia and north Florida; many of their burial customs are seen throughout the southeastern United States. African American burial practices would have been highly resistant to loss, and the deceased would have continued to be close to their ancestors and their loved ones who were still living. The London Town burial appears to have been an example of such a tradition carried to the New World.

The body of the London Town child had been returned to the earth by the chemical content of the soil surrounding it. The organic stain of the bone, along with the child's tooth enamel, was the only evidence left, distinguishing the faint outline of a body. The feature that contained the burial was also small and rectangular shaped,

looking very similar to a typical post-hole. With these factors in place the *Lost Towns Project* was still able to uncover a burial that holds with it a tradition that has been lost in many cases in today's society. The burial at London Town was not well preserved physically, but the ideas of the slave funeral rituals that have been discovered at this old tobacco port will always be remembered. The roots of our ancestors are coming to light, and will hopefully never be forgotten again.

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**Lisa E. Plumley** is a former historical archeologist and the initial volunteer and education coordinator with Anne Arundel County's *Lost Towns Project*. She has completed her Master's course work at the University of Maryland-College Park, and is now residing in the Adirondacks in New York. Correspondence can be addressed to Anne Arundel County, Office of Environmental and Cultural Resources, 2664 Riva Road, Annapolis, Maryland 21401.

**Erin N. Cullen** is an historical archeologist, and the volunteer and education coordinator for Anne Arundel County's *Lost Towns Project*. She devises education programs for the school children who visit the historic sites each year, and also recruits volunteers of all ages to come and explore the world of archeology. She holds a B.A. in Anthropology from Salisbury University. Correspondence can be addressed to Anne Arundel County, Office of Environmental and Cultural Resources, 2664 Riva Road, Annapolis, Maryland 21401, or via e-mail at [erncullen@yahoo.com](mailto:erncullen@yahoo.com).

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