

FOWL PLAY AT LONDON TOWN?

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Archeologists are often confronted with glimpses of the past that they do not fully understand. Far more often than they are inclined to admit, their investigations result in data that they analyze, use to consider alternative explanations, and then simply take their best guess. A recent discovery made at Historic London Town is an excellent case in point.

While excavating a shallow pit feature behind what was once the Rumney/West Tavern on Scott Street, staff members of Anne Arundel County's *Lost Towns Project* encountered something that still has them scratching their heads. The pit proved to contain the earthly remains of five or more headless chickens as well as what might be a turkey. Their articulated remains clearly demonstrated that they had not been eaten. The pit's flat bottom was wide enough that they did not really seem to be on top of each other—more like they had been placed than thrown. Several of the staff rather reluctantly noted that the pit was basically shaped like a pentagon.

As can be seen in Figure 1, five articulated chicken carcasses are clearly visible at the bottom of the pit. However, a minimum chicken count conducted later in the lab indicates that there must have either been parts of several more interspersed in the fill, or else an upper layer of chickens had been truncated by the plowzone. A check of the plowzone materials indicated that, if true, the fragile bones had not survived.

There was little evidence for when this strange occurrence might have happened. London Town has been a place with constant human activity from 1683 to the present day. Artifacts, the mainstay of archeological dating, were not present. Assuming that mass chicken burials would be unlikely events to have taken place on a county-owned park, the most likely suspects would be during the colonial town period of roughly 1683-1790, or during the period when the property was used as the county poor house 1824-1965. The fact that the bones were in reasonably good condition would seem to argue for the latter time frame—but this is not totally conclusive.

This brings up the next question—what happened here? Putting aside the unavoidable jocular discussions of suicide or mass murder (fowl play) leaves one with few sensible options. Were the chickens diseased and disposed of in a pit? If so, then why weren't the heads similarly tossed? Why a flat-bottomed pit instead of just a conical hole? Were the chickens killed to prepare a large meal, and then allowed to spoil? This certainly seems the most

plausible, but it is still possible that something stranger was going on here. One thought that crossed everyone's mind was that the birds might have been sacrificed.

Only two years before, a strangely-placed burial of a six year old child was discovered beneath the floorboards of the nearby remains of a circa 1720 carpenter's shop (see Plumley and Cullen, this issue). It was eventually concluded that this was an example of a fairly common practice among slaves in the Caribbean and West Africa, and that the child had been placed there by its enslaved mother in accordance with these religious practices. The African-American population had been high at London Town, not only throughout the period of the colonial town, but during the almshouse period as well.

So, could a similarly unfamiliar African-American religious practice have been responsible for the chicken burial? Unfortunately the evidence is slight. Certainly, chicken sacrifices were and are common among the practitioners of several African-derived religions like voodoo, but it appears that the birds were usually eaten later. Finally, no evidence could be found that sacrificed birds were later buried.

It appears that the best solution is to admit something archeologists rarely do—the past is trying to speak to us, but in this case we don't know what it is saying.

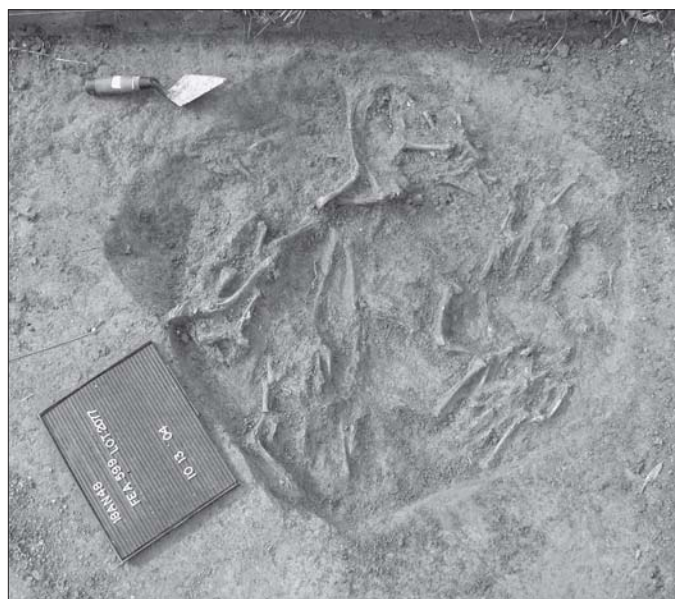


FIGURE 1. Remains of multiple articulated, headless chickens interred in a shallow pit behind Rumney/West Tavern.