

Maryland Archeology Month 2019

The Magic and Mystery of Maryland Archeology



An Interesting Chicken Burial at London Town

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When archeologists discover something for which they don't have a frame of reference, how do they make interpretations? An interesting case from Anne Arundel County concerns a pit full of chickens. During the 2004 field season at Historic London Town, archeologists discovered directly underneath the plowzone a shallow, five-sided, flat-bottomed pit. At each of the points of the pit was an articulated chicken skeleton with no visible remains of their heads. The interior of the pit contained the fragmentary bones of other fowl, including, perhaps, a turkey. There were no other artifacts contained within this pit, and it



Remains of multiple articulated chickens interred in a shallow pit near the Rumney/West Tavern at Historic Londontown.

was not associated with any other features. London Town has been a place of constant human activity during the recent past. Beginning in 1683 until roughly 1790 this place was a colonial port town, and between 1824-1965 a large portion of the town land became the County poor house. When was this pit dug? Who could have deposited the chickens? What could it mean? It was unusual that the remains were laid out so carefully: if the chickens had been butchered to be eaten the bones would be in disarray, not complete skeletons; and one would suspect that if the chickens had died from something like disease a regular conical hole would be dug and the bodies disposed of less carefully.

Once the usual answers seemed to be at odds with the data, archeologists began to wonder if this was evidence of ritual activity. Reviewing research done at other archeological sites showed that chicken burials have been discovered in a number of places across the southern United States. A burial of three chickens in a pit under the floor of a cabin of an enslaved person at the Levi Jordan Plantation in Texas, a completely articulated chicken buried upright with its wings

outstretched under the floor of a quarter at Frogmore Manor Plantation on St Helena Island, South Carolina, and the articulated skeleton of a hen buried on top of an egg under the floor of an enslaved person's cabin at Kingsley Plantation in Florida, are just a few examples of similar burials.

The common thread between all of these burials was that they occurred in contexts related to enslaved persons. Careful research at Kingsley Plantation, for example, showed that the early 19th century enslaved peoples were mostly African-born and came from a wide array of nations including Nigeria, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Liberia. Animal sacrifice was and is currently a common practice across many nations in Africa, especially among the Ibo peoples of modern day Nigeria. Chickens are routinely sacrificed to mark births, deaths, dedications, and purification rituals among other acts. In the Americas, similar rituals occur to this day among the Gullah culture in South Carolina and in creolized religions like Santeria, Haitian Vodou, and Obeah.

To try to determine if this pit may have been associated with African or African American enslaved persons, it is crucial to understand where it was found. Archeologists know that many London Towners were slave owners and some were directly involved with slave merchants and captains. Four slave ships are confirmed to have docked and sold 845 enslaved people from Sierra Leone, Angola, Benin, and the Gold Coast at London Town. More specifically, Stephen West, Sr., a prominent London Town merchant, ferry owner, and ordinary (inn) keeper owned Lot 86, the parcel where the chicken burial was discovered. He owned seven enslaved women and men at the time of his death. West built a workshop on Lot 86 that was rented to and then owned by carpenter William Brown, who is also known to have owned enslaved individuals. West also ran the tavern located next door on Lot 87 and staffed it with enslaved labor. There is tangible evidence of the enslaved individuals who lived and worked in the Carpenter's Shop with the discovery of a child's burial under the floor of the workshop. As the burial was contemporaneous with the use of the workshop, it is believed that they were buried while the building was occupied. Subfloor burials within a house have been seen historically in Ghana and are seen archeologically in enslaved contexts in the Caribbean. This burial, then, is another example of how African traditional cultural or ritual practices may have been translated in America under a system of slavery.

It is then no stretch to suggest that this chicken burial could be the material remains of African religiosity or social practice by enslaved peoples or their descendants either living in London Town or, later, in the Alms House. It may never be clear exactly who buried these chickens and for what purpose, but this one small feature offers tantalizing hints of the complex beliefs and practices of a past inhabitant of London Town.