

June 9, 2008

Twenty-Five Years of Archaeology in Annapolis: A Synthesis

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Looking Closer: 300 Years of Annapolis History, a Symposium

June 6,7, 2008 St. John's College, Annapolis, MD

What does archaeology have to say about Annapolis that you want to know and that you don't already know some other way? Does archaeology within the context of anthropology provide a perspective complimentary to or different from that provided by history? From within the work of Archaeology in Annapolis, done over the past 28 years, the clear answer is yes. Further, the answer is positive for three reasons. Archaeology discovers things and relations available no other way. Some things are never written down; they are just buried and left there. In a largely undisturbed city like Annapolis, that constitutes quite a lot. We find things that no one remembers.

The second reason that archaeology provides a different perspective is that it belongs to a different discipline. A discipline, anthropology, assumes that culture exists; is a complete entity; that there are classes in the early modern west; that there is an economy; that there are conflicts and struggles, and these can be understood by looking at all of culture's parts and their interrelationships.

The third reason we can say something we haven't heard before comes from using the framework of ordinary scientific reasoning. What are you disproving? And how can you disprove what you have just proven? This is not very different from the procedure of historians whose constant struggle is with improving the quality of their knowledge about the past, except that our approach uses a more pointedly defined foil.

Here is the foil against which I defined Archaeology in Annapolis. It can be laid out in a number of ways but amounts to the same position said over and over again. Annapolis is a modern, rational, patriotic place that lead the Revolution with ideas, men, documents, and patriotic fervor mixed with foresight. The standard view is that Annapolis is important to see, visit, and understand because the city plan, great houses, ordinary houses, and statehouse all instruct people alive today in the central events of the Revolution and thus in our national founding. Political events can be understood through architecture and through remaining documents. There is a transparent tie between Washington, Paca, Carroll and the other more local patriots like Jonas and Ann Catherine Green and the Stamp Act, Washington's resignation, Annapolis as U.S. capitol, and the remains of the places where all of these events happened.

Archaeology in Annapolis is a scholarly contribution to the understanding of Annapolis. It is a University of Maryland project created by Historic Annapolis' St. Claire Wright and sustained by her organization and more recently by the Banneker Douglass Museum. Its archaeological aim is scientific books and journal articles, not CRM literature, although we have produced a lot of that too. Its aim as always been immediate access to all of the discoveries made through archaeology and how they are made. This has been Archaeology in Public and has been the original and most effective,

most widely used, creation stemming from our work. Immediate access for the people was supposed to be the antecedent to scientific publication and was designed to show how meaning was created through the working of the archaeological process. All this means that understanding itself is a combination of things from the ground and the current conversations that make the things mean something. Behind the effort at public interpretation was and is the explicit effort to say that the past doesn't just mean what we say it does. The doing and saying is a creation, a creative act done now. Once this attitude was used, there could never be an unbroken tie between the past of Annapolis and Annapolis today. What you see and hear is never what was there, once upon a time.

There were two assumptions behind Archaeology in Annapolis that lead to our most important discoveries. One was culture, the complete way that people can see their world. The other was that the use of the past is ideological and that ideology played a large role in Annapolis itself in the past. Therefore, nothing from the past or about the past is transparently clear. It comes down to us through a filter of power and we see it through a filter of power.

A few years ago, Historic Annapolis Foundation celebrated 20 years of Archaeology in Annapolis in a modest symposium at Brice House. At the time, I thought there were three achievements that we had made that deserved attention. One was the discovery of the rules of perspective as built into the city's 18th century gardens and the 17th century street plan. In other words, we pointed out that the gardens from the 1760s and 1770s and the town plan from 1695 were built as volumes, not as maps or plans, and were used to control sight, not only property lines and traffic. This knowledge had never

been lost among art historians and urban planners who knew baroque theory, but it was gone in Annapolis and among scholars of the city.

Five or so years ago, I thought our work on African origins was a substantial achievement because we had the archaeological remnants of bundles or hands that had been buried in important Annapolis houses to invoke spirits of the dead to protect the living. We had found the answer to the question: what is left from Africa.

It is inappropriate to call this second achievement a discovery. Instead it has become a way of doing archaeology more effectively. Our questions about African origins came from understanding that Annapolitans had questions and could use the answers. This second achievement has three parts. As archaeologists, we recognized that we could have productive collaboration with ordinary residents who asked questions. Until 1990, either Mrs. Wright or I defined the questions. That was limiting. Now, there is a set of questions from people of African descent who are partners and who all the graduate students collaborating with Archaeology in Annapolis see as partners.

It is very difficult to interpret much of what is excavated archaeologically, particularly features, but some artifacts too. Because African bundles had never been found in Annapolis, it took experts in West Africa religion and in African-American religious traditions to tell us that what we had found were of African origin as well as part of its American form called hoodoo or conjure.

This second achievement required an external question, an external interpretation, and external uses. The Banneker Douglass Museum has exhibited archaeological materials from African-American Annapolis four different times. The museum has thousands of visitors a year and is an ideal place to speak to the community who might

use information about African origins and descendant practices in Annapolis. The demonstration of the continued existence in North America and in this city, whose public identity is the founding of the nation, of African religious traditions is an achievement. However, the initial questions and public presentations have been in the hands of these descendants. That is the three-part achievement.

Bundles and caches in hoodoo are called hands, mojos, tobys, or fixin's. These are 19th and 20th century terms and are used in the context of rootwork and doctoring. As is now well-known, we have excavated bundles in the Carroll, Slayton, and Brice Houses in multiple locations in each, as well as in Reynold's Tavern. These bundles include pins, pebbles, black, white and red objects, cosmograms, and other markers invoking a spirit or supernatural. There is African material at Calvert House, Adams-Kilty, and Maynard Burgess, but less clearly identifiable.

In 1982, Archaeology in Annapolis created Archaeology in Public. Mrs. Wright had agreed that a public program in archaeology was good for her concept of a museum without walls, as she saw this city. My initial conception of this idea was to stop the just-so presentations of the past so common then and now in outdoor history museums. What I wanted on display were the roots of class, race, and exploitation, and that never worked well. What did work was opening up excavations to the public with archaeologists themselves explaining how we worked. That has gained national acceptance and, like any good song, appears to have no author. However, we did it here first, published it widely, found that people like it, and we still do it. Fleet and Cornhill excavations are open now and have been all of April and May, 2008, thanks to Mayor Moyer's administration.

The public program was supposed to show archaeological methods and results right away. It did and does. It was also supposed to provide long-term interpretations and produced a guidebook and 25 minute slide show introducing people to how Annapolis had changed over the years, all under the guise of not changing at all. And the slideshow was to provide questions about power, wealth, and class as antidotes to the idea that American patriotic Annapolis was serving everybody. Neither worked; the guidebook and slideshow weren't popular and never caught on.

Public interpretation is much more mild now but has two accomplishments to it that are worth noting. The new exhibit at the Banneker Douglass Museum, "Seeking Liberty..." is about white and black Annapolis, largely hidden from each other, living in two separate, parallel worlds. Its idea is that freedom is incomplete and the fight is unfinished. The exhibit is only a celebration on the surface. For anyone who knows the condition of African Americans in the city, of Muslims in the greater Washington area, or sees sexism, the exhibit can only be a push to continue the struggle here. So, in the exhibit a critical archaeology continues to live.

Public interpretation continues on Fleet and Cornhill Streets. Although I'm not sure of all the ways we did this, there is a transparent relationship between the archaeologists and the homeowners that results in a mutual understanding of each other's interests. I would never have said this were it not for the relationship of many homeowners and the city's Department of Public Works, which is best characterized by frustration, failures to be plain, and an invocation on the part of the officials in charge that they know best, first, finally, and always. Archaeology in Public was designated to

prevent the attitude that archaeologists know best and have the last word. Archaeology is a dialogue anyway, and a better one if seen that way by its constituents.

Initially, the public program was to create consciousness of modern political conditions by displaying their archaeological origins. It failed to do so. Then our idea, using Habermas, was to build an alternative history of people who were excluded and marginalized. We have succeeded. We did this outside the power structure. Now there is something new on both the matter of dialogue and knowledge. I'm not sure why this has happened, but it has, and the result is remarkable.

A very local discovery of about 6 weeks ago is the log road found on lower Fleet Street. It was public interpretation that discovered the log road, not archaeologists. It was dialogue, not declaration. The log road was a public discovery through a dialogue between archaeologists and historians, particularly Tony Lindauer and Jane McWilliams. I mention them here to thank them. But the larger issue is how discoveries are made. They are made by parties talking with each other, in public, as equals. A modest version of this process occurred in 1990 when the first cache of African materials from the Charles Carroll House was discovered by Robert Warden and we put it in the New York Times and learned from Frederick Lamp that it was the result of West African religious practices moved to and adapted in North America. That complex dialogue has been healthy, although not without limits.

In fostering one of the major innovations Archaeology in Annapolis has made, Matt Cochran, Matt Palus, and I want to show you a discovery made about 4 weeks ago on upper Fleet Street that we make public now, for discussion's sake.

About 200 feet up Fleet Street from the location of the pit where we found about eight cut timbers that we call the log road, Aleithea Williams and Matt Cochran discovered the same road's hard packed surface and its gutter. In the gutter was a bundle which was a separate mass that was immediately recognizable as different from everything around it. Matt Cochran knew it was different and so did I when he called me up a few hours later. The mass is about 10 inches high, 8 inches wide, and 5 inches thick. It looks like a large mass of compacted sand and mud. However, the blade end of a grooved prehistoric stone ax stuck out of the top end of it.

We both separately thought the object was African. Matt Palus and Matt Cochran took it to Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum about three weeks ago and had it x-rayed under the guidance of Dr. Patricia Samford, an archaeologist who also has done work on African religious symbols in North America. The x-rays show about 125 pieces of small lead shot surrounding the bottom of the ax, about 25 common pins forming a slightly higher context around the ax, and several hand-wrought iron nails mixed in and above the pins near the top. All these are embedded in sandy mud. The whole was in a pouch or bag whose wrinkles can be seen as impressions in the sand.

The bundle was resting in the gutter, not cut into it, or buried. Although now 3 or 4 feet down from the current surface, it was visible when set there and would have been meant to be seen. It was a public object. The artifacts date the road bed and gutter to before 1740, as is the case with the log road further down the same street. There remains always the possibility that the bundle dates to earlier in the 18th century.

We have only begun the dialogue necessary to identify the bundle as to what its origins might be. Where are its African origins? Could it be English witchcraft? Why is

it in public, when all hoodoo/conjure is buried and done in secret? If this has African origins, where and who could they be: Nigeria, Congo, Senegal, Yoruba, BaKongo? We, as archaeologists, do not have immediately at hand the knowledge to answer these questions. We also could not turn logs in a row, shaped and laid flat, into a log road that might date to the 1680's and be a boundary maker within Annapolis while it was still Arundel Town. It took open dialogue to do that and we want to foster that now too.

We have two leads, which come from our own use of scholars on Africa and African-American religion. Elegba or Elegba is a Yoruba god who has the power to disintegrate and regenerate and is the guardian of the threshold and keeper of the gate. His image is molded and put at a crossroads. His image can be made of clay, was portable, cone shaped, contained red, and can be brought to life by a proper sacrifice centered on a piece of stone. The "tip of the cone is perforated by a nail which is the god's wonder-working knife worn erect upon his head (Thompson 1984: 24)." So is this bundle Yoruba?

The second lead comes from the Congo, or the BaKongo tradition of bundles to lure and enclose spirits for human use. Bundles are a round container bound with a sash, containing beads, stones, and dirt. They tell a spirit what to do. Sometimes called prendas, or points, they can mystically attack slaveholders and other enemies. They may be wrapped in cotton and secured with pins, and sometimes crowned with feathers. They may also have cruciform signs, all to "capture the forces guarding the households that own such charms (Thomson 1984: 126-127)."

Not only is the meaning of the bundle not yet clearly tied to a specific African group, but also it is not our task alone to do so. We can facilitate discussion of a proper

identification. However, as archaeologists working in this city, for many years, we can provide some other contexts, particularly given the other work I cited earlier.

To say something about Annapolis at this time, using archaeology, I want to make two counterposed points. Annapolis is a patriotic city, looked at historically, and that gets a little thin at times because such a view has become little more than a pious church service. It doesn't stick with you or change anything. This is to say, the interpretation is tired, but not the significance of the Revolution and the Constitution.

The second part of the foil is that the acts and texts we celebrate about Annapolis are products of the Renaissance, Baroque, and Enlightenment. They are rational; they are not supernatural. The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, Washington's resignation, the Maryland Gazette, the Nicholson or baroque town plan are full of rules, procedures, math, natural law, and sensory observations. What we celebrate about the city is rationality.

From archaeology, particularly from the type of the Maryland Gazette, this process of rationality using grammar or the rules for written sentence construction began by 1750. It is also at this point that magic citations disappear from the pages of the Gazette and simultaneously complaints about Britain's treatment of its American colonies begin to be noticeable. There is talk of liberty, and rights, and individuals with freedoms.

Next, we have discovered many bundles but all were buried. They begin to appear by 1780 or 1790 and continue at least to 1920. The bundle on Fleet Street was not buried. It sat there in public ready to protect or, on the obverse, to harm. Therefore, could it be that such an African practice was acceptable?

Annapolis before 1750 was a city where the Gazette cited many-headed monsters, magical trials in Europe, misshaped births in magic contexts, unaccounted appearances and disappearances, and the world of pagan, non-Christian belief that was all supposed to have been abolished with the Reformation. But there was plenty of magic, including public African magic on Fleet Street, and it was tolerated and may have been mixed with an equally public English witchcraft. This could explain how the two traditions look alike from time to time as with the treatment of hearths and chimneys associated with spirits.

Therefore, should we see the Annapolis of the early 18th century as not only more dominated by magic, but also by lively and accepted African magical uses? Slave, yes; but African too? By the 1750s and after, when there is to be freedom for some and no liberty for most, as argued through the citation of natural rights, both kinds of magic went underground. English magic tends to disappear, remaining only in a celebration like this one where we invoke moments in the past which are largely untied to us alive now. Or black magic in the form of hoodoo which is very much alive now in the United States, predominantly in the South but also in African Caribbean communities in our major northern cities.

There is one final tie to be made. We do not think of early colonial life as very free or featuring liberty. We tend to think of it as the time and circumstance needed for the Revolution to start. Yet it may have been a time when Africans could have been Africans more openly, including using their religions. All this because more magic was used to regulate all daily social life which is magic's purpose as seen in anthropology.

Magic may have been the alternative to failures of the British rule and to the imposition of violence. So, the period 1700 to 1740 may have had more magic in society.

Two processes should be considered after 1750. Society was rationalized through the invocation of natural law. Everyone was asked to agree that hierarchy was natural. During and after the Revolution everyone was asked to see society as built on the liberty-loving individual. Slaves and free people of African descent had no place in either ideology. When hierarchy was natural, they were at the bottom. When citizens were endowed with inalienable rights, slaves had none at all.

As freedom took hold for some and slavery, racism, and segregation were imposed by others, the days of public, real magic were gone, at least in the open. In the African world magic remained used and almost universally known. It was used to hold parts of the Annapolis community together and should be celebrated as such.

Now to end comes my tercentennial question. Do you think magic is bad? Do you think it is an alternative to Christianity? Is it a religion? Is it more than an anthropological curiosity? And, do you think that if people of African descent were treated as equals, they would need magic?

That's what we have accomplished.

Thompson, Robert F.

1984 Flash of the Spirit. New York: Vintage Books.