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Archaeology at the Talbot County Women's Club
Lecture by Dr. Mark P. Leone, Stefan Woehlke, and Tracy Jenkins
Presented by Dr. Mark P. Leone

Introduction

First, I would like to thank each of you for your permission and support throughout the excavations this summer. It has been a real pleasure getting to know you, and the students have all felt the same way.

This summer's excavation has been a success on many fronts. One of the most impressive aspects of this summer's project is the large numbers of visitors who came by the site throughout our work. We were honored to have a visit from Mayor Robert Willey during our first week. By the end of the project we had over 600 visitors to the site. On the day that you hosted the open house, we had 200 visitors, and everyone mentioned how happy they were that they got to take a peek inside this wonderful building. Thank you for that.

There was also a tremendous amount of press that was generated about the project, spreading the word about Easton across the country. Together, we made the covers of local and national papers, radio interviews, and television news. The widespread interest in the project shows the significance of this property and of its place within the neighborhood we all know as The Hill.

The Project on the Hill

The excavation that took place here over the month of July is just one part of a much larger project aimed at researching the unique history of Easton and this neighborhood. Since the late 18th century, the efforts of many families and individuals created a community where African Americans could, in relative safety, build lives free of the shackles of slavery. African American and other community members shaped the social life of The Hill, and also of Easton and Talbot County, in ways that we are only beginning to appreciate.

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By documenting The Hill's heritage and the significance of this heritage on local, regional, and national levels, we help local residents to preserve those things that have made The Hill special for over two centuries. Here at the Talbot County Women's Club, thanks to your careful preservation of this wonderful house, that work has already been underway for some time. Historic Easton has been working to preserve other sites, and since 2009, Morgan State University, under the direction of Professor Dale Green, has gone from researching the African American churches to an effort to understand the wider significance of this community within Maryland's and the nation's history. Over time, partnerships have grown between Historic Easton, Morgan State, the University of Maryland, the Historical Society of Talbot County, and many local residents. Funding and support for the research has come from these sources, as well as the National Trust for Historic Preservation, another reminder of this community's importance in our nation's history.

Last year was our first year of archaeology on The Hill. We excavated at the home of a Buffalo Soldier's Family. Built by a black laborer in 1879, that home saw many generations of African American residents. Among them were relatives of Sergeant William Gardner, who served in the U.S. Army for 29 years. After his death in the Philippines in 1908, he was buried in Easton and his family kept his discharge papers and uniform. These papers were rediscovered in the house and excavations recovered two Army buttons from Gardner's period of service. The buttons and the service they represent reminds us that patriotism offered a means by which African Americans could challenge the ideology of racism and claim the promise of citizenship that was extended to them in 1863.

Our excavations at the Home of the Family of the Buffalo Soldier also documented garden beds and play areas in the yards of the house. Clay and glass marbles were abundant. Physical objects and places often serve as access points for memory, and the marbles at the site helped one site visitor to recall his childhood on The Hill when he and his friends used to shoot marbles in the alley between the Home of the Family of the Buffalo Soldier and the house next door. Moments after hearing this story we began to uncover clay and glass marbles in that spot.

Our experience in 2011 taught us that The Hill's rich heritage was intact—in the ground, in memory, and in the built environment—and impressed upon us the vital significance that heritage bears for community members today. Archaeology illuminates and shares that heritage, through which the community builds and maintains a sense of itself. Although the testing was limited, we were able to determine that the soil layers were intact in the neighborhood, and because of this, had the potential to provide important evidence about the lives of those living in the past.

This year, we set out to find a site that dated back to a much earlier period in the Hill's History. Your (the TCWC) property was a prime candidate. Through a combination of census records and deed research we were able to determine that there were free African Americans living here prior to 1800. Although we were excited to learn this much through historical research, there was nothing in the historical record that told us about the property's early free black residents. For this reason, we were very excited to be given permission by your organization to conduct our excavation here.

The team of researchers had many questions that the excavations could help answer. What was the earliest evidence of people on the property? Who were they? Were the historic records missing people who lived or worked on the site even earlier than we had identified?

Also, we had questions related to what people's lives were like. We knew that there were both white and black residents living on the property over time, but we didn't know what their relationships were to one another. How did these relationships change over time?

We also saw this site as a great opportunity to begin to understand the lives of free African American tenants during the establishment of the community. In the future, we will be excavating at sites that had been purchased by free black families, as well as houses rented by free black families, but where there was an absentee landlord. The effects of this economic diversity within the African American community are poorly understood, but they provide a complex and fascinating avenue for research. Without the information from this site, only a partial understanding of the full complexity of this community could be achieved.

Findings

Although our analysis of the artifacts has just begun, a number of interesting observations have risen to the surface. In order to understand our findings I will discuss them in relation to the development of the property over time, beginning with the purchase of the lot in 1786 or 1787. We will relate the changes we see in the way that the property is used with broader changes in society, and conclude with a discussion of our next steps and what we still hope to learn through our analysis.

The Price Years

In 1786, Jeremiah Banning drew up a plan for the Town of Easton and laid out the grid of streets and blocks that John Needles surveyed in 1791. Originally, the block was laid out in thirds, with lots running East-West from Talbot Lane to South Hanson Street. Even before the survey stones were put in place, the lots went to auction, and as often happens, land speculators saw an investment opportunity and quickly purchased most the lots in what has become The Hill. In 1786 or 1787 a large portion of the current property, lot 27, was purchased by John Troupe. The rest of the current property was part of lot 28, which was purchased by Thomas Kersey in 1788. In 1795, James Price purchased all of lot 27 and half of lot 28. This resulted in his ownership of the northern half of the block.

When James Price acquired the property, the original frame house had already been constructed, along with a few supporting outbuildings. Within the next few years a number of free African Americans moved onto the property with James Price, most likely as tenants. Price saw the property as an economic investment. Since he was employed at the courthouse he was unable to earn money from his own labor on the property, so renting would have been seen as a way to gain income without investing his own time into his property. In 1803, he had the brick house built next to the frame one, and moved in. The houses were kept separate at this time. This is likely because the frame house could be used by rental tenants, expanding the income potential for the property.

The follow up question is how did the tenants afford to pay their rent? What did they do to earn a living? What we found in the archaeological record is that they practiced a diversified income strategy, relying on a variety of skills. These are things many of you heard about as we uncovered them over the summer. The first things we found related to this were raw materials

used for manufacturing nails. About 40 yards behind the frame house, we recovered considerable quantities of slag and two pieces of iron used to hammer out nails. Freedom granted a relief from the dehumanizing effects of slavery, but as African Americans entered the work force on their own, they had to find a way of supporting themselves and their families. Before 1800, hand-made nails offered an easy way of making some small profit without a large investment. From historical records we know that a number of blacksmith shops operated on The Hill at this time. Eventually, however, mass mechanical production rendered hand-made nails obsolete. So it wasn't too long into the 19th century before technological advances drove these black tenants out of production. Still, until then, nail-making offered one means of supporting a family and securing rent.

By the 1830s the property had been updated by the tenants, who erected a chicken coop near the area where they had been producing nails a couple decades earlier. There were a number of pieces of evidence that have led us to this conclusion. First, we found the remains of two posts. These were located four feet apart, which is a standard measurement for buildings made with posts at this time. Next, between these posts was a pale gray soil that wasn't found anywhere else on the property, and was likely the decayed remains of chicken manure. Finally, we also found a large pile of whole oyster shells just a few feet away. It was a common practice to let chickens pick at oyster shells since they would inevitably ingest pieces, which acted as calcium supplements. This helped them make eggs. In fact, Oyster shells are still ground up and added to some chicken feed for the same purpose. Oyster shell was also used to make mortar, or to control the acidity of soils in the garden, so it would have been important to have easy access to oyster shells just in case they were needed.

During the Price years, then, the part of the backyard behind the frame tenant house became a site for small-scale industry and livestock. The clang of hammers and the cluck of chickens would have been familiar sounds here in the first half of the 19th century. James Price didn't have the time to make nails or raise chickens on his property. And as a gentleman with a job at the courthouse, such activities were beneath his status. So by renting to tenants, he could still, effectively, earn an income through production on his property.

Mordecai and Deborah Dawson Years

After owning the property for over half a century, James Price passed away in either 1860 or 1868, at which time the property was given to his brother, Joseph's, children. They in turn sold it to Mordecai and Deborah Dawson in 1868. The house and property both went through some major changes during this time period. It likely became a primary residence of a single family for the first time since the Price family moved in during the 1790s. It was at this time that the brick house and the frame house were combined into a single structure for the first time.

This change in use and mindset brought a transformation in the landscape. The Dawson years swept away the economic production in the back yard, and established itself as a modern urban landscape. Based upon the artifacts recovered from the area of the chicken coop, this most likely took place within a few years of the Dawson's purchase. Instead, the area became used as a place to dispose of coal ash along with some broken glass and dishes, creating what archaeologists call a sheet midden, but you would most likely call a scatter of garbage.

These changes also occurred in conjunction with the rise in Victorian ideals. All across the country, work became increasingly separated from the home. In the big cities, workers

traveled to the factory or the office every day, returning home with their wages. Here on the Dawson's property, the change in ownership combined with this ideal to transform the house and the yards. The home was no longer seen as a way to produce economic value; instead it became seen as a way to produce symbolic value within a particular social environment. While removing the noise and smell of the chickens cleared the backyard for a calmer, quieter yard, the Dawsons mirrored this effort toward respectability inside the house as well. They stocked their shelves and tables with objects like the blue opaline glass vase we uncovered. A consumer good made in France, this vase bears classical and floral motifs that assert a connection to the republican and romantic ideals of the period. This and other items would have fit seamlessly into a house decorated along Victorian standards. In Annapolis, our organization has identified this transition to Victorian ideals in both white and black households of the emerging middle class. It is unclear at the moment if this pattern follows similar class based pattern here in Easton, or if other porces drove the acceptance of this particular style.

William T. Wright Years

After about 20 years, the Dawsons sold the property to William T. Wright in 1891. Instead of making it his primary residence, he developed it in order to generate rental income from the property. Once again the two houses were separated into separate apartments. He also built the house on the corner, which may have become his residence, or was also used to generate additional rental incomes. This 6 room building was known as 'The Annapolis' at that time. More historic research is needed to understand all of the relationships between the archaeology and William Wright's ownership.

The archaeological materials we uncovered from this time period shows that there was vibrant family life. It is from this time period that the series of toys were recovered. These included parts of a toy fire truck, a toy gun, marbles, and a small ceramic figurine. Right next to these we also uncovered a sewing needle and pins. We could practically picture a mother watching over her children while fixing a tear, or doing some seamstress work to earn a little extra money for the family.

Talbot County Women's Club Years

In 1946, the president of the Talbot County Women's Club, Anna Brinkloe, purchased the property and immediately began making changes. Many of the old building were torn town down, which included a stable and a shed according to deed research. Trash was removed from the back of the lot, where a bottle dump had accumulated. The women also oversaw renovations that were done to the front porch, as well as modifications that were made to all of the additions in the rear.

The women turned the yard space into a formal garden space, designed to entertain at social events. A light post was put out in back so that gatherings could continue into the evening. Huge trees were removed and holes filled, something we found evidence of in the side yard. You may remember the particularly deep hole with a rounded bottom just out the side door. We also found updates to utilities and drainage systems so that the property would reflect that status of the Women who gathered here, much like we are today.

Conclusion

The grounds of this property bear the imprints of two hundred years of daily life. Both owners and tenants left their marks on and in the ground as they turned the land to their

various needs. From an empty lot in the hands of speculators, this property became a home and an opportunity for free African Americans to build meaningful lives out from under the lash of slave owners. They worked hard, and their small transformations of the landscape of the backyard bear out their efforts. In the later 19th century, the Dawsons transformed the property again, from a working landscape to a symbolic one in which they consumed and expressed the values of Victorian culture. In the 20th century, like many other properties, this site became a source of rents for an absentee landlord. Tenants raised their children here while working in Easton's many businesses.

Time has forgotten most of these men, women, and children who made The Hill not just a collection of people, but a community. Their efforts and their experiences created a heritage that has left its mark in the ground and, perhaps less perceptibly, on us. As our work continues, we will learn more about daily life on The Hill over time and how the social, economic, and cultural lives of these residents inscribed this part of Easton with meaning.

As we continue to wash away the dirt from the artifacts we uncovered this summer we will make new discoveries that will help us fine tune our interpretation. While we catalog and analyze these objects we will be able to tell a more detailed story about the lives of the people who once called this building home. Undoubtedly, we will also have new questions to ask of the land. We will continue to excavate on the Hill over the next few years, trying to better understand its history and its people. This year's work has been a huge success, and we owe it all to you. Thank you again for your warm reception.