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A Chesapeake family and their slaves

A study in historical archaeology

Illustrations by Julie Hunter

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Transforming space into place

He who out of curiosity desires to see the Landskip of the Creation drawn to Life . . . [may] view Mary-Land drest in her green and fragrant Mantle of the Spring.

G. Alsop, 1666, *A Character of the Province of Mary-land*

“The past is not dead”

The past is a bridge to the future; it permeates the present. Despite the convictions of some historical archaeologists, it has yet to die, although we neither witness it directly nor live in it. The past remains alive in familiar ways: when older women tell family legends to younger ones, teach them to make pots, or old men teach their grandsons to fish and sail. It matters little whether they are Indian, African, Asian, or Euro-Americans. The past is also with us in ways that are unrecognized or unfamiliar.¹

Many people in Maryland do not know there are material remains lying outside their doorsteps that tell, sometimes with exquisite detail, of the everyday experiences of colonists who lived here while it was still a province, a land of rich black “mould,” or soil, dense woods, interspersed with tobacco plantations and farms in small clearings, governed by the Calvert family through Royal charter. The question is just who and what these material remains tell us about – black people, white people, men, women, lifestyle, world view. Does one’s social status, ethnic identity, or gender affect what the future can learn of the past? Are those who were most visible in earlier societies those who left the most indelible imprint on the archaeological record or can we, with skill, learn how to read artifacts so that additional individuals appear with clarity and grace? If so, would it make a difference? Do artifacts have import beyond a narrow frame?

Many people, especially those whose goals necessitate the reuse or reallocation of land, cynically believe archaeology is an obstacle to economic growth and expansion. Their view is similar to Samuel Johnson’s 1751 statement, “Life is surely given to us for higher purposes than to gather what our ancestors have wisely thrown away, and to learn what is of no value, but because it has been forgotten.” Sometimes disparaged as piles of dirty trash, archaeological artifacts remain a fragile, vital bridge between past, present, and future. Essentially they are things lost, set aside, thrown away, misplaced, buried, and then forgotten.²

Because they are direct derivatives or surviving examples of material culture – all

products shaped and influenced by human thought and action – the value of artifacts transcends their origin as things discarded and displaced. Artifact analysis is capable of disclosing beliefs so fundamental that they were taken for granted by the people who left behind an archaeological record – ideas that were unspoken assumptions essential in a culture’s world view, ideas which existed at the interface of conscious and unconscious activity. These beliefs were the bedrock of human social action, encapsulating and framing daily life. This aspect of past culture is often less visible in written records such as wills, merchants’ invoices, legislative records drafted for specific, well-articulated goals than in broken pieces of glass, clay, and bone, in the spatial constraints of old buildings, or in patterns made by fence lines crossing the land which shaped social space (fig. 1.1).³

The value of Maryland’s historical archaeological record is increased because in its years as a province, men and women also left a wide variety of other cultural texts: documents in court, town, and state records, folk narratives maintained by individual families or communities, and illustrative portraits of family, favorite animals, landscape paintings, and maps. All of these can be used to create a cultural context for the artifacts and features that archaeologists excavate. The texts are collateral sets of independent evidence that enable us to draw stronger inferences about past behavior from information derived from artifacts, soil layers, and features than from data at sites that come naked, without parallel documentation. Texts strengthen and enrich archaeology; they bring individuals into focus. They let us situate an old culture, like that of the Chesapeake, in time and space (fig. 1.2).

The tobacco coast: a settled land

Historian Edmund Morgan began *American Slavery, American Freedom* asserting the importance of tobacco, by stepping back to bring in native peoples. Rhys Isaac began a more anthropological interpretation, *The Transformation of Virginia*, by surveying the landscape. He moved quickly to show culture’s imprint in configurations of social space and among the marks of tobacco production. Tobacco trade governed the placement of plantations, the outlines of fields, and the shapes of houses no matter who built them. Chesapeake tobacco was food, cloth, and drink. The use of tobacco as coin helped create a society where interaction was close, personal, not mediated by electronic device. There are various points of entry to the study of its past.⁴

As a start – and it is the beginning here – one might take Maurice Bloch’s point that “environment is not neutral, but is itself culturally construed” and try to gain some grasp of the colonial Chesapeake as a distinct space. It was, after all, the environmental setting in which most of the social action that fills these pages took place. If we were dealing with the era ten thousand years ago when the Susquehanna still ran in its riverbed, a different approach would be required. But we are not.⁵

From clues in old documents, evocative descriptions of a Chesapeake garden of Eden, disparaging remarks in the heat of the day, and reminiscences of crossing the Bay, the environmental context – the Maryland ecosystem – takes on a cultural hue. It also can be approached experientially by seeking out less settled areas in the

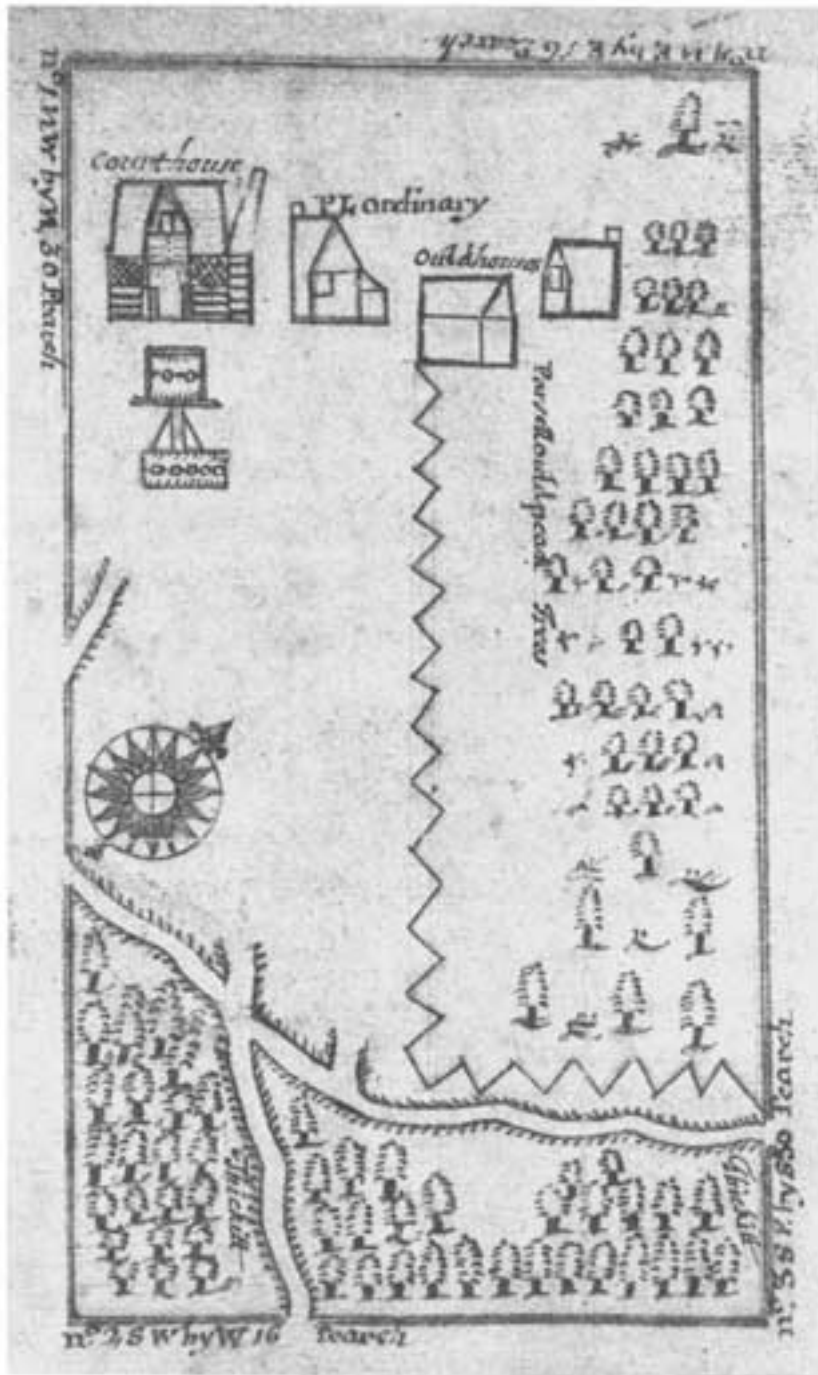


Figure 1.1. Zigzag worm fence protects a “parcel of old peach trees” on a surveyor’s 1697 plat of the Charles County courthouse and ordinary. The plat inserts the cultural landscape into the wilderness: a wooden clapboard courthouse with diamond-paned windows and crib chimney with pillory and stocks outside its door. Close to a tavern lie old homes; thickets of uncleared forest about a road. (Maryland State Archives, Charles County Court Records v No. 1, MDHR 8132.)

region, by listening to wind and weather, by recreating in the mind's eye a day when travelers climbed into log canoes, paddled by people of color, or using the eyes of an artist: "all about land cradled water. Beyond the coves and harbors, loblolly and maple brushed a feathery sky. Here and there, among the myrtle and the cord grass, the honeysuckle and the pine, were weathered brick facades." The spirit of place can be heightened by thinking of the pigs of the sea, as men called dolphins, that leapt and dove, pacing ships, playing in waves, overturning canoes, and forcing Edward Kimber to swim for his life near Yorktown in the 1730s. This is not recreating past thought, but actively imagining a world that might have been, using this to structure questions and evaluate answers. As Greg Dening reminds anthropologists: "It is no breach of scientific method to claim to see the time before in the time after."⁶

Naturalists introduce the Chesapeake by writing of its subtle beauty, its shallow tide-washed shores and gentle, reserved tides, its history "bound in sand and clay and water." Ecologist Eugene Cronin views it as a "biological treasure" while earlier men saw it as bountiful, teeming with life, a garden of earthly delights. Seventeenth-century promoters also were exuberant about its soil, a loam capped by two feet of "blacke mould wherein you shall scarce find a stone, . . . like a sifted Garden-mould." Expressing a cosmology that metaphorically connected the human body and the natural world, Rev. Hugh Jones likened "the many Rivers, Creeks, and Rivulets of Water . . . to veins in humane Bodies" while others wrote of the many ships the Bay could harbor in its capacious bosom. The physical context of land and water is evocatively captured in *Tobacco Coast* by Arthur Pierce Middleton: "a vast inland sea thrusting its deep estuaries and long tidal reaches far into the wooded coastal plane . . . The presence of the Bay profoundly affected the history of Virginia and Maryland by providing an unsurpassed network of natural waterways . . . [opening] 10,000 square miles of hinterland to immediate settlement."⁷

In 1634, Father White believed the Bay was "the most delightful water I have ever seen" and contrasted the Potomac – the sweetest and greatest river he had seen – with London's Thames, "but a little finger to it." Carefully watching the weather like an anxious planter, he observed: "from the South comes Heat, Gusts, and Thunder; from the North, or North-west, cold-weather, and in winter, Frost and Snow; from the East and south-east, Raine." John Hammond contrasted it with England's climate:⁸

The Country is as I said of a temperate nature, the dayes in summer not so long as in England, in winter longer; it is somewhat hotter in June, July and August than here, but that heat sweetly allayed by a continual breaze of winde, which never failes to cool and refresh the labourer and traveler; the cold seldom approaches sencibly untill about Christmas, . . . and when winter comes, (which is . . . no worse then is in England), it continues two monthes, seldom longer, often not so long and in that time although here seldom hard-weather keep men from labour, yet there no work is done all winter except dressing their own victuals and making of fires.⁹

Dr. Alexander Hamilton wrote an intimate letter, extracted below, to his brother

containing an informative account, contrasting the region’s climate with Scotland’s, revealing the underlying strain the British emigrants felt, their expectations and fears:

We have here in this country very hot weather in the summer time, of which you can have no idea. I write to you now in my shirt and drawers with all the doors and windows open upon me to receive the Breeze and yet I sweat excessively. The grass and herbage here would all dry to snuff, were it not for the frequent heavy rains we have in the summertime, which come up for the most part in the evening with violent thunder and lightning . . . our winters are for the most part exceedingly cold – your breath will freeze upon the sheets in a night, cold iron will take the skin off if you handle it, the

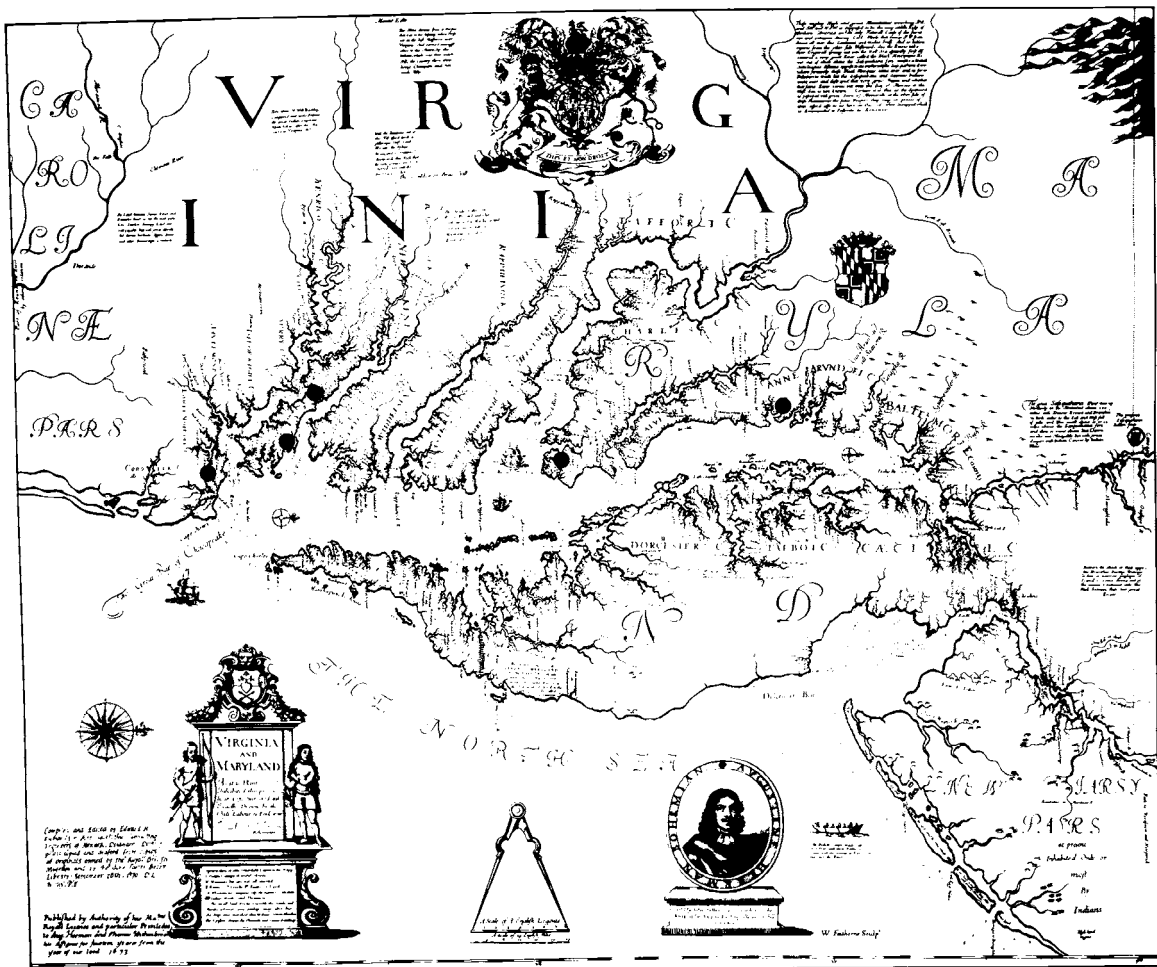


Figure 1.2. Augustine Herman map of 1673 shows Chesapeake Bay and the surrounding colonies of Maryland, Virginia, and New Jersey which was “inhabited only or most by Indians.” The settlements at Norfolk, Yorktown, Williamsburg, St. Mary’s City, and Annapolis are marked with circles. (Maryland State Archives, Huntington Map Collection, MSA SC 1399-679.)

nosedrops will freeze to one's nose who rides out or walks in the air. It sometimes rains and freezes here at the same time, so that the trees in the woods are sometime broken [by] the icicles upon them . . . a bowl of water or punch will freeze standing near a pretty large fire of wood and sometimes as one endeavors to warm himself, he shall roast upon one side and be almost frozen on the other.

. . . I wish well to all men and mind carefully my gallipots and vials, which are my basic stock, and I daily pray to God, that I may never be disabled by distemper, or arrive to a helpless old age in this part of the world.

Letter to B.G.H. from Annapolis, June 13, 1739.¹⁰

When the British arrived, the Chesapeake was already a settled land (fig. 1.3). Thus in 1634, Englishmen travelled upriver to negotiate first with the original inhabitants, stopping at two Algonkian Indian towns: Patomeck and Piscataway. Bonfires lit along the river's edge spread news of their coming; 500 bowmen gathered at a palisaded stronghold with their "Werowance" (hereditary chief) and "Cockarouses" (counselors). The Maryland Piscataways perceived the settlers as strong because of noisy English guns that announced Leonard Calvert's passage along the Potomac. This they likened to thunder, and because English ships appeared as reincarnations of mythic wonders – bewitching floating islands – curious men came aboard the vessels to see "where that tree should grow, out of which so great a canow should be hewen, supposing it all of one peece, as their canows use to be." Father White wrote that the "king of Yoacomaco" and his people, who lived across the embayment from the proposed location for St. Mary's, increasingly threatened by hostile Susquehannocks, hoped an English presence would bring greater safety. Higher up the river, Piscataways spoke of bloody raids by the Virginia settlers, by the northern Erie, and other members of the Iroquoian alliance. And so the native peoples traded Leonard Calvert a recently deserted open village, one where the Yoacomaco had recently lived, whose occupation extended seven thousand years or more back to a time when the land was still an upland forest.¹¹

The English settlement of Maryland resulted in retrenchment, a native population decimated by European diseases, and ultimately a long journey north to rejoin other Native Americans in upstate New York. Throughout this process, Maryland Indians were able to preserve many elements of traditional culture. In 1715, the fifth Lord Baltimore filed a petition with the Crown asking that the province be excepted from a regional military plan because his council believed Maryland Indians were peaceable and their numbers were too small for effective warfare. At the same time, they formed a fringe community; negotiations with Native Americans were one aspect of Captain Calvert's governorship in the 1720s. Men continued to wear Indian dress (e.g. Mark Challoner's inventory), to trade for furs (e.g., William Holland's inventory); travelers spoke with Indian couples on woodland roads (e.g. Edward Kimber at Snow Hill); a few Indians worked in menial jobs within towns (such as selling lamp black and cleaning chimneys); Indian bowls were used on some English farms; a few planters sold tomahawks in their stores. Some Indians taught the

English how to tame turkeys. A few native place names remained; others such as *portobaco* were anglicized (i.e., Port Tobacco). Here and there, to those such as Henry Parker who could speak their language and lived among them, they taught medical skills prized by the colonists.¹²

The English province

The Indians gave Maryland settlers a gift of inestimable worth – the opportunity – and a product – tobacco – which the English adopted and used to build their own dominion. The Chesapeake’s network of creeks and rivers provided ready access to the interior, and facilitated a supplemental fur trade. The cleared fields of the Yoacomaco village gave the English a head start with farming tasks; a few alterations to a native long house provided Father White with a chapel to celebrate mass (fig. 1.4).¹³



Figure 1.3. Detail from the Herman map showing the Indian villages at Pamunkey and Piscataway in Prince George’s County. The encroaching English plantations have begun to line the Potomac along its Maryland shore as far up river as St. Thomas. (Maryland State Archives, Huntington Map Collection, MSA SC 1399-679.)