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The Archaeology of Archaeology

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Author

Hurry, Silas

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The Archaeology of Archaeology

In the 1970s, Historic St. Mary's City in Maryland, the first capital city of 17th century Maryland, undertook extensive archaeological excavations at the St. John's site. We were not the first archaeologists to look at this site and we could see the evidence of St. Mary's archaeological predecessors. Dr. H. Chandlee Forman explored the site briefly in the 1960s. The most common artifacts resulting from this previous campaign were cigarette filters. Most were too deteriorated for identification beyond broad functional attribution since they were primarily cellulose, but there were some examples which could be identified. These represented filters from True© cigarettes. True cigarettes utilized an "advanced filter system" that incorporated an element of plastic (see the ad below). According to court records filed as part of one of the massive suits brought under the tobacco litigation, True© was distributed nationally beginning in 1966.

[yt video=V_gniQQaUwU] Advert for True Cigarettes [/yt]

In addition to the cigarette filters, we recovered pieces of a small, aluminum pan of the type associated with small commercial fruit pies in the last century.

Fragments of 20th century bottle glass represented beverage bottles, a notable example being "RC Cola" (Royal Crown) which was developed in the south in the second quarter of the 20th century.

There were also actual colonial artifacts which had been modified by the earlier archaeologists. The most notable of these was a ceramic roof tile which bore the initial “HCF”, a date, and the provenience of the exploratory trench it was placed at the end of.

Perhaps the favorite artifact recovered from the excavations was a 20th century masons’ trowel. The trowel was intact with the exception of the wooden handle. The ferule which surrounded the base of the handle was very well preserved. Alas, it was not a Marshalltown!



Trowel excavated at St. Johns site at Historic St. Mary's City.

So that we don’t feel “holier than thou” in these matters, when HSMC returned to the site to undertake archaeology in preparation for the development of the exhibit which now surrounds the architectural remains we again found evidence of previous archaeology – this time it was us. In the course of the excavations, numerous forming nails (double headed nails for stringing squares), gutter spikes, and Mason jar lids (used as datum corners) were found. But this should delight us, rather than cause despair. It simply proves again that the underlying ideas of archaeology hold true regardless of how recently the cultural activity which led to the deposition.

One final note on the archaeology of archaeology. Israeli archaeologists working in Jerusalem recovered shoe and beer bottle fragments left behind by 19th century British archaeologists. The correlation between beer and archaeology have long been known in the profession (note the huge increase in archaeological publications following the repeal of prohibition...or was that just the WPA)?

