Unearthing the past, one little metal thing at a time

MAC Lab curator gets grant to study horses during Colonial times

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Sara Rivers-Cofield, who has been the curator of federal collections since 2004 at the Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum's Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory, recently received a grant for her work on horses during Colonial times.

Though she has never owned or ridden a horse, Sara Rivers-Cofield has dedicated the last decade or so of her life to studying how important the animals were in Colonial times.

And that work recently received a significant boost after the Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum's Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory curator was awarded a $25,000 Chesapeake Material Cultural Studies Grant presented by The Conservation Fund.

JPPM first launched the Diagnostic Artifacts in Maryland webpage in 2002 to help archaeologists and the public identify Colonial and Native American ceramics. Since 2007, it has expanded the site to include post-colonial ceramics, projectile points, table glass, and miscellaneous small finds such as marbles, cufflinks, and religious artifacts, or "little metal things," as Rivers-Cofield calls them.

"The main thing is I'm going to take all the artifacts I'm studying for this grant and add them to our diagnostic artifacts website," said Rivers-Cofield, who has been the museum's curator of federal collections since 2004. "That is open to everybody, so the goal really is to help people figure out what this stuff is. These little metal things get misidentified a lot, like really a lot, so that means they're not contributing to the interpretation of sites and not helping us understand how people lived, and so the archaeology ends up being really focused on the ceramics and there's nothing wrong with that, it's just that it makes all these other things non-contributing. If people have access to it, they feel they have hope to identify things, and we can learn what happened back then."

The grant will help further research and expand current knowledge of artifact collections from previously excavated archaeological sites at Jamestown, Martin's Hundred, Carter's Grove, Kingsmill and other locations in the Chesapeake region to better understand and interpret the Colony's first settlers and their response to the new environment and climate.

It will also help advance the Maryland Archaeology Laboratory to add equestrian artifacts of the Colonial mid-Atlantic to JPPM's Diagnostic Artifacts in Maryland website.

The facility houses an estimated 8.5 million artifacts.

"American history is intrinsically connected to the land [and] in Virginia and especially in the Chesapeake region, our land can tell a variety of stories going back multiple centuries," said Heather Richards, the Virginia state director for The Conservation Fund. "While we at The Conservation Fund focus on protecting the places where history happens and conserving important natural resources, we depend on our peers in the archeological field to research and interpret how human lives intersected with these places. We are honored to support JPPM's ongoing work."

The grant will allow the MAC Lab to build a new section of the website that will focus on equestrian artifacts such as spurs, bosses, stirrups, horseshoes, saddle parts, bits, and curry combs. These artifacts were incredibly important in the daily lives of Maryland's colonists, but they are not always recognized by archaeologists.

"The goal is to help people recognize, identify and understand and interpret all artifacts related to horses of the Colonial period," Rivers-Cofield said, referring to 1609 and onward in Virginia and 1630 and onward in Maryland.

She added that there are plenty of publications for bulk finds, but very little for other finds.

"The first category of artifacts I did were little leather ornaments, made of copper alloy with grips on the back," she said. "We found a lot of them [and they were] identified as clothing and book clasps, but it was clear to me that nobody really knew what they were or studied them."

After Rivers-Cofield discovered more and more of these unusual items, it was time to find out what they were.

"Once you have enough [of these items], you can figure out how styles changed over time, so that was the goal of adding these artifacts to our website so others could compare dates and sites," she said. "It turned out that many other little metal things I was interested in were part of a spur or a stirrup or bridal bosses [on cheek of bit]. It turned out a lot of these metal things turned out to be horse-related."

And while horses were a valuable commodity, equine-related items were being manufactured in England and shipped.

"One of the interesting things I found out that made this area of the [Maryland Virginia] colonies really unique and different is that England was manufacturing saddles and shipping them by the thousands," she said. "You hear all the time that Colonial people just wanted to grow tobacco and not make things, or they didn't have time to make things, and they would rather just buy it, and that seems to be true in this case. It's not that nobody made anything, but for the most part, bridles and saddles were being imported completely. It further bolsters the argument that planters were more interested in tobacco production than making stuff."

Rivers-Cofield said soon after the Ark and the Dove first settled in Maryland that Leonard Calvert's seven horses were worth more than his hundreds of acres of land.

But Rivers-Cofield, who graduated from the University of Maryland College Park with a masters in applied anthropology and a concentration in historical archaeology, also added that as time went on, horses became more and more common.

"People sort of just let their horses loose to forage on their own," she said. "They would fence in their tobacco, but they would let their horses – and livestock — wander around in the woods. There was little specialized food for horses and no need for blacksmiths to make horseshoes because there were no paved roads, just soft clay."

She added that owners also rode their horses hard and didn't take care of them. And even if a horse went missing, some owners didn't bother looking for them.

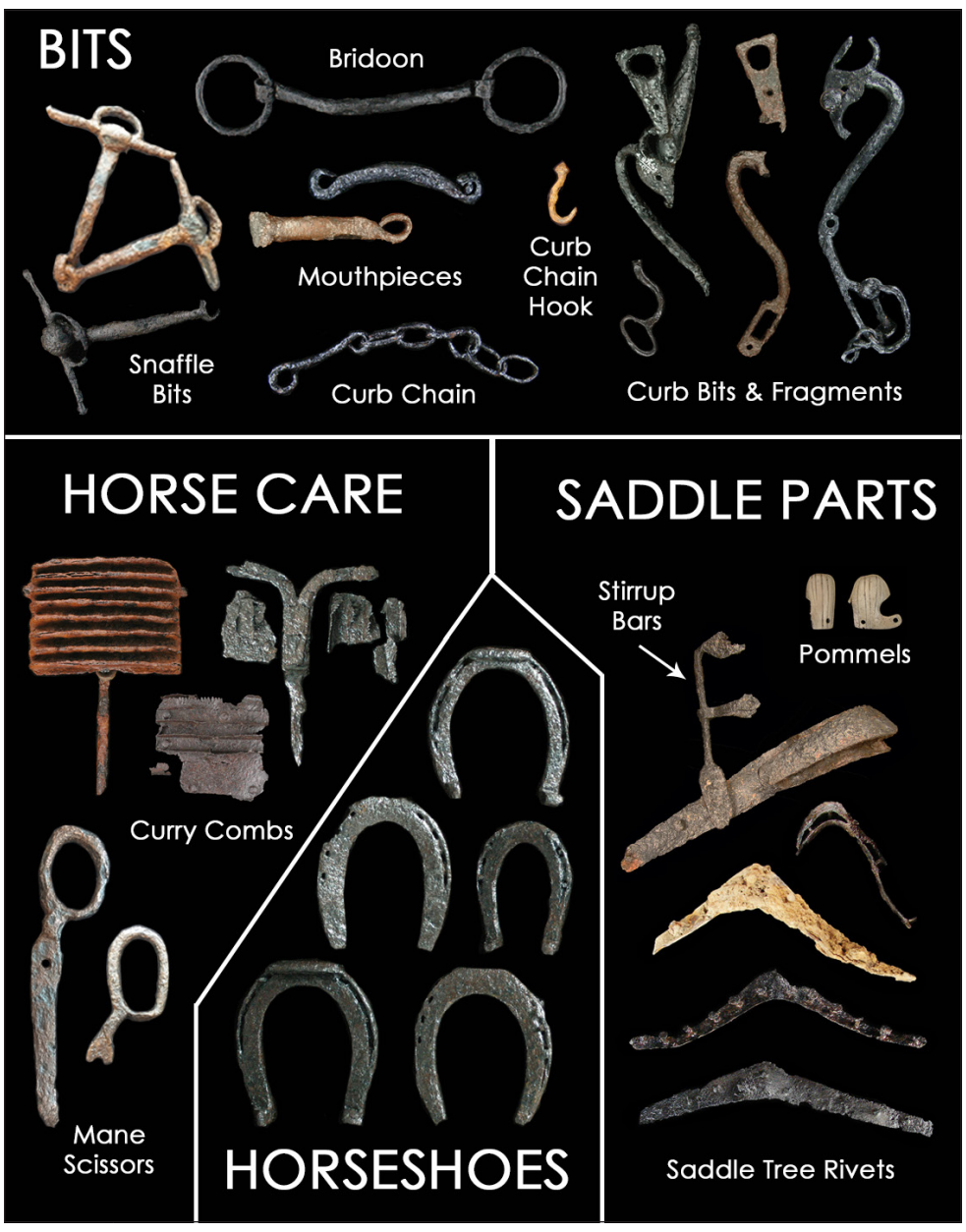
"There was very little upkeep [to owning a horse]," she said.

And by the end of the 18th-century, horses were abundant, and so were horseshoes.

But they weren't only for the horse's hooves, they were also thought to ward off magical spirits, and many homes had one near the chimney because it was considered a vulnerable opening for witches.

As horses became more popular, so did saddles, and the manufacturing of them by England created some problems.

"In theory, a saddle should be fitted to the horse, but if it's imported, how do you know what size the horse is?"



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Some of the hardware and metal items used on horses in Colonial times.

Rivers-Cofield said. "Is there a Ferrari versus a Toyota type of saddle, and can we recognize that archaeologically? Can we say a person is an aspiring gentleman or a woman riding side-saddle? What we see in the historical documents that are not reflected by the archaeology is that sometimes high-end saddles were imported. Still, instead of your basic leather seat, they had velvet and metallic embroidery, made with silk threads and wrapped in silver."

Because the saddles were imported and replacement parts could take up to a year, owners were often tasked with fixing saddles themselves.

"To me, that's one of the cooler things," Rivers-Cofield said, "because it shows this human agency and shows more about the people."

Last fall, Rivers-Cofield was finally able to identify a piece of brass that had had been discovered from the Addison site in Oxon Hill near the National Harbor and had been bugging the MAC Lab for more than 12 years.

"I found this piece that I thought might be a stirrup and this other piece that might be a decorative stirrup," she said. "But once I looked at the sides, I thought, 'Hey, this is like the other thing we've been trying to figure out what it was.' So I pulled it and it all went together. Not only did we have three pieces but they had been categorized as copper pot handles, so now we were able to identify them as stirrups. When I figured it out it was way up there [on my list of career highlights]. I love when I can identify unidentified things or things that have been identified wrong."

And that is much of what keeps Rivers-Cofield continue searching.

"I see all these people giving papers on interpretation and human behavior and trends and examples of artifacts that have been misidentified," she said. "[For example, if someone says] 'This was a luxury house because it had book clasps, but it turns out the book clasp was actually a leather ornament, well, that's a problem because then that conclusion they made is based on faulty data. I'm trying to bolster everyone's data by making sure they're identifying things right."

She has been unable to visit such archaeological sites as St. Mary's City, Jamestown or Colonial Williamsburg because of the coronavirus.

Rivers-Cofield will use some of the grant to go to Sweden's Royal Armory, which is one of the preeminent museums in terms of equine-related artifacts.

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