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Fact Sheet

The Lead Coffins of St. Mary's City, Md.

Seventeenth-century lead coffins found in North America are extremely rare—only five have ever been discovered. Three of these lead coffins are on view together for the first time in the “Written in Bone: Forensic Files of the 17th-Century Chesapeake” exhibition at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History. The three people, two adults and an infant, lived and died in St. Mary’s City, Md., founded in 1634 by Cecil Calvert, the second Lord Baltimore.

These three lead coffins were discovered in 1990 at St. Mary’s City during an archaeological excavation of the 17th-century Brick Chapel by St. Mary’s City archaeologists. They have been identified as members of the Calvert family, the founding family of Maryland.

The largest of the coffins contained the remains of a male in his mid-50s. The remains were poorly preserved and had possibly been embalmed before they were interred in the chapel. Pollen evidence had accumulated within the coffin before it was sealed, and the types of pollen and its concentrations indicate that the man died in winter. By constructing this forensic profile, scientists were able to identify the man as Philip Calvert, son of the first Lord Baltimore. He arrived in the colony in 1657, and served as its governor, chancellor of Maryland and its chief judge.

The adult female was identified as Anne Wolseley Calvert, the first wife of Philip Calvert. At the time of her death she had very high status among the women in the colony. Her skeleton provides interesting information about her life. The amount of tooth decay indicates she had access to large amounts of sugar, a sign she was wealthy enough to obtain this expensive food item. Evidence of a badly healed fracture in her right femur indicates she walked with a severe limp. Through carbon-isotope testing of her bone, scientists analyzed her diet and determined that she had been born in England but lived in Maryland for an extended period of time. She died at the approximate age of 60.

Of the three coffins found in Brick Chapel, the third remains a mystery. Small in size, it contained the remains of an infant. Archaeologists determined that this coffin had been interred later than the two larger lead coffins. It is likely that Philip Calvert’s second wife, Jane Sewell, gave birth to the infant who died around 6 months of age, suffering from a variety of nutritional problems.

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