

Archaeologists reveal interesting part of Sykesville's past – March 24, 2024

Archaeologists are always in search of ways to determine how our predecessors looked and lived. When construction began on the Law Enforcement Driver Training Facility on the grounds of the Springfield Hospital Center near Sykesville and workers uncovered a cemetery there, professional archaeologists were called to thoroughly investigate the site.

The late 18th to early 19th century burial ground contained the bodies of 14 unidentified Caucasian adults and children. Extensive study of those remains ultimately offered a better understanding of rural life in Carroll County two centuries ago.

Records at the Maryland State Archives showed the cemetery stood on 402 acres originally called “Brown’s Inheritance” which were acquired in the 1790s by an ancestor of Maryland’s only governor from Carroll County, Frank Brown. Large tracts like “Brown’s Inheritance” were often inhabited by tenant farmers who worked the land for owners who lived elsewhere. Two family names appeared as likely tenants during the 1790-1825 period the burials took place — Demitt and Dorsey.

According to the Maryland Historical Trust’s report on the Training Facility site, “During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, tenant farming was quite common in the region, and by the end of the 18th century, the majority of agricultural property was in the hands of a minority of landowners. Many hard-working farmers viewed their tenancy as a temporary situation endured to gather the capital to purchase property. Life for non-landowning tenants was, in general, quite difficult. Tenants were often on the move in search of better land or cheaper rent.”

The report continued, “The lives of tenants revolved around farm and house work, all of which contributed to the survival of the household. The men and boys spent their days in backbreaking labor, performing the heavy tasks common on a farm (plowing, cutting wood, clearing land, etc.). Women also performed heavy physical labor, and, in addition to working in the fields (especially during the harvest time), they were responsible for washing, cooking, churning butter, spinning, and tending livestock. Despite the rigorous demands made on rural farmers, they were able to lead fairly healthy and productive lives. The ready availability of food resulted in the farmers’ relatively good nourishment, often not the case for urban dwellers.” Archaeologists concluded that the cemetery was an important discovery because it offered a “window on the past health and well-being of tenant farmers.”

The bones available for study belonged to 7 adult females, 4 adult males, and 3 children. All the individuals had been buried in hexagonal coffins and the bodies most likely wrapped in shrouds because little clothing was found. Apart from two children who died young, most of the adults died between the ages of 20 and 50, but four died after 50 which was considered a relatively long lifespan during that period. “Overall, the individuals were robust and of good stature when compared to contemporaneous cemetery populations.” The bones revealed the lives of both sexes involved “intense physical activity” over a long period of time and any pathologies noticed were caused by “constant bending and squatting and from performing tasks requiring tensile strength

and endurance.” The strenuous lifestyle resulted in “degenerative changes including arthritis in shoulder, hip joints, and the vertebral column.” Similarities in the bones of several individuals suggested they were probably related.

Dental hygiene among all the individuals was poor – a condition common at that time. The teeth of four individuals, including one older woman, showed signs of pipe-smoking. Rural women occasionally smoked pipes or used snuff.

Governor Frank Brown not only owned the land called “Brown’s Inheritance” but several thousand additional acres in the area of Sykesville. After his term as governor ended in 1896, he sold his entire property to the State of Maryland which built its second state facility for treatment of mental illness there.

It is likely that the lives of the unknown tenant farmers buried on “Brown’s Inheritance” were very similar to those of tenant farmers buried in the opposite corner of Carroll County — at the Runnymede Cemetery situated in a rural area between Uniontown and Taneytown.

In 1769 Upton Scott and Francis Key, early Maryland land speculators, acquired over 3,000 acres in what later became Carroll County. Parts of their huge tract, “Runnymede” (various spellings), were occupied by tenant farmers who usually paid rent in goods rather than cash. In the early 1800s, an aging Upton Scott living in Annapolis brought his nephew, Clotworthy Birnie, from Belfast, Ireland, to manage his property and collect rent. A cemetery still exists on part of Scott’s land with names that must have belonged to some of his early tenants based on the dates.

Members of the Carroll County Genealogical Society investigated what remained of the cemetery in 2011 and found a variety of stones marking the graves. The earliest burial was of someone named “Andres” [likely Anders] who died in 1769. Many of the early stones were so small they were difficult to see among the fallen oak leaves. Hana Kitzmiller’s headstone protruded scarcely eight inches above ground. The two lines read “HANA” and “17 KMR 84.” The headstone of “P.W.” was dated 1785 — full name unknown. Lennerd Kitzmiller’s headstone included enough information to show he died in 1820 at the remarkable age of 87.

We can assume that the bones of tenant farmers buried in this cemetery would reveal the same strenuous lifestyle as the ones buried near Sykesville. As many as 20 different surnames (or initials) appear, indicating this cemetery was in use by multiple families for nearly 100 years. Although Carroll County wasn’t formed until 1837, people from a variety of socio-economic backgrounds were living and dying here long before that — people with bones which revealed the hard lives they lived and the aches and pains they endured.

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Image 1: Submitted photo Caption: This tiny headstone, hardly visible above ground at the Runnymede Cemetery between Uniontown and Taneytown, was erected for Hana Kitzmiller who died in 1784. She was probably among the early tenants living on Upton Scott’s land.

Image 2: Submitted photo Caption: Dr. Arthur Tracey drew this map of the 402-acre plat called “Brown’s Inheritance” acquired by Elias Brown in 1796 near present-day Sykesville. By the late 1800s the land belonged to Maryland Governor Frank Brown.