

AN 18TH-CENTURY FAMILY CEMETERY

SUSSEX COUNTY, DELAWARE

Archaeological excavation of a small family cemetery in Sussex County, Delaware was sponsored by the Delaware Department of Transportation (DelDOT). The site was located along U.S. Route 113 (Du Pont Highway) between Georgetown and Milford. The cemetery was located on property within the state-owned right-of-way, and it had been unmarked and forgotten since its acquisition by the State of Delaware in 1911.

The cemetery was a small family burial plot that was used during the late 18th century, probably between 1752 and 1799. The cemetery contained nine individuals representing the entire range of the human life cycle, from an infant and a young child to elderly individuals in their 50s or 60s. Among the adults, there were three males and four females.

Located on a low ridge of well-drained soil, the site is typical of rural family burial grounds used from the Colonial period to the mid-19th century. Western European traditions dictated that the dead be interred in community burial grounds close to churches. However, the dispersal of the American colonial population among scattered farms and plantations may have led to the use of family burial plots. The individuals were buried in shrouds and interred with their heads to the west and their feet to the east, following practices that date from the beginning of the Christian era. All of the individuals were buried in simple hexagonal coffins that lacked decorative hardware.

Skeletal analysis determined that the individuals were of European ancestry and provided general information regarding the quality of life in the late 18th century. None of the skeletons provided any indication of the cause of death; however, severe dental disease was apparent among the adults in the sample population. Tooth wear was quite heavy, apparently the result of a diet of unprocessed or gritty foods.

FIELD EXCAVATION



The cemetery was unexpectedly discovered during investigation of a prehistoric campsite. Full excavation of the cemetery required the use of machine-assisted and manual techniques. After discovery of the cemetery, heavy equipment was used (upper left photo) to remove topsoil and pavement from the adjacent area to insure that all of the burials would be located and removed. The grave pit outlines were discernible as elongated areas of darker, mixed soil (upper right photo). After exposure, the graves were excavated manually (photo at right), using trowels, brushes, and wooden picks to remove the soil from the skeletal remains. In some cases, the bones were so fragile that measures were taken to preserve them before removal from the ground. Preliminary skeletal analysis was also completed in the field, including stature measurements and assessments of age, race, and sex.

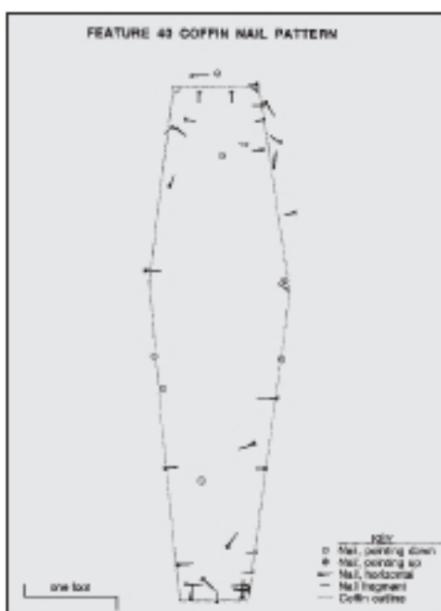


COFFIN CONSTRUCTION

All of the coffins were the hexagonal type which was widely used in America until the mid- to late 19th century. The complete lack of coffin hardware indicates that the coffins used at the site were plain, utilitarian vessels. Coffin preservation was poor, and in most cases, the coffins were represented only by dark stains in the surrounding soil. Despite poor coffin preservation, mapping of the coffin nails provided information to determine coffin shape, size, and construction technique.

While the basic hexagonal form was used in all of the coffins, there was much variation in size, indicating that each coffin was custom built to fit a deceased individual. Coffin construction techniques were also interpreted from the patterning of coffin nails. In all of the examples, most nails were used at the head and foot of the coffin.

In the Colonial period, coffin building in rural areas was done by a local carpenter, cabinetmaker, or wheelwright. Before beginning work the carpenter needed only a few measurements from the corpse. Generally, two measurements were sufficient—the length from head to foot, and the width at the shoulders or elbows. The coffin itself was built of six pieces—bottom, head, foot, two sides, and top or lid, and the only tools required were a few saws, planes, a hammer, and various marking tools. The only unique tool required for coffin making was the template or pattern board, which was used to mark the hexagonal outline onto the bottom board before cutting it to shape.



ARTIFACT ANALYSIS

Artifacts associated with the burials were limited to coffin nails, shroud pins, and buttons. Artifact analysis focused on their manufacturing technology, which provided date ranges to assist in establishing the identities of the individuals.

Coffin nails were the most numerous artifact type associated with the burials, and they were recovered from all nine burials. Most of the nails were handbrought, although one machine-cut nail with an applied head was also found in one of the adult burials. Handbrought nails were used during the 17th, 18th, and early 19th centuries. Handbrought nails had three types of heads: T-head, rosehead, and headless. T-head nails were the most common of these types.



Shroud Pins



Close-up of Button Types. Button on left is a tombac with a cone shank; the button on the right is a wedge with a loop shank.

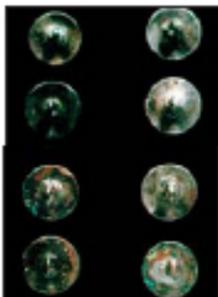
Shroud pins were recovered from five of the burials. One other adult female burial exhibited staining on the skull indicating that a shroud pin was used. Shroud pins are straight pins used for fastening the burial shroud around the body. The shroud pins were made of a copper alloy, probably brass, fashioned with wrapped heads, and were most likely plated with tin or gold. The use of brass or copper alloy in making straight pins began in the sixteenth century, while the shaping of the head with a second piece of wire began in the seventeenth century.

Buttons were recovered only from one of the burials, an adult male who was in his 50s or 60s at the time of death. A total of 8 buttons were recovered from this burial, including two types of 18th-century buttons known as wedges and tombacs. Two wedge buttons and two tombac buttons were located on either side of the pelvis, close to the femora, a location that suggests they were sleeve buttons. The other four tombac buttons were located in the center of the pelvis.

The two button types are distinguished by the materials used and by the form of the attachment. Neither type in this collection was decorated. Tombac buttons were finely cast, frequently plated, and made of various metals. Wedge buttons were always cast in copper alloy. The tombacs associated with the burial were made of a copper alloy, probably brass, with the plating still visible. The wedge buttons were also made of a copper alloy. The attachments on the two wedge buttons were noticeably different even though they were both technically referred to as loop shanks.



Handbrought Coffin Nails



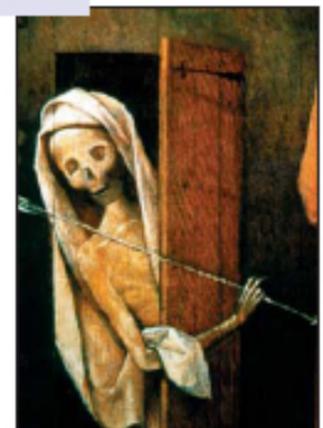
18th Century Buttons

DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE

During the Colonial period, attitudes toward death and the treatment of the dead in rural America exhibited a strong continuity with traditions that began in Europe.

The fear of death reached a peak in the Middle Ages, stimulated by numerous plagues, epidemics, and the short life spans of this period. In the late Middle Ages, the human skeleton or a decayed corpse was used to personify death. In the American colonies, the Puritans of New England had the most strongly developed beliefs concerning death and the afterlife, and those beliefs had a wide influence throughout the colonies. Underlying the Puritan traditions was a view of a sinful people who inhabited the natural world, whose death was the punishment for sin.

By the end of the seventeenth century, the strict Puritan views began to dissipate, and funerals became more elaborate, with prayers, preaching, consumption of food and drink, and the distribution of gifts such as rings and



Detail of *The Death of a Miser* by Hieronymus Bosch, circa 1500.



The Funeral by William Hogarth, circa 1731.

gloves. In late 18th-century Delaware, rural funerals would have been a community event attended by neighbors and friends of the deceased's family. Burial of the corpse would have taken place within two or three days following death. In rural areas, neighbors and friends would have assumed responsibility for the burial arrangements, including laying out of the corpse and digging the grave, so that the funeral ritual served as a community affair.