

# Aberdeen Proving Ground Uncovers 17th-century Settlement of “Old Baltimore”

**L**ocated along the western shore of the upper Chesapeake Bay, the U.S. Army’s Aberdeen Proving Ground (APG) for the past 80 years has tested munitions, trained soldiers, and conducted highly innovative defense research. The 75,000-acre military reservation, originally established in 1917, is also home to an abundance of historic and prehistoric resources, including APG’s pre-military built environment and archeology sites. As part of its ongoing mission of environmental stewardship, the U.S. Army Garrison at APG complies with various cultural resource legal requirements, including the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 (NHPA).

In accordance with Section 110 of the NHPA, APG established a cultural resource management program within its Directorate of Safety, Health & Environment. The cultural resource management program helps the Army complete its mission at APG by locating, evaluating, and protecting historic properties within the installation’s boundaries. In recent years, APG completed a cultural resource management plan and archeological predictive model. Both of these tools allow APG to manage its cultural resources

more efficiently and effectively. Specifically, the archeological predictive model identifies known sites and areas of the installation that are considered high potential for intact archeological resources. Of all the known historic sites identified in APG’s archeological predictive model, the area known today as “Old Baltimore” (18HA30) promised to be one of the most significant sites in terms of local, state, and regional history.

Between the fall of 1997 and winter of 1998, APG’s Cultural Resource Management Program completed the Old Baltimore Research Project, an archeological investigation to locate and evaluate a 17th-century colonial site that served as the first permanent seat of government for Baltimore County, Maryland (later Harford County). With contracted technical support provided by R. Christopher Goodwin & Associates, Inc., of Frederick, Maryland, a firm specializing in cultural resource work, APG set out to answer the following question: Where was Old Baltimore located, and what, if anything, of the site was intact? With a lot of hard work and a little luck, the archeology team completed the project with much success and discovered a site that, by all indications, is eligible for inclusion in the National Register of Historic Places.

Before field work began, Goodwin & Associates conducted extensive historical research in the Maryland State Archives and at the Historical Society of Harford County. Focusing primarily on property ownership at “Old Baltimore,” the historians found original 17th-century land patents that identified the main property owners. As the records revealed, in the 1670s-1680s, the primary landholders in the area of “Old Baltimore” were James Phillips, a wealthy and prominent resident, and William Osbourne, the local Bush River ferry operator.

The researchers also discovered 18th-century court documents that detailed the tracts of land in and around the site. The project’s first

*Typical trash pit feature containing various artifacts at Old Baltimore site (Site No. 18 HA 30).*



*Old Baltimore site (Site No. 18 HA 30) of James Phillips' Tavern, c. 1685.*

stroke of luck came when the researchers uncovered court documents from 1791, involving a long-standing property dispute between Phillips' and Osbourne's descendants. The papers proved to be the key to locating the site. The surviving court documents recorded the metes and bounds of the original Phillips and Osbourne properties. They also pinpointed the location of the original "courthouse land," by referencing present-day landscape features, such as a family graveyard and nearby waterways.

While little documentary evidence actually survives, records do indicate that "Old Baltimore" thrived in the late 1600s as a center of county government and commerce. Originally called "Baltimore Town," the site and surrounding region were first occupied in the 1650s by European colonists seeking fertile soil for tobacco farming. In 1671, the Maryland Governor's Council appointed Baltimore Town as the first permanent seat of county government. Three years later, the colonial assembly commissioned construction of a courthouse and licensed the community's first tavern. By 1683, the assembly designated Baltimore Town as an official tobacco port and appointed James Phillips and William Osbourne to complete the first survey of the town lands. Other records confirm the existence of a wharf and related facilities, most likely constructed in anticipation of increased commercial traffic.

Since the 1660s, "Old Baltimore" was home to James Phillips, one of the wealthiest and politically well-connected citizens in the county. In 1683, he received a license from the colonial assembly to operate a tavern out of his primary residence, presumably to serve those attending the court. Phillips was very active in the community, serving several times on the county court. Additionally, in 1688, he received the prestigious appointment of port officer with responsibilities for the weighing and inspecting of tobacco, the all-important cash crop, as well as tracking all other imports and exports. At the time of his death in 1689, Phillips' surviving estate inventory indicated that his debtors owed him over 71,000 pounds sterling, a whopping sum in the late 1600s.

Following the archival work, the archeology crew went into the field with heightened expectations. Accompanied by members of the U.S. Army Aberdeen Test Center's Explosives Ordnance Division, the team began surveying



and excavating the seven-acre site amid scattered, unexploded ordnance, a common field hazard at APG. Exercising extreme caution and following established safety standards, the team thoroughly tested the restricted site with magnetometers before digging. During the excavation of over 420 shovel test pits, the crew encountered a high concentration of historic artifacts in one section of the project area. The artifacts included well-preserved ceramics, metal, glass, French and English gun flint, and faunal remains.

Then the project's second stroke of luck hit. A crew member placed an individual shovel test pit directly on top of a sub-surface brick foundation, thus exposing the primary feature of the site—the remains of a late-17th-century dwelling. As a result of the find, the crew focused their attention on that area of the site, eventually placing several larger test units around the foundation. Upon exposing the feature, the archeologists measured a 20-foot section of brick wall and observed two centrally placed cross walls. Further excavation convinced the crew that the cross walls and heavily oxidized soil within them were the remains of a fireplace. All the artifacts recovered from around the wall dated to 1660-1700. In comparison with the archival information, the artifacts assured the crew that they had discovered the Phillips residence and tavern.

The team exposed a number of other archeological features near the wall, including several trash pits that were full of artifacts. Some of the

more noteworthy pieces from the site include: a copper alloy Charles II farthing (dated to the 1670s), a ceramic salt (a rare luxury item), a wine bottle with family crest (compares to one found at Jamestown), and a North Devon sgraffito slipware bowl rim sherd with sunburst motif. In all, the crew recovered over 17,000 artifacts from the site, of which a significant portion dated to the late-17th century. The surviving cultural material recovered from the tavern site and the other features examined, including well-preserved glass, ceramics, metals, faunal remains, and brick foundation, serve as clear evidence of James Phillips' European-influenced lifestyle on the edge of the frontier. This conflicts with the long-standing assumption that the early settlers of the upper Chesapeake Bay were only small tobacco farmers, eking out an existence in the harsh wilderness.

The Army-sponsored excavation has generated a great deal of interest from the local media, community historians and archeologists, as well as the Maryland Historical Trust (the State Historic Preservation Office). In late December 1998, *Baltimore Sun* journalist Frank Roylance wrote a front-page story on the excavation, which was subsequently picked up by the Associated Press. The county historic preservation commission, local historical and archeological societies, as well as other members of the community, have expressed a sincere interest in a long-range interpretive plan for Old Baltimore, to include a permanent local display and heritage tourism component. Staff from the Maryland Historical Trust have visited the site and voiced their enthusiasm for the project as well. Although Old Baltimore is located in a restricted area at APG, the Army recognizes the need for adequate site protection. As

a result of the media attention, the Army's Conservation Law Enforcement Division has increased surveillance of the Old Baltimore site to ensure the area is properly monitored.

Above ground there is little that remains of Old Baltimore except for the early-19th-century Phillips family graveyard. However, below ground a wealth of information exists that potentially challenges the current understanding of early colonial settlement in the Chesapeake Bay. Aberdeen Proving Ground wishes to thank Chris Polglase, Dr. Tom Davis, and the many other Goodwin associates for their hard work and professionalism during the course of this compliance-based research project.

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Any opinion expressed in this article does not necessarily reflect the view of the Department of the Army.

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