

Business

'Unseen Archaeology Treasures' explores Annapolis' history

BEN MOOK

Daily Record Assistant Business Editor

February 22, 2008 5:11 PM

When the British government implemented the infamous Stamp Act of 1765, rebellious newspaper publishers responded by putting a skull and crossbones on their front pages where the despised stamps were supposed to be placed.

Front pages carrying the "death's head" stamp, as it's also known, can be found in archival collections and on microfilm. But a new exhibit at the Banneker-Douglass Museum in Annapolis features the actual handmade lead stamp that was used by publisher Jonas Green when he placed the death's head on the front page of his Maryland Gazette.



Amelia Harris, exhibits specialist at the Banneker-Douglass Museum, holds a 'death's head' stamp and a blown up copy of the Maryland Gazette where it was used.

"He protested for his expression of free speech against what he saw as a violation of the freedom of the press," said University of Maryland, College Park, professor and Archaeology in Annapolis founder Mark Leone.

The stamp and nearly 500 other historical artifacts recovered in Annapolis during archeological digs undertaken over the last 27 years make up the "Seeking Liberty" exhibit at the Banneker-Douglass Museum. The artifacts span a 250-year period from the mid-18th century on, and it is the first time all of the pieces will be on display at once.

The digs were carried out by the University of Maryland's Department of Anthropology, which runs an archaeological field school in Annapolis annually during the summer. The results of these digs over the last 27 years make up the nearly 500 artifacts that will be displayed.

The exhibit has been a year and a half in the making and is a joint effort of Annapolis Mayor Ellen Moyer and Archeology in Annapolis, itself a partnership between the University of Maryland, College Park, and the Historic Annapolis Foundation.

One of the goals of the exhibit is to remind people that Annapolis was a diverse city of residents of European and African descent. And, like the better known efforts in Boston and Philadelphia, Annapolis was a hotbed of pro-liberty thinking and actions.

"This exhibit highlights groups of people in Annapolis who were never content with being second-class — whether they were women, African-Americans or the disenfranchised," Leone said.

All four of the Maryland signers of the Declaration of Independence — Charles Carroll, Samuel Chase, William Paca and Thomas Stone — had residences in Annapolis at the time of the signing. The city even briefly served as the capital of the newly created country.

"Annapolis was regarded, even by Washington and Jefferson who visited often, as a really significant place where the revolution was supported," Leone said.

Another goal of the exhibit is to show visitors that Annapolis was not merely a city populated by colonists of European descent. Artifacts recovered from homes occupied by residents of African descent point to a thriving community equally interested in pursuing personal liberty.

As an example, excavations at the Maynard-Burgess House, home to free African-Americans uncovered bottles that contained national brands of food and medicine. Leone said this was evidence the residents were able to get around prejudice at stores and buy items with consistent quality and prices.

Additionally, Leone said, a number of items on display cast light on how residents of African descent held onto their spiritual roots and integrated them with Christian beliefs. These items include such things as a Hoodoo shrine and a "Hand of Fatima," an Islamic symbol used to ward off the evil eye.

Leone said West African spiritual practices, sometimes called Hoodoo or conjure, were an amalgamation of Christian and African traditions. Leone said the early findings showed a predominately African influence that increasingly adopted Christian traditions over time.

The centerpiece artifact in the exhibit showing the spiritual beliefs of Hoodoo practitioners is a "cosmogram" recovered from under the floorboards of the Brice House that dates to the late 19th century. The cosmogram is a Hoodoo shrine that used items like beads, feathers and glass in an effort to influence and control spirits.

"That cosmogram is an African symbol retained through slavery and subsequent emancipation by people who understood African spiritual practices," Leone said. "The function of the cosmogram is to attract and control spirits of some of the dead, and hold them and get them to do what the cosmogram maker wanted."

Leone said the cosmogram along with evidence recovered from a middle-class home occupied by free African Americans showed all residents of Annapolis were strong adherents of personal liberty. "People had the liberty to preserve the integrity of another culture, in this case that of West Africa," Leone said. "That is the most significant thing we've accomplished in

the last 27 years.”

If you go:

The Banneker-Douglass Museum is located in Annapolis at Mount Moriah A.M.E. Church at 84 Franklin Street. The exhibit will open March 4 and will run through Nov. 29. The museum is open to the public and there is no charge for admission.

Investigate

[SEARCH RELATED STORIES](#)

Respond

[Email the Reporter](#)
[Email the Editor](#)
[Submit letter to the Editor](#)
[Order a Reprint](#)
[Print this story](#)
[Email this story](#)