

Curator's Choice

Inscribed "SS" Bodkin

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The Charles' Gift archaeological site was discovered in 1999 during U.S. Navy-sponsored excavations conducted aboard the Naval Air Station Patuxent River (Hornum et al. 2001). Archaeologists identified two different houses; one that appears to have been inhabited from c. 1676-1694, and another that was presumably built as a replacement around 1694. Between the two structures was a large borrow pit where builders dug up clay to make brick for the foundations of the 1690s structure. This pit was later filled with debris from the destruction of the earlier house. Among the debris in the pit was a bodkin inscribed with the initials "SS".



Figure 1: Wenceslaus Hollar's 1636 etching titled "The same woman, with a ruff" depicts a woman with her bodkin tucked into her cap. Courtesy of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto.

A bodkin is like a large, slightly blunted needle with a rectangular hole to accommodate ribbons and laces. In the 17th and 18th centuries, bodkins were important personal items for women. They were primarily used to lace decorative trims, corsets, and drawstrings, but sometimes women also displayed bodkins like jewelry by wearing them in their caps (Figure 1). Many women of high status owned inscribed silver bodkins, often pierced with a second hole to string on a decorative bauble.

Historical research suggests that the Charles' Gift structures had been occupied by Nicholas and Susanna Sewall and their family, because Nicholas Sewall would have come of age and inherited the parcel of land in 1676. The discovery of a bodkin with the initials "SS" inscribed on it helps confirm this interpretation by acting as a poignant connection to Susanna Sewall (Figure 2).

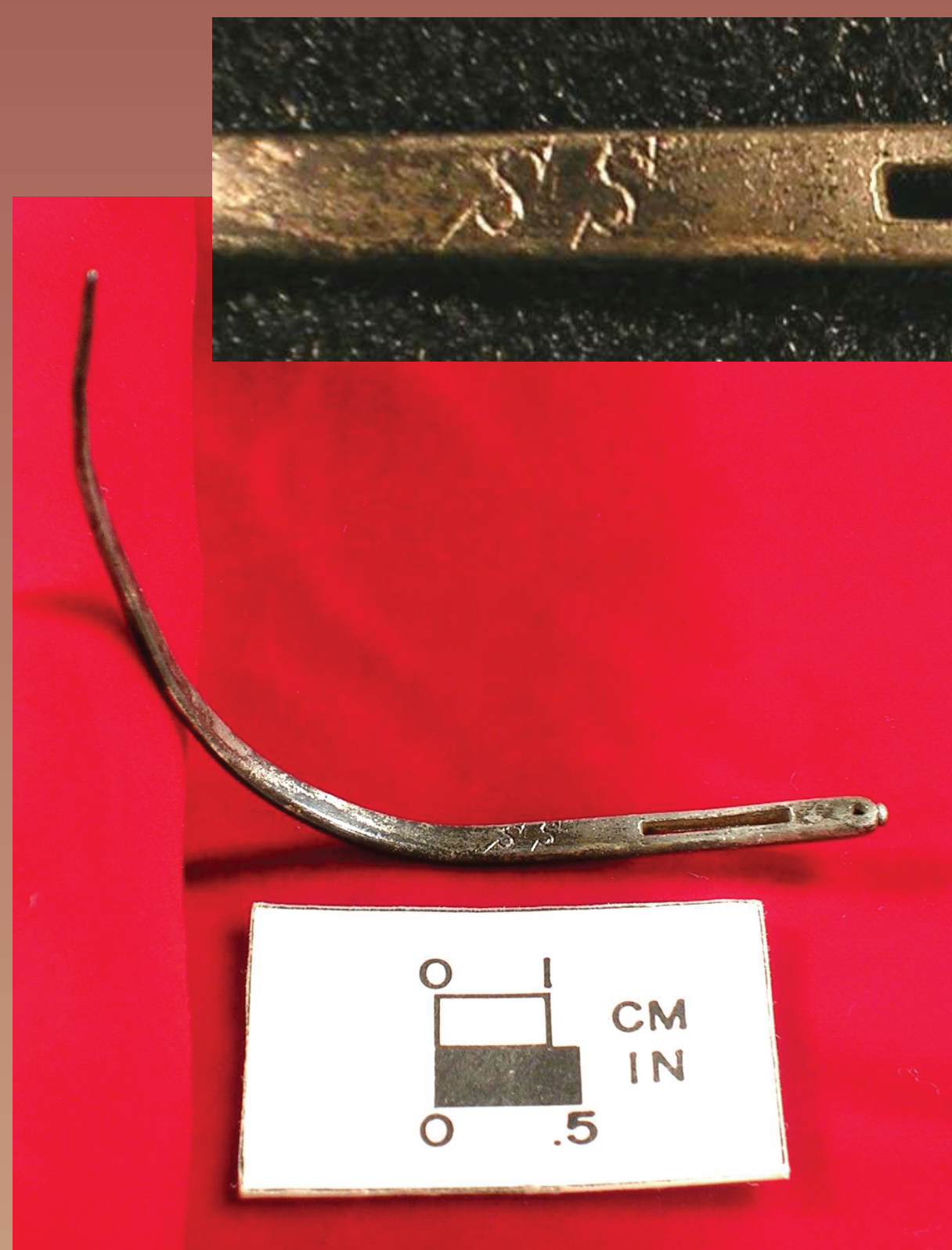


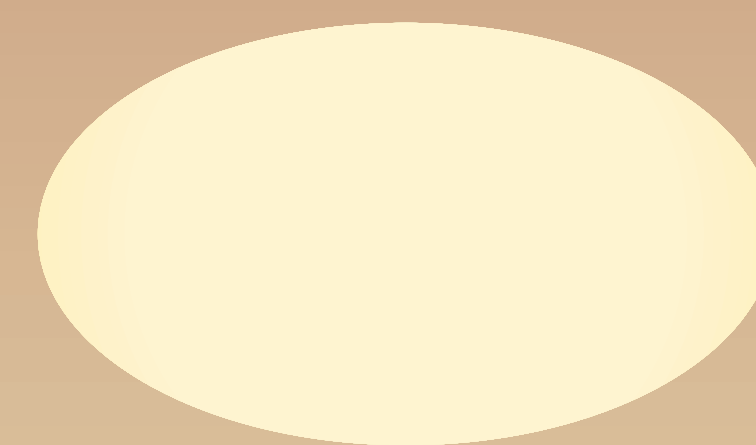
Figure 2: The Charles' Gift bodkin, with inscribed "SS" initials, a rectangular hole for ribbons and laces, and an extra hole for a decorative bauble. Most bodkins found archaeologically are bent, as is the "SS" bodkin but it is unclear if the curve served a utilitarian function or if it represents damage. Courtesy Naval District Washington, Naval Air Station Patuxent River.

Nicholas and Susanna Sewall were part of Maryland's elite in the 1670s and 1680s. Nicholas' stepfather was Charles Calvert, governor of Maryland who became the Third Lord Baltimore in 1676. The family fell on hard times in 1689, however, because Protestants overthrew the Catholic Calvert proprietary that year, raiding Charles Calvert's home and forcing Nicholas to flee to Virginia. Susanna Sewall's bodkin may reflect this hardship because elite women generally had professionally inscribed silver bodkins, but Susanna's bodkin was copper alloy with silver or tin plating, and her initials appear to be chiseled rather than neatly inscribed. It is possible that Susanna had to trim the budget on her personal items while still keeping up appearances (Beaudry 2006).

References Cited

Beaudry, Mary C. 2006. *Findings: The Material Culture of Needlework and Sewing*. University Press, New Haven and London.

Hornum, Michael B., Andrew D. Madsen, Christian Davenport, John Clarke, Kathleen M. Child, and Martha Williams. 2001. *Phase III Archaeological Data Recovery at Site 18ST704, Naval Air Station Patuxent River, St. Mary's County, Maryland*. Report prepared for Tams Consultants, Inc., Arlington, Virginia.



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