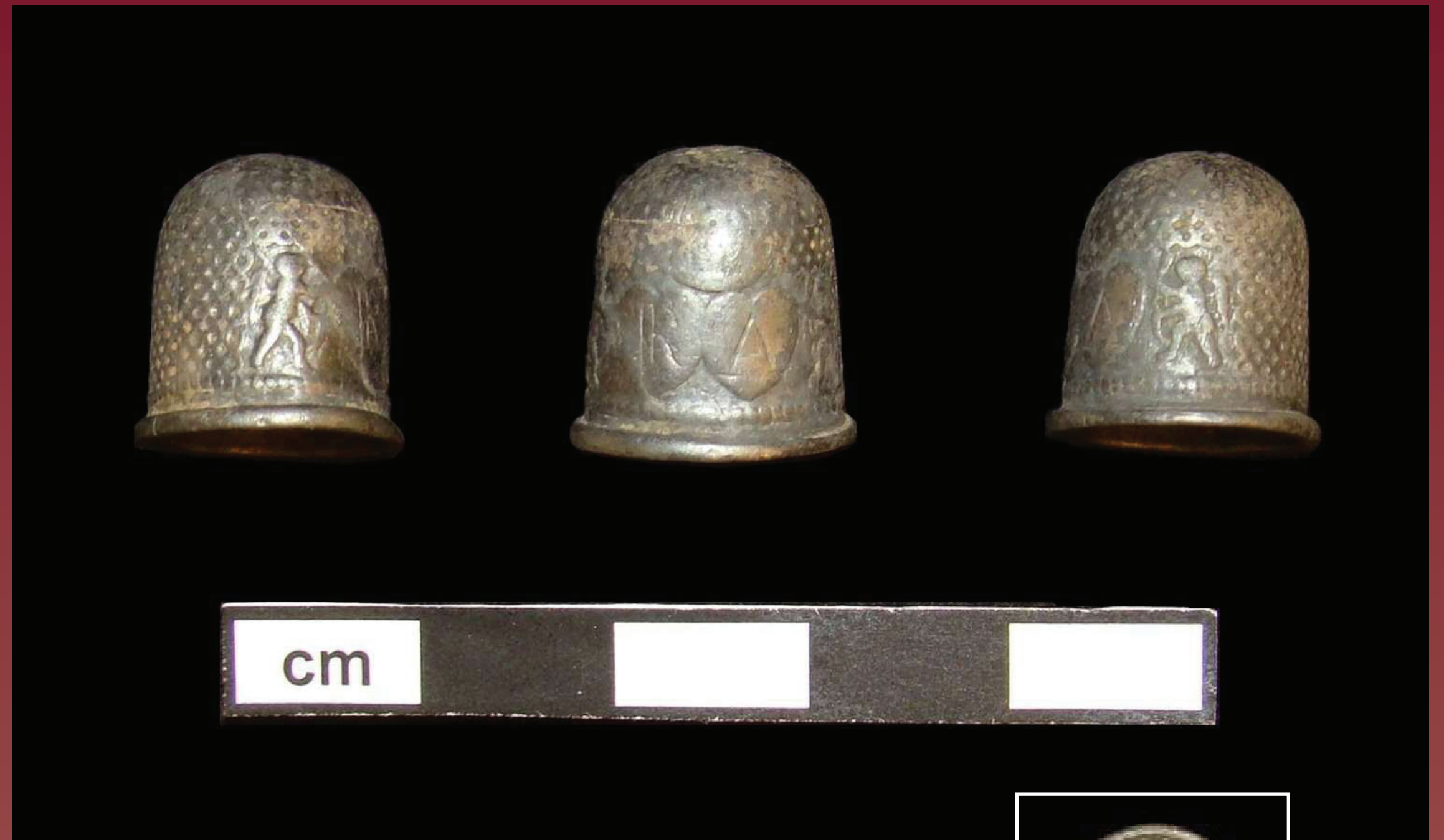


Curator's Choice

Rebecca Addison's Silver Thimble

By: Sara Rivers Cofield,
Federal Curator, MAC Lab

We do not know when Rebecca Wilkinson was born, but we do know that she immigrated to Maryland with her father, Anglican Reverend William Wilkinson, her stepmother Mary Pudden, and two sisters in 1650. She grew up at Westbury Manor, a 1,250-acre plantation on St. George's Hundred in St. Mary's County (Carr n.d.). As the daughter of an educated clergyman, Rebecca probably enjoyed a relatively genteel lifestyle for an early Maryland colonist.



Three views of Rebecca Addison's thimble with her initials inscribed on two hearts. Right: A view of the top of the thimble where a needle apparently poked a hole in the worn surface

By 1662, Rebecca had married Thomas Dent, a merchant, attorney, and planter who held several offices in the Maryland government. They had six children together; Thomas, William, Peter, Margaret, Barbara, and George. Dent owned over a thousand acres of land and had at least six slaves and eight indentured servants when he died in 1676, dividing his estate between his wife and children (Carr n.d.).

In 1677, Rebecca remarried John Addison, another merchant and planter who also engaged in a great deal of trade with Maryland's Indian population (Carr n.d.). It is perhaps this latter occupation that motivated the Addisons to move up the Potomac River to what would become Prince George's County. At the time of their move around 1689, the area was on the outskirts of English settlement in Maryland, and John Addison was tasked with keeping a magazine for the local militia in case they needed to assemble to protect from Indian attack (McCarthy et al. 1991).

It was perhaps on the occasion of Rebecca's marriage to Addison that she received a thimble with the initials "RA" engraved on two hearts. The love theme of the thimble was enhanced by two cupid figures flanking the hearts. The style of the small, domed thimble helps date it to the mid- to late-17th century (McConnel 1990). It was intended to look like a silver

thimble, but it may be an alloy of silver and another metal. A similar thimble was found at the Smith's St. Leonard site in Calvert County Maryland. Its date is later, probably early- or mid-18th century but it shows that the motif was a popular one that persisted on personalized thimbles.

Rebecca seems to have had plenty of time to use her cupid thimble. As mistress of a significant number of servants and slaves, she most likely did not have to concern herself with personally completing the many laborious tasks that would be necessary to run a large plantation. Instead she had the luxury to engage in the fine needlework and sewing that was considered an appropriate occupation for an English gentlewoman.



Front and back view of a similar thimble recovered from the Smith's Saint Leonard site. Only one initial is inscribed in the first heart as if an unmarried woman was hoping her name would change before she committed to the last initial. The owner of this thimble has not been identified.

References Cited

Carr, Lois Green (n.d.) *Dr. Lois Green Carr's Biographical Files of 17th and 18th Century Marylanders*.
<<http://www.msa.md.gov/msa/speccol/html/carr.html>> sc4040-0438-1, sc4040-0438-7, sc5094-1134-125, sc5094-0021-04.

McCarthy, John P., Jeffrey B. Snyder, and Billy R. Roulette, Jr. 1991 Arms from Addison Plantation and the Maryland Militia on the Potomac Frontier. *Historical Archaeology* (25)1: 66-79.

McConnel, Bridget 1990 *A Collector's Guide to Thimbles*. Secaucus, New Jersey: Wellfleet Books.

It is clear that the thimble saw many, many hours of use. The diminutive needle pusher is so worn that a small cartouche over the hearts is almost indecipherable, and the top became so weak that a needle actually poked a hole in it. The hole would not have rendered the thimble completely useless, but its indentations are so worn that Rebecca probably had difficulty catching a needle with it. Despite its special inscription, it may have been deliberately discarded when it became too difficult to use.

Rebecca's thimble was recovered in 1988 by archaeologists who excavated the house she and John Addisons built along the Potomac c. 1689. It was in a trash and brick rubble deposit near the house. Rebecca's son Thomas Addison inherited the property around 1705, but she may have continued to live with him until her death in 1726. Although we do not know exactly when she was born, Rebecca must have been at least 77 years old when she died.



10515 Mackall Road
St. Leonard, Maryland 20685
410-586-8501 www.jefpat.org



Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum is part of the Maryland Historical Trust, an agency of the Maryland Department of Planning, Baltimore.

