

Curator's Choice

Horne Point Fireback

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In 1976, excavations took place at the Horne site located on the south bank of the Choptank River in Dorchester County, Maryland. Archaeologists discovered a dwelling not previously on record, but found to belong to a family of landed gentry, which occupied the area during the late 17th and 18th centuries. The house burned around 1770 and was never rebuilt, thus preserving the contents of the home in layers of charcoal and plaster (Jull 1980). Among the artifacts recovered from the site were a copper alloy tea set, thimbles and buttons, glass and ceramic vessel fragments, iron keys and tools, and fragments of a cast iron fireback.

Iron firebacks are a common historic feature in many homes across Europe and North America. Traditionally, many fireplaces were constructed of stone and mortar that can be easily damaged by the intense heat generated by the burning of logs and peat. This is particularly relevant to the masonry located at the rear of the fireplace, towards which the greater portion of heat is directed. In order to preserve the integrity of the fireplace, a fireback functions to reduce the damage to the rear wall masonry by presenting a physical barrier. Firebacks also have the added function of reflecting both light and heat into the living area, thus maximizing the functionality of the fireplace.



Cast iron fireback in low relief.

References Cited

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Fragment of head from cast iron fireback found at Horne Point.



Line drawing depicting head image of the cast iron fragment shown on the left.

Decorative themes on the firebacks from the 18th century tend to incorporate coats of arms or allegorical stories. In the case of the Horne Point fireback, the scene depicts the Maid of Dort (Dordrecht), the national symbol for Holland, and the Lion of the Provinces sitting within a palisade. The Maid holds a hat on the point of a spear while the Lion holds a sword and seven arrows representing the seven Provinces (Kammen 1996:93-94). This image symbolizes Holland, "surrounded by her fortified frontiers, maintaining liberty by the force of arms" (Churchill 1985:44). Both the sword and pomegranates along the border (symbols of the unity of many under one authority) allude to the struggle for unification of the Provinces (Westland London). The scene is topped by the motto Pro Patria, 'for the fatherland'. Dutch themes were not out of place in North America. After all, New York City was a Dutch colony and called New Amsterdam until 1674. This motif is a legacy of the colonists' European heritage.

The Horne Point iron fireback currently exists in a fragmented state due to the intense heat experienced during the fiery destruction of the home. Cast iron is a commonly chosen material for firebacks for two reasons. First, the physical properties of iron, primarily its comparatively high melting point, make it an ideal material for withstanding the heat generated by a normal hearth fire. Secondly, it can be melted and cast into a mold to produce attractive designs. Unfortunately, some iron may contain defective qualities. Unlike wrought iron, in which impurities are beaten out of the material as it is worked, cast iron is dependent upon the smelting process to remove impurities and contaminants. If these impurities are not removed, the physical properties of the material can be affected (Cronyn 1990:176). In the case of the Horne Point fireback, it appears likely that excess sulfur was not removed before the artifact was cast. Sulfur-rich iron will have sufficient strength when cold, but cracks at red heat.

....it seems this fireback just couldn't take the heat.



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

