

# Curator's Choice

## Witch Bottle

By: Rebecca Morehouse, State Curator, MAC Lab

In January 1983, preceding construction of a wastewater treatment facility, Mid-Atlantic Archaeological Research, Inc. (MAAR) conducted Phase I and II archaeological investigations at the University of Maryland Center for Environmental and Estuarine Studies at Horn Point in Dorchester County, Maryland. One of the sites identified during these excavations was the White Oak site, a tenant house or possible slave quarter, which dates to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Schiek and Goodley 1984: II-17).

A wine bottle neck (Figure 1) was recovered from a hearth or chimney at the rear of a brick structure at the White Oak site (Schiek and Goodley 1984: II-4). While wine bottle glass is far from uncommon on domestic sites, this bottle neck had special significance because, when excavated, it “contained a portion of a solid stopper into which had been inserted, on both the inside and the outside, nickel-plated copper straight pins” (Schiek and Thomas 1983: II-3). This collection of objects indicated archaeologists had found the remains of a “witch bottle”.

Originating in Europe several hundred years ago, witch bottles were protective “white magic” charms used to ward off “black magic” or were used as countermeasures to redirect an evil spell back on the conjurer. A witch bottle, usually made using a glass bottle or ceramic jug, was filled with urine and sharp objects, such as pins or nails, and buried inverted at the entrance to a home or under a hearthstone (Becker 1980: 20-21; Merrifield 1987: 163-175). Urine was the most important ingredient in witch bottles, as it is the agent with which the spell is turned back upon the witch (Figure 3). The sharp objects may have been symbolic of the victim’s pain, and inverting the bottle when buried symbolized the reversing of the witch’s black magic (Becker 1980: 20-21).

The witch bottle from the White Oak site (Figure 1) is broken and incomplete. At some point in the past, the main body and base of the bottle was destroyed, leaving only the bottle’s neck and lip and the pins. Any urine that may have been present in the bottle would have been absorbed into the surrounding soil when the bottle was broken or it may have slowly leaked from the bottle as the sealed stopper began to degrade. It



Figure 1: The remains of a witch bottle from the White Oak site.

was recovered from a layer which also contained melted green bottle glass, bone, and a horse shoe (Schiek and Thomas 1983: II-3). Some of the bottle glass may have been part of the original bottle and the bone and horseshoe may have been associated with the ritual burial, as bone and iron, usually in the form of nails, have been found with witch bottle burials from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in both America and England (Becker 2005: 18). Also, in folk practice, iron in any form holds its own protective powers.

Witch bottles, like the one from the White Oak site, are evidence that folk magic, deeply rooted in European traditions, was alive and well, not just in the early years of the colonies, but well into the 19<sup>th</sup> and even the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. While such efforts may seem amusing to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, witch bottles represent “the poignant efforts of a pre-scientific era” to protect itself from what were perceived as very real threats. (Becker 1980: 23).

“Another way is to stop the urine of the Patient, close up in a bottle, and put into it three nails, pins, or needles, with a little white salt, keeping the urine always warm: if you let it remain long in the bottle, it will endanger the witches life: for I have found by experience that they will be grievously tormented making their water with great difficulty, if any at all... The reason...is because there is part of the vital spirit of the Witch in it, for such is the subtlety of the Devil, that he will not suffer the Witch to infuse any poisonous matter into the body of a man or beast, without some of the Witches blood mingled with it...”

Figure 3: Quote from the *Astrological Practice of Physick* by Astrologist Joseph Blagrave, published in London, England in 1671.

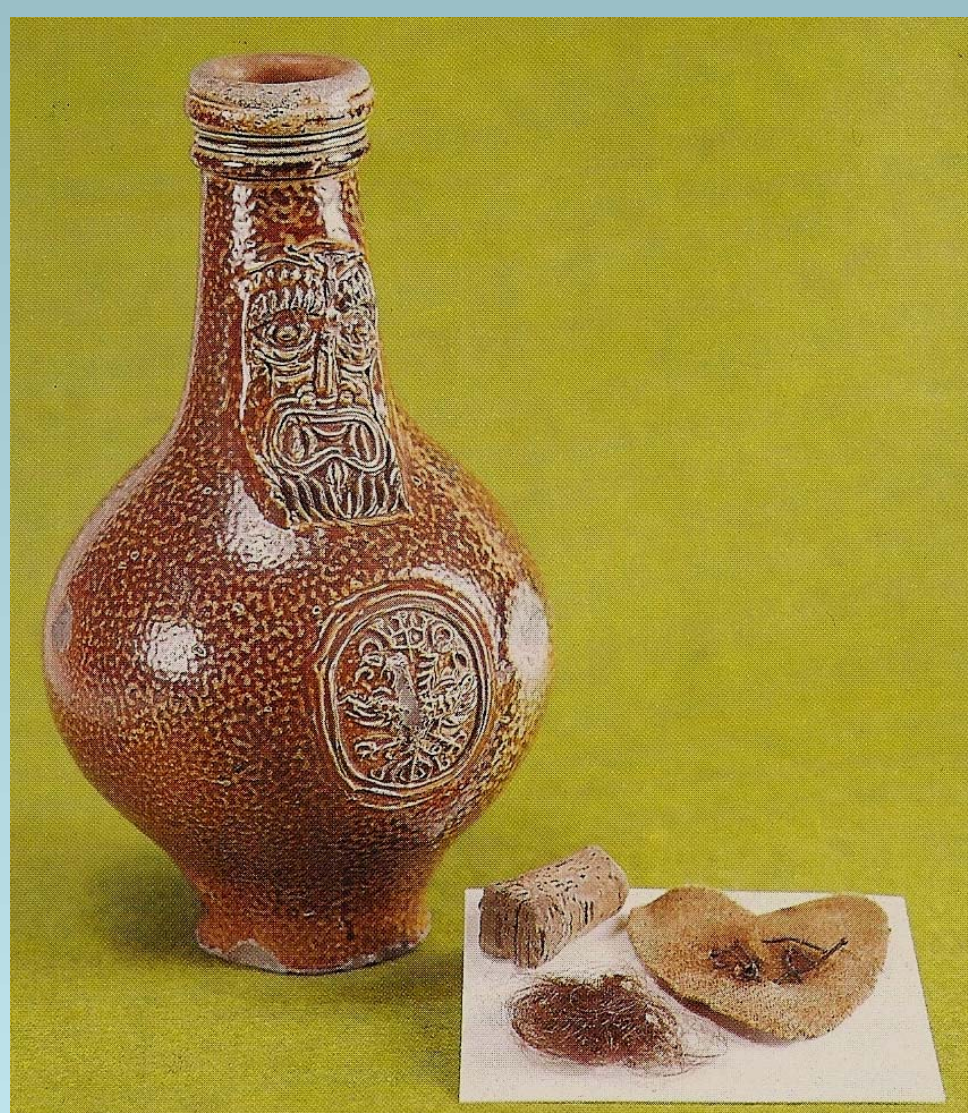


Figure 2: A complete Bellarmine witch bottle with cork, hair, nail clippings, and a felt heart with pins found in Westminster, England and dating to the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Merrifield 1987: cover photo).

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