

Curator's Choice

Rachel Was Here

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In 1968, a homeowner in Anne Arundel County, uncovered a suspected Colonial-era cellar pit while excavating for the installation of a swimming pool. Archaeologists were called in, and a salvage operation yielded a collection of artifacts dating to c. 1750, including ceramics, glass bottles, farm tools, a sword hilt and three pieces of window glass upon which was engraved the name "Rachel Ridgely" (Figure 1). The site, called Saunders Point, is known to have been part of a plantation owned by the prominent Saunders family.



Fig. 1: Rachel Ridgely engraved glass from Saunders Point site.

A quick look into genealogical records finds that there were several ladies named Rachel Ridgely, either by birth or by marriage, living in the area during the late 17th century and throughout the 18th century. Any of these, or some other, may have been the one who wrote, or was written of, in the Saunders Point window.

History shows that the etching of names, and indeed whole verses on window panes, was a common practice in 16th and 17th century England (Targoff, 2008: 67). The Princess Elizabeth is said to have inscribed the following words during her captivity at Woodstock in 1554-1555: "Much is suspected of me/ Nothing proved can be. Quoth ELIZABETH, Prisoner" (Fumerton and Hunt, 1999: 332; Fleming, 2001: 55-56). Later as queen, the same Elizabeth and Sir Walter Raleigh shared a bit of conversation inscribed in glass when Raleigh wrote in a window at court, "Fain would I climb yet fear I to fall." Underneath, Elizabeth inscribed in reply "If thy heart fails thee, climb not at all" (Fumerton and Hunt, 1999: 333; Fleming, 2001: 56). Raleigh reportedly used a "writing ring," which was a ring with a pyramid shaped diamond set with the pointed end up (Figure 2). Such rings were produced by jewelers especially for writing on glass.



Fig. 2: Walter Raleigh engraving ring from Beadles Monthly. (Fleming, 2001: 55; Targoff, 2008: 67).

A closer example exists, both in distance and in time. The 1780s brick plantation house at Mount Calvert in Prince Georges County has an intact example of an inscribed window pane. The "lover's window" at Mount Calvert bears the inscriptions of several names and initials. Particularly poignant is the upper right pane, upon which is inscribed the names "M B Beanes" and "W N Dorsett" above an arrow pierced heart (Figure 3). A young lady named Mary Bradley Beanes is known to have resided at Mount Calvert in the 1810s-1820s, while a young man named William Dorsett lived on a neighboring plantation. The two grew up to marry other people, and it remains unknown whether the window alludes to a youthful romance (Montaperto, 2009).

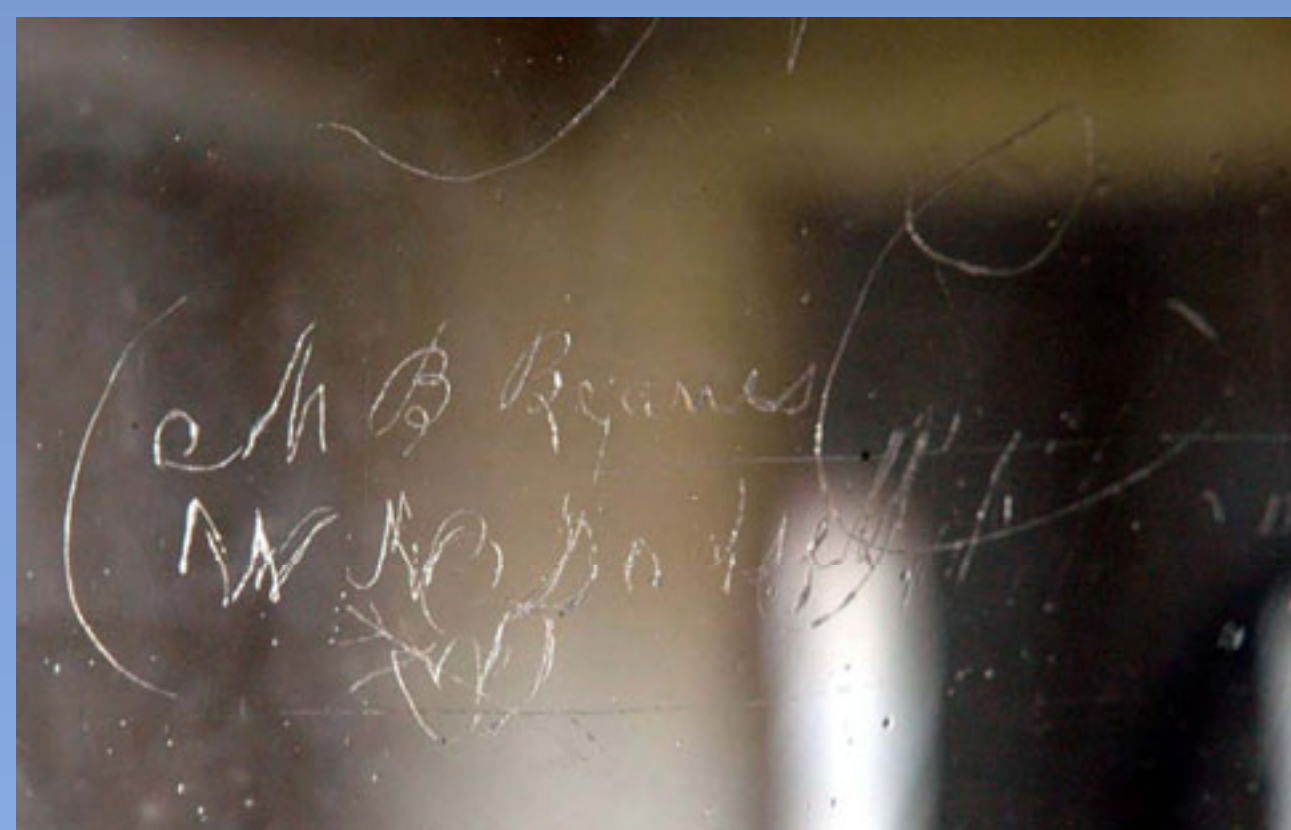


Fig. 3: Mount Calvert Lover's Window - Courtesy of the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission.

The Maryland Archaeological Conservation Lab collection also includes two pieces of glass from Angelica Knoll, in Calvert County, with partial words inscribed upon them (Figure 4). The message will probably never be known, and it will remain a tantalizing bit of historical graffiti, much like "Rachel Ridgely" will probably remain a mystery person with an unknown purpose.

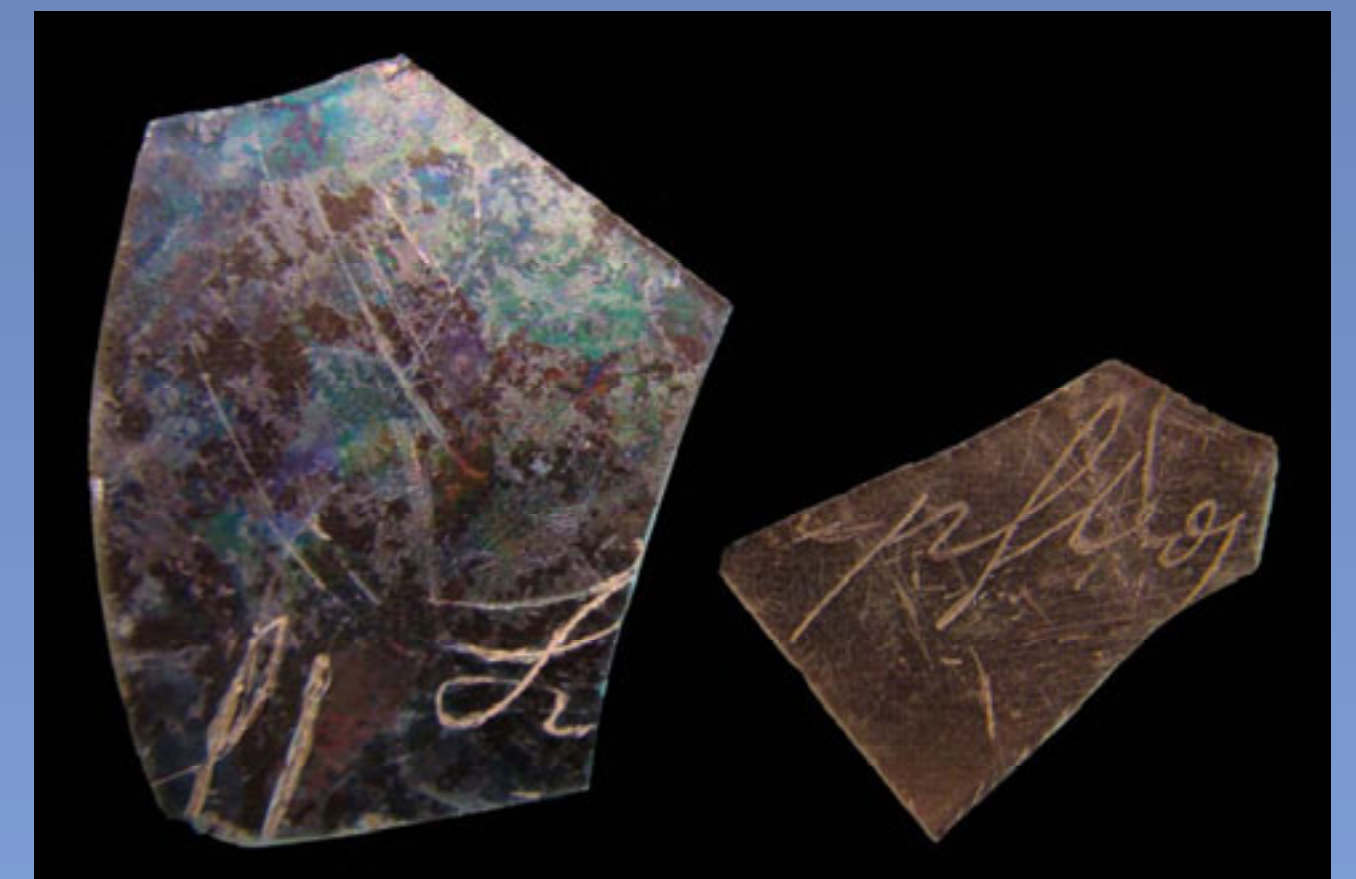


Fig. 4: Glass fragments from Angelica Knolls.

Why would someone take the time to etch their name or other words into glass? Over thirty thousand years ago people began leaving handprints on cave walls using charcoal dust blown through a straw. Perhaps then, it is a simple human desire to leave a token of oneself. To set words in something firm and to tell the world "I existed, I was here."

References Cited

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