

Curator's Choice

A Human's Best (and Oldest) Friend

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Domestic dogs and their wolf ancestors have played an integral role in human history. Archaeological, historical and genetic research has provided insights into the domestication of dogs, their likely migration with humans across the Bering Straits from Asia, and the deep bond that formed between Native Americans and their canine companions (Koeppel N.D.). Archaeological evidence of the relationship between humans and dogs indicates that canine domestication may have taken place as far back as 15,000 years ago, maybe earlier (Morey 1994: 339). This would suggest that dogs became part of the lives of humans while they were still living a semi-sedentary existence as hunters and gatherers and prior to transitioning to more permanent settlements.

Humans and wolves would have come in contact with one another while hunting the same game, placing wolves in an excellent position to scavenge anything humans left behind (Morey 1994: 339). This early hunting/scavenging relationship evolved into one of cohabitation and, according to archaeozoologist Susan Crockford, probably resulted in wolves domesticating themselves rather than being deliberately tamed by humans (Lobell and Powell 2010).



Figure 2: Dog burial from Feature 8 at the Reeves site, Wicomico County, Maryland.



Figure 3: Dog skeletal remains from Feature 8 at the Reeves site, Wicomico County, Maryland.

In Maryland, a small number of Native American sites have yielded evidence of this human-dog relationship. At the Reeves site on Maryland's Eastern Shore, two dog burials were excavated, dating to the Late Woodland period (A.D. 950 to 1600). Both burials were from relatively young dogs whose skeletal epiphyses and cranial plates had not yet completely fused (Figures 2 and 3). Almost the entire articulated skeleton of each animal was present and the bones were positioned in such a way as to suggest intentional burial after death. The bones show no sign of cutting or butchering so it is unlikely that these animals were used as a food source. Perhaps they died of disease or some other trauma not immediately apparent on the skeletal remains.

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Figure 1: A 19th century engraving by William H. Lizars of the Dog of the North American Indians (Jardine n.d.: Plate 8).

Archaeological evidence from prehistoric sites throughout the world suggests that domesticated dogs were treated not just as companions, but were used for hunting (Figure 4), protection, clothing, ceremonial food or sacrifices, as well as guides in the afterlife (Kerber 1997: 81)

The Jesuits, some of the first Europeans to arrive in northeastern America, observed Native Americans using dogs as hunting companions for game, as well as for their enemies (Kerber 1997: 88). Pathologies found on some dog skeletons recovered from archaeological contexts, as well as ethnographic evidence, indicates that dogs were also being used as beasts of burden (First People) (Figure 5). Native Americans also wore the skins of dogs and wolves. In 1535, Jacques Cartier described seeing Huron men wearing capes and masks of "dogges skinnes white and blacke" (Cartier 1906: 52).

Today, while dogs are still used as hunting aides, guardians and protectors, the vast majority in the United States simply serve as our companions. The deep connection we share with our dogs makes it impossible to conceive of them as a sacrificial animal or a source of food. Dogs share our lives and homes as members of our families and when they die, we mourn their passing, usually affording them a ritual burial in a marked grave. This emotional bond is the legacy of those first wolves which chose to follow human hunters in search of food over 15,000 years ago.

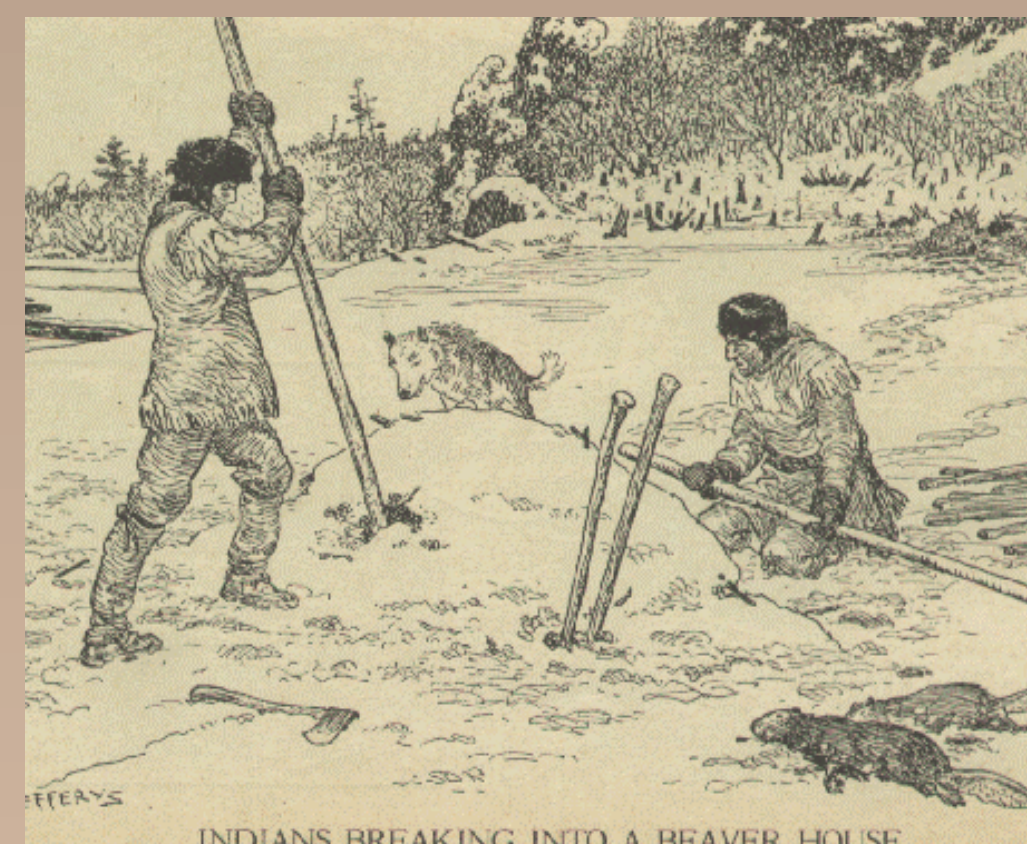


Figure 4: A sketch of Indians using a dog to hunt beaver (Jefferys 1945: 141).



Figure 5: Lakota woman and dog with travois on the Rosebud Reservation, South Dakota, date unknown (First People N.D.).



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

