

# Curator's Choice

## *Fish in a Barrel*

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Discovered during the 1987 excavation of Brown's Wharf by archaeologists from the Baltimore Center for Urban Archaeology (BCUA), this wooden barrel was found filled with debris, including a metal funnel, part of a candlestick, a leather shoe, a spoon, some rope, and a broken champagne bottle that helped date the 180-year-old barrel (Figure 1). Most impressively it contained five dozen fish (later identified as menhaden) with their scales and fins preserved in the tar-like substance that also filled the barrel (Figure 2). A number of these fish were frozen for trace-element research by the University of Maryland.



Figure 1: An archaeologist carefully excavating the wooden barrel.

Post excavation, the barrel was treated at BCUA's conservation facility. During treatment it was cleaned and allowed to slowly dry out, before being placed in a storage facility and eventually making its way to Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory for permanent curation. Unfortunately, while moving the barrel from one storage location to another the barrel was not sufficiently supported, resulting in the shifting of the staves and sagging of the rings. This gave the barrel a tilted appearance and destabilized its overall structure. To fix this problem and provide a long-term storage solution, it



Figure 2: BCUA curator Louis Akerson and archaeologist Scott Simmons examining the contents of the barrel. Reprinted from *The Evening Sun* Perry E. Thorsvik.

was decided that the best course of action was to construct a new support system. This structure was made of archival materials, that would fit within the barrel and prevent further destabilization. To achieve this stability, a ridged cardboard tube core was coated in a polyethylene and nylon barrier film. Four rings of thick conservation grade Ethafoam were then cut and surrounded in Tyvek to prevent the rough Ethafoam surface from catching on the wood. These rings were then slid onto the core inside the barrel fitting tight enough to support, but not break the wooden staves (Figure 3).

This process was a success in providing the much-needed support; it also significantly straightened the barrel. To complete this project, a custom coroplast box was constructed so the barrel can be stored safely (Figure 4).

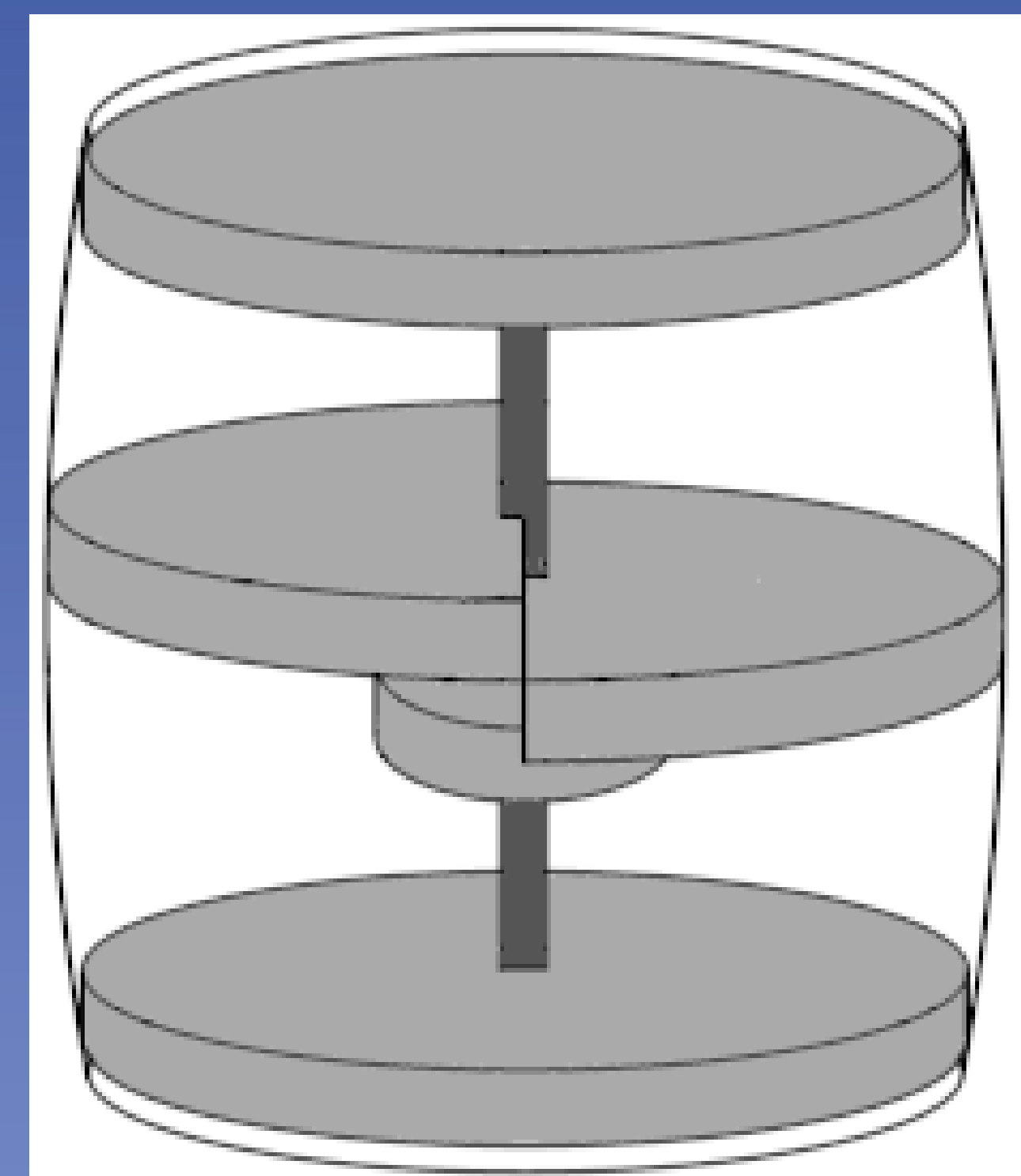


Figure 3: Diagram of interior support system.



Figure 4: Barrel in its new box.

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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.

