

Curator's Choice

A Little Sheep-ish: Bones from a Baltimore Privy

By: Alex Glass,
Patterson Archaeologist

These bones, either sheep or goat, were recovered in the early 1980s during excavation of a 19th to early 20th-century privy in Baltimore (Figure 1). Rodent marks on some of the bones indicate they were first deposited somewhere exposed, and later re-deposited into the privy to fill it. Fragments of lower leg bones, these probably represent sheep or goat shank, a type of cut which generally requires slow cooking to make it tender.



Figure 1. Goat or Sheep leg bone fragments from the Aged Home (18BC27).
Left to right: ulna, humerus (distal end), and femur (distal end).

Documentary research revealed the privy was in the backyard of a dwelling which functioned as a home for elderly African Americans from 1870 until 1910, including many who were formerly enslaved (Samford 2023; Figure 2). The Aged Home for Men and Women of the Methodist Episcopal Church was funded almost exclusively by members of the church community. Thousands of fragments of animal bones were recovered from the privy soils and analysis of a small sample has identified the remains of numerous fish species, pig, cattle, muskrat, and goat/sheep bones. The bones are the partial remnants of meals which fed the Aged Home residents (Figure 3).

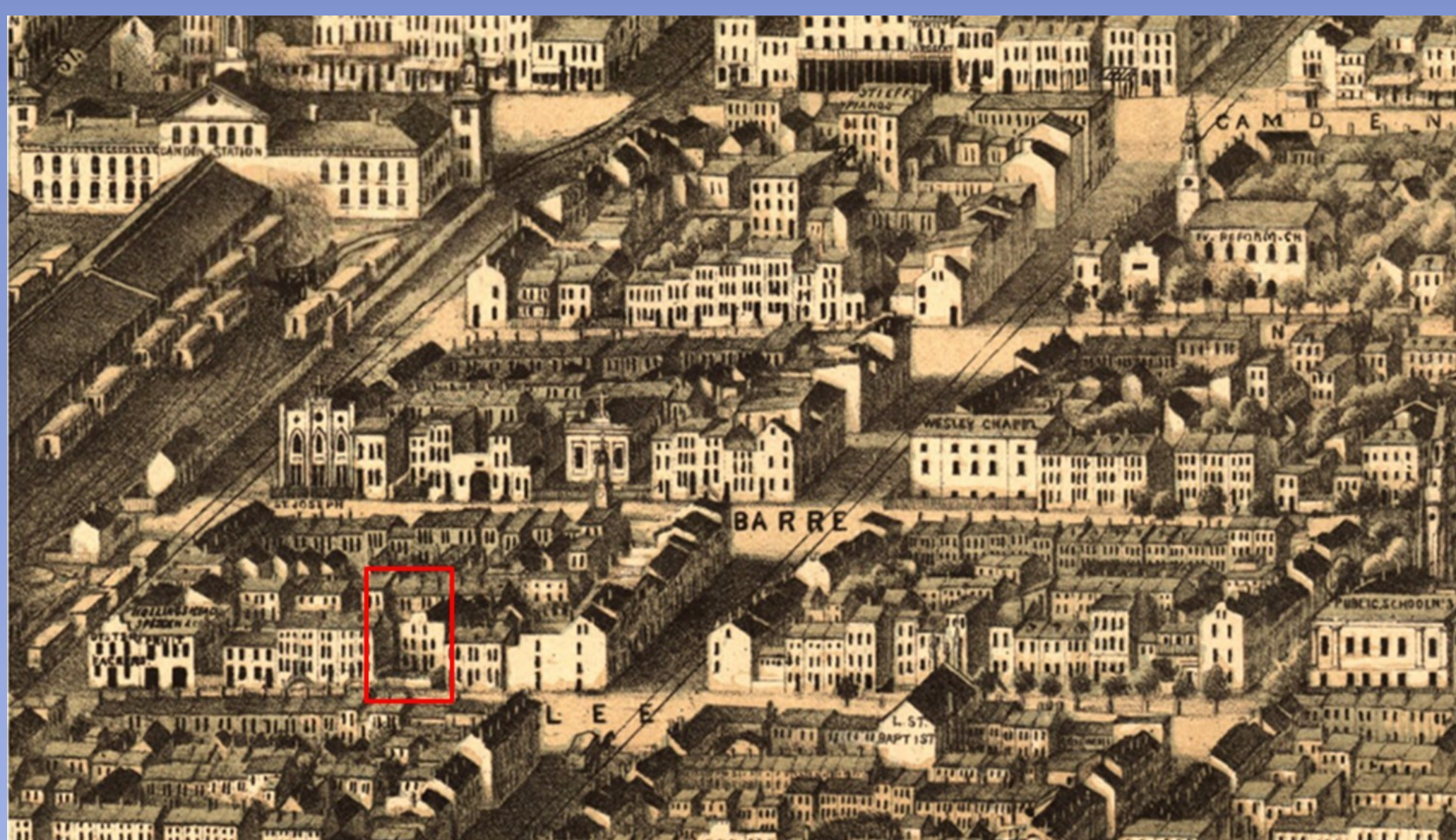


Figure 2. 1869 Sasche Map of Baltimore. Red rectangle highlights the location of the Aged Home in Baltimore City.

At first glance, these fragments may not be the most eye-catching of artifacts; however, they can provide a lot of additional information about a site. Goats and sheep are multi-purpose livestock. In addition to being a potential source of meat, they are often used for textiles or milk. These uses leave different signatures in the archaeological record. Animals used for wool are often older when they die, meaning their bones have fully fused and they may show signs of age such as arthritis or healed injuries. Animals used for meat are often slaughtered at a younger age, when they've reached peak size, but their bones are not yet fully fused. By studying these characteristics in bones which get left behind archaeologists can identify different patterns in animal husbandry. Many of the mammal bones from the Aged Home are from younger individuals whose bones have not yet fully fused, suggesting they were used for meat rather than other products.



Figure 3. Assorted unanalyzed bird and mammal bone from the Aged Home (18BC27). Some butcher marks are also evident on the bones, either from cleavers or saws.

References Cited

Samford, Patricia

2023 Aged Men and Women's Home of the Methodist Episcopal Church: Historical and Archaeological Research. Feature 38 Privy. 18BC27 Federal Reserve. Unpublished manuscript on file at the Maryland Archaeological Conservation Lab, Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum. St. Leonard, MD



10515 Mackall Road
St. Leonard, Maryland 20685

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

