

# Curator's Choice

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## Susanna Sewall's Bodkin: A Sequel

In March 2008, I wrote my very first Curator's Choice about a bodkin inscribed with the initials "SS" (Figure 1). This personalized artifact was found in a c. 1675-1700 pit at the Charles' Gift site, home of Susanna Sewall, her husband Nicholas, and their children. At the time I cited sources interpreting bodkins like this as personal objects that women used for running drawstrings and laces in clothing, and I speculated that the wealthy Sewalls may have opted for a silver-plated bodkin instead of a solid silver one because they fell on hard times during the Protestant uprising of 1689. I've learned a lot since 2008 though, and I now don't believe either of those interpretations to be accurate. Reading my original Curator's Choice is therefore something the latest slang would call "so cringe." It's time for an update.

The Charles' Gift archaeological site is located aboard the Naval Air Station, Patuxent River in St. Mary's County, MD. Nicholas Sewall received the land from his stepfather Charles Calvert, who was the Governor of Maryland from 1661-1676 and the 3rd Lord Baltimore from 1675-1715. Nicholas came of age as a member of the Catholic ruling family of Maryland, and when Charles Calvert returned to England in 1684, Nicholas Sewall was one of the loyal Catholic elites he left in charge. Banneker was in his forties during the American Revolution, but there is no evidence that he was involved in the war. The solid cast figure found at the Banneker site appears to be a military standard bearer like one shown in the center of the top row in Figure 2. While it is unlikely to date to the American War for Independence, details that could have been used to definitively date the figure (like the head and the flag) are unfortunately absent. The short jacket and the striped spats suggest that this figure dates to World War I, based on examples shown online (Figure 3).



Figure 1. The Charles' Gift bodkin, with inscribed "SS" initials. Courtesy Naval District Washington, Naval Air Station Patuxent River.

He calls them "Instruments for the head," and groups them with combs (Alcock and Cox 2000). Many other 17th and 18th-century sources concur, suggesting that bodkins underwent a shift in primary function from hairdressing to lacing at some point in 19th century

Women's bodkins of the 17th century facilitated popular updos with ribbons and cords running through them, or tight buns concealed under bonnets and caps (Figure 3). In other words, my original Curator's Choice had the function of the bodkin wrong. Aglets were very popular in the 17th century, and it makes much more sense that they facilitated lacing rather than the relatively large bodkins of the period that were too big to fit through most lacing holes.

Additionally, in 2008 I thought that the family's woes following the Protestant Rebellion might have forced Susanna to settle for a crudely inscribed silver-plated bodkin instead of solid silver. Now I'm not so sure the inscription or the material reflects hardship. All the initialed bodkins in the MAC Lab's collections have been inscribed by hand, and it may be that the SS just looks a little messier because the curved letters are harder to make than straight ones. Plus, Susanna's bodkin was in the "new fashion" according to Holme, and it was deposited by c. 1700, so unless Susanna accidentally

When Protestants overthrew the Catholic proprietary government in 1689, Nicholas became a target. He fled to Virginia, leaving his plantation and family vulnerable. Susanna and the children seem to have stayed at Charles' Gift, but over the next five years, Nicholas only made intermittent appearances in Maryland, and he complained that his family and property suffered.



Figure 2. Holme's drawings of bodkins depicting older bulbous styles (top left and box 63), and the newer fashion with a smaller finial and a small hole above the long hole (top right and box 64). Adapted from Alcock and Cox (2000).

Around 1694 hostilities had settled enough to allow Nicholas' return. The original house was in disrepair so new construction began across the yard. The "SS" bodkin was recovered in a pit that was likely excavated for clay to make brick, then filled with construction waste from the new home, and demolition debris from the old one. That means it was lost or discarded sometime between 1694 and 1700 (Hornum et al. 2001; Hornum and Rivers Cofield 2022).

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, Randle Holme III, a deputy herald in Great Britain started publishing The Academy of Armory in 1688 (Alcock and Cox 2000). This encyclopedic set of books illustrated heraldic elements and many everyday objects that might have made it into heraldic imagery. Holme depicted two types of bodkins; the "old fashion" with a somewhat bulbous finial, and the "new fashion," which is the best match for the "SS" bodkin (Figure 2). Holme states that:

*The Bodkin is a thing usefull for women to bind vp their haire with and aboute, they are usually made of siluer and gold the inferiour haue them of Brasse, but the meanest content them selues with a scewer of sharp pointed stick. [Alcock and Cox 2000]*

This primary source has significantly changed my understanding of Susanna Sewall's bodkin. Holme makes no mention of bodkins like this being used for lacing clothing.

### References Cited

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2000 *Living and Working in Seventeenth Century England: Descriptions and drawings from Randle Holme's Academy of Armory*. CD-Rom. The British Library Board, London.

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Hornum, Michael B., and Sara Rivers Cofield

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Figure 3: Gerard der Borch's 1654 painting titled *The Paternal Admonition* (aka *The Gallant Conversation*) shows a woman wearing a popular updo of the 17th century. Her hair circles the back of her head and black ribbons wrap the hair, with ribbon bows tied at each side. The long holes in bodkins would facilitate threading wide ribbons into the hair for styles like this.

lost the bodkin very shortly after she got it, she must have had enough purchasing power and awareness of the latest fashions to be an early adopter of the trend.

The "SS" bodkin remains important as a direct connection to Susanna Sewall, a woman who helped steer her family and home plantation through the adversarial years following the Protestant uprising. The bodkin is also now one of the many artifacts that exemplify the usefulness of archaeological collections for ongoing study. It's been 18 years since I first wrote about this artifact, and while it is kind of disheartening to have to revise a Curator's Choice that has long since been finished, it would be much worse if I hadn't learned anything new in 18 years! The thrill of discovery is ongoing when we recognize that not every first interpretation will prove to be the best or most accurate one, and there is always room to keep learning. Maybe someday there will be an "SS Bodkin: Part III" with even more insight into this little piece of Maryland's history.



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