

Curator's Choice

Perukes and Bilboquets: Wig Making in Annapolis

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In the mid-1990s, the City of Annapolis planned a major reconstruction project on Main Street. This project included replacing utilities and repaving the sidewalks and street. In advance of this work, archaeologists conducted test excavations to identify any historically significant deposits followed by complete excavation of any intact features destined to be disturbed by the utility and paving work (Polglase et al. 1997: 1). One of the areas excavated recovered a large cluster of 18th-century artifacts, including four white clay wig curler fragments (Figure 1).

These curlers, also known as bilboquets, bigoudis, roulettes, or pipes were used by 17th- and 18th-century hairdressers to curl wig hair, not the hair on a person's head (Diderot 1751-1765; Le Cheminant 1982: 345; Noël Hume 1969: 322). Made from the same white clay as tobacco pipes, wig curlers were cylindrical, measuring 6-8 cm long, and flared at the ends. The ends of the curlers were sometimes flattened and marked with initials, presumably of the maker, similar to marks on tobacco pipes of the same period (Noël Hume 1969: 345; White 2005: 116). Two of the curlers recovered from Annapolis have the initials "WB" under a crown (Figure 2). Similar curlers have been found on archaeological sites in both Europe and America, but the maker has never been identified (Noël Hume 1969: 321). However, it is quite likely that at least some of the hundreds of tobacco pipe makers in the 17th and 18th centuries would have also made curlers. Seventeenth-century

author John Houghton wrote the following account of the England's pipe making industry:

...the pipes are used not only for tobacco but often to blow fires; and being warmed they curl hair if wrapt about them, and not only pieces of pipe but instruments are made on purpose for peruke makers to bake their hair on (Le Cheminant 1982: 347).

To create a wig's curls, the curlers were first wrapped in paper, then with sections of hair, which were tied with a rag (Noël Hume 1969: 322) (Figure 3C). These sections were then boiled, dried, and baked, sometimes twice (Diderot 1751-1765; Stewart 1782: 185). Once this was accomplished, the hair sections were sewn into the wig.

Wigs, also known as perukes or periwigs, were primarily worn by men in France and England starting at the beginning of the 17th century. Made of long sections of curled hair, wigs were often tied at the nape of the neck with a ribbon (Figure 3E). These hairpieces found their way to America and became increasingly popular in the 18th century before falling out of fashion in the early 1800s (Diderot 1751-1765; Le Cheminant 1982: 345; White 2005: 115-116).

Documentary research conducted by archaeologists working on the Main Street excavations found a 1759 rental agreement between the owner of the lot where the wig curler fragments were recovered, a gentleman named Benjamin Tasker, and a local innkeeper (Polglase et al. 1997: 60). This docu-



Figure 1: Wig curlers recovered from excavations on Main Street in Annapolis.

ment listed William Elting (also designated as Elton in legal records) as owning or renting the parcel just to the south of Tasker's property. Further research found an advertisement from the 1754 *Maryland Gazette* listing a William Elton as "peruke maker" (Figure 4). Archaeologists aren't always able to link a specific artifact to a specific individual but, in this case, there is little doubt that the wig curler fragments excavated on Main Street once belonged to the Annapolis wig maker, William Elton.

WILLIAM ELTON,
PERUKE-MAKER,
Living near the Dock in Annapolis,
HAVING lately procured a
very neat, Skill'd Hand, and vast Variety
of the best of English HAIRS, will make
WIGS of any Sorts, and at the cheapest Rates.
He also sells Cruls, Silk and Thread, for Wig
making; likewise Tea, Coffee, Sugar, Rock
Indigo, &c.

Figure 4: Advertisement from the 1754 *Maryland Gazette* for William Elton, "peruke maker."

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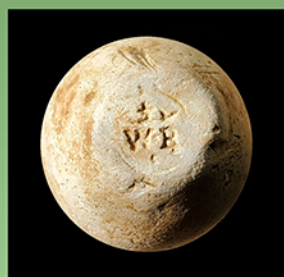


Figure 2: A wig curler with stamped initials "WB" from excavations on Main Street in Annapolis.

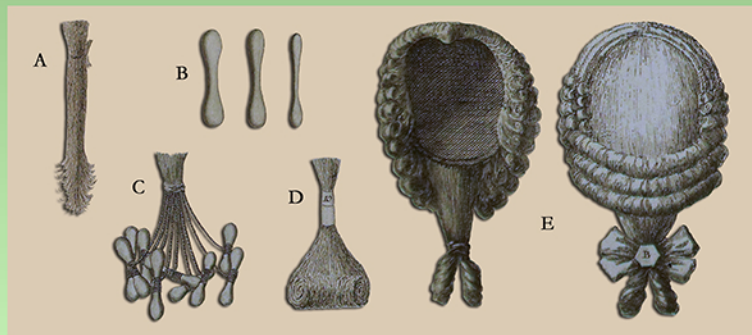


Figure 3: Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (1751-1765) illustrates various tools used for wigmaking and types of wigs worn in the 18th century. A) A packet of hair before it is styled. B) Wig curlers, also known as bilboquets. C) A hair packet wound with bilboquets that is ready for boiling. D) The curled hair packet after it is dried and the curlers removed. E) A wig style known in French as a peruke à la brigadière.



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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.

