

# Curator's Choice

## *Biblical Bling: A Crown of Thorns Pendant and Maryland's 1689 Protestant Revolution*

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This month's Curator's Choice is yet another example of "This is why we Re-examine Collections (again, and again, and again)." The artifact has been on display at the Patuxent River Naval Air Station (NAS PAX) since 2002, and it is still on display at the golf course there. It was originally identified as a pendant, but it is so tiny it would hardly weigh down a chain (Figure 1).



Figure 1: This tiny copper alloy pendant or charm was recovered at the Charles' Gift site over 20 years ago. Courtesy Naval District Washington, Naval Air Station Patuxent River.

The little pendant was recovered at the Charles' Gift site when plans to reconfigure the parking lot at the old NAS PAX Officer's Club triggered the need to do archaeology. The site was the home of Nicholas Sewall, his wife Susanna, and their family beginning around 1675. Sewall was the stepson of Charles Calvert, who was Maryland's Proprietary Governor from 1661-1676. In 1675, Calvert became the 3rd Baron Baltimore upon

the death of his father, increasing his responsibilities in England. His stepson Nicholas was one of the elite Catholic men Charles Calvert left in charge of Maryland's government when he returned to England in 1684.

Calvert's departure took place at a time when Catholic-Protestant divisions contributed to a great deal of unrest in Maryland. This tension erupted in 1689 when word of England's Glorious Revolution reached the colony. After William and Mary moved to England to replace the unpopular Catholic James II, armed Protestants used intimidation and superior numbers to overthrow the Catholic Calvert family's control of Maryland. Nicholas Sewall fled to Virginia, where he lived in exile for years, complaining that his plantation suffered in his absence.

Nicholas was able to return home eventually in the 1690s, not as a political leader, but still a wealthy landowner. Archaeology from his home under the NAS PAX parking lot revealed that upon his return, a huge borrow pit was excavated to get clay for brick making, and a new home with a brick foundation was erected to replace a post-in-ground house that had suffered rot and disrepair. The bottom of this pit was filled with daily trash plus construction debris from the new home, while the top was filled with trash and debris from the destruction of the older house. The copper alloy pendant that is the subject of this *Curator's Choice* was found in that filled borrow pit, so it has a date of ca. 1675-1700.

While preparing a scholarly article about the site in partnership with the archaeologist who originally oversaw the excavations, I went to NAS PAX take new pictures of the exhibit artifacts this spring. Perhaps it was the raking light, or the fact that Easter was coming up, but suddenly it didn't look like just a pretty wreath shape, it looked like a Crown of Thorns. This led to a new avenue for research.

It turns out that some rosaries from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries had beads or charms in the shape of the Instruments of the Passion of Christ, such as a hammer, nails, hands, feet, and the crown of thorns (Figure 2). Also, the only two beads found at the site were in the same soil level as the pendant, further suggesting it had been part of a disarticulated rosary (Figure 3A). After 20 years on display, we now think this artifact is not just any piece of jewelry; it's an expression of faith with much more meaning.



Figure 2: This rosary was made in Germany ca. 1475-1500 and every 10th bead is a silver representation of one of the Instruments of the Passion. The arrow points to the crown of thorns, which is strung as a bead instead of a charm like the example from Charles' Gift. Victoria and Albert Museum Accession 517-1903, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O17404/paternoster-unknown/>

Other artifacts in the feature might also have Catholic associations, such as a king figurine that might have been perceived by Protestants as an idol, and a book clasp dating to a time when most books people owned were religious ones (Figure 3B-C). The fact that these artifacts—all of which would have been highly valued by the Sewalls—ended up in the trash in the aftermath of Maryland's Protestant uprising suggests that Nicholas fled with good reason, and his home was probably ransacked while he was away.

Over 20 years after the tiny copper alloy artifact went on exhibit, we can still learn about the site by researching its presence from a new angle. It was not just evidence of jewelry or wealth; it was a symbol of the faith that put the Sewall family in the crosshairs of conflict at the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

### References Cited

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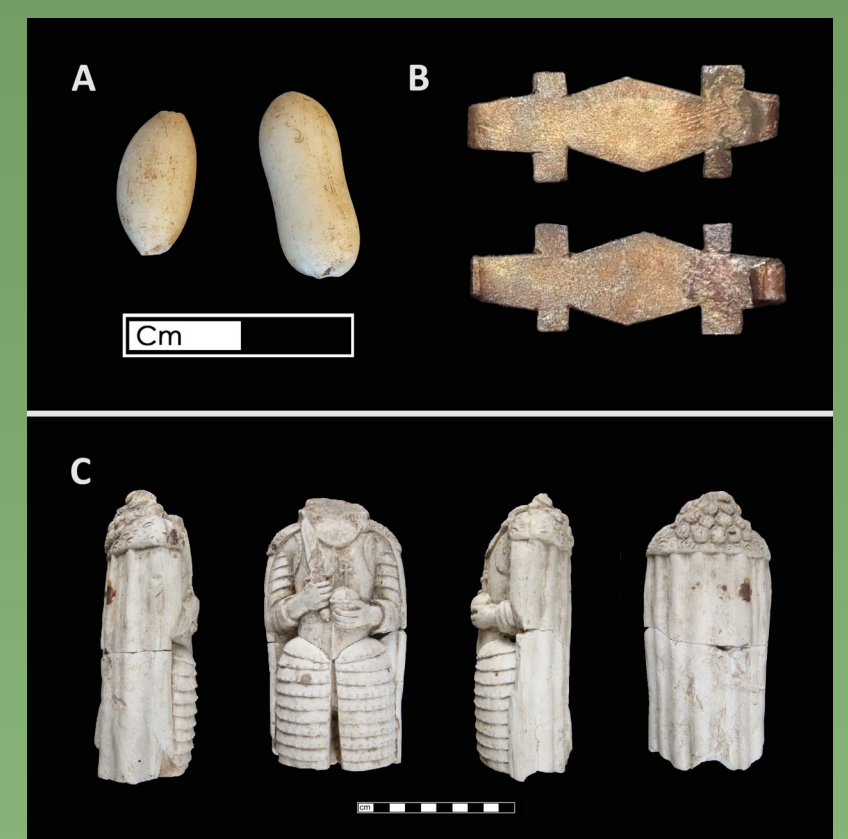


Figure 3: More artifacts from the borrow pit where the pendant was found. A. The only beads in the feature were these two opaque white beads, found in the same soil layer as the pendant. B. A book clasp which probably adorned a Bible, prayer book, or other religious text. C. Four angles of a pipe clay figurine of a king. While not necessarily a Roman Catholic item, Protestants might have considered this to be an idol and attributed its presence to the Sewalls' Catholicism. Courtesy Naval District Washington, Naval Air Station Patuxent River.



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