

Curator's Choice

Making Music: A Family Affair

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“It was a revelation for me, at some point later in life, when I discovered there were people who didn't...sing or play an instrument.” - Andre Brown

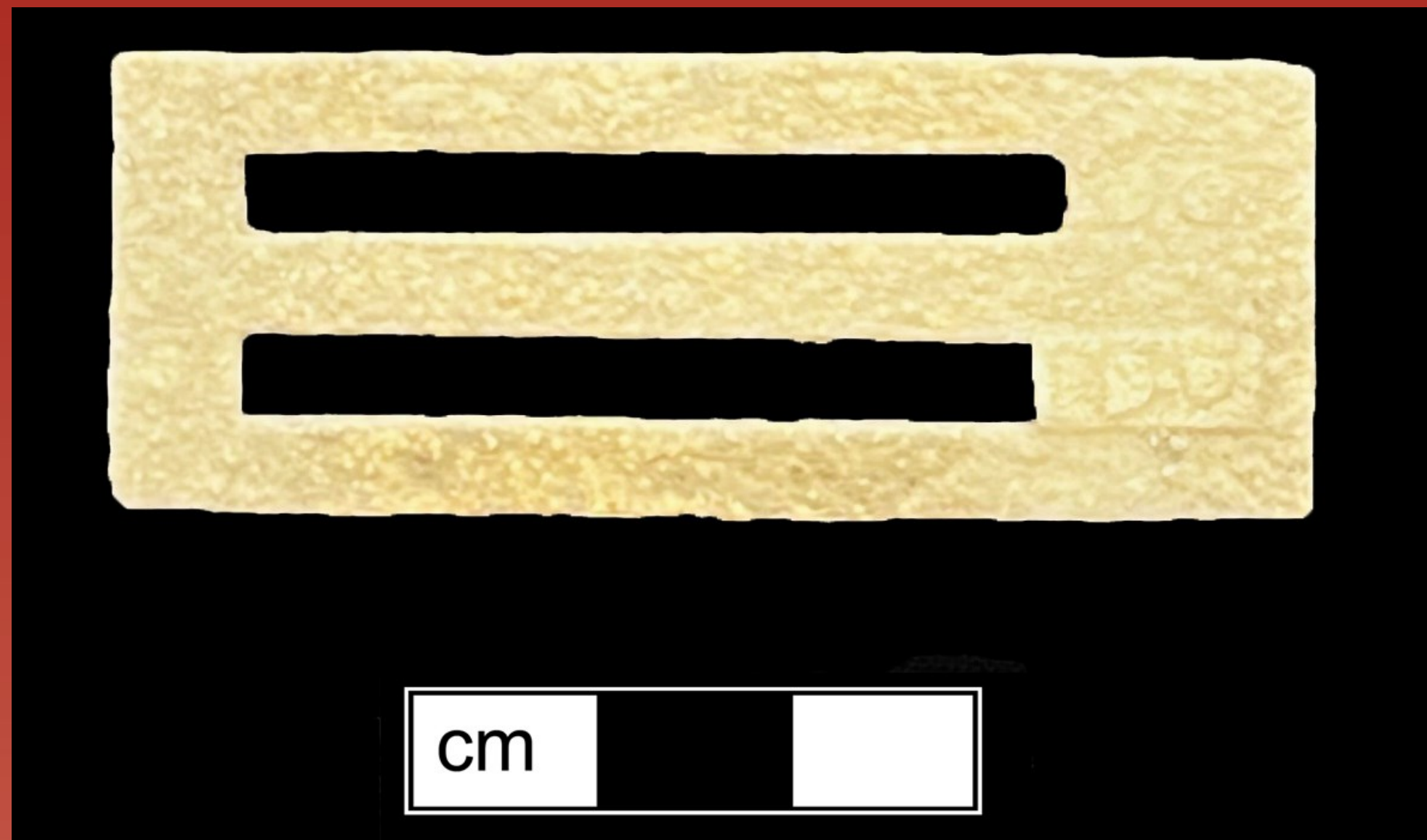


Figure 1. Diatonic accordion reed key.

This quote from Andre Brown, a Wallville community descendant, highlights the central role music played in the lives of community members (Oral history on file at JPPM). In his 2023 oral history, Brown added, “practically every family member played at least one instrument, most played two, and sang.” Other oral history interviews for the Wallville project recorded similar sentiments about how deeply integrated music was into daily life.

It isn't terribly surprising then, that excavations at three Wallville sites have recovered artifacts related to playing or listening to music. Harmonica and record fragments have been identified, but this rectangular steel artifact is a reed key from a slightly larger instrument: the accordion (Figures 1 & 2). The accordion was invented in 1822 in Berlin, Germany and it did not take long for the instrument to become popular since it could be used for many different styles of music. Although used less often today, it was most popular from the mid-19th century and into the early 20th century. The accordion makes sound when air is drawn in and out by the bellows. As the air moves through the instrument, buttons or keys can be pushed to control the air flow through thin strips of metal called reeds. The resulting vibrations create sound.



Figure 2. Diatonic button accordion. Maker: Santa Crucianelli (Cav.) & Figli, ca. 1925-1935, Castelfidardo, Italy, Arne B. Larson Collection, Vermillion, South Dakota, 1979. National Museum of Music, Object number: 01290

This diatonic accordion reed key was recovered from the Elizabeth Rawlings site during archaeological survey conducted for the Wallville Project, funded by the National Park Service African American Civil Rights grant (see Figure 1). The Rawlings were a Black family living at the southern end of Mackall Road in Calvert County, Maryland. In 1903, Edward Rawlings purchased 7.25 acres from Isaac Bowen and his wife Elizabeth Mackall Bowen (Calvert County Land Records, GWD 3, 459). Shortly after the purchase, Rawlings sold 2.75 acres of the same parcel to his sister, Sarah Elizabeth Rawlings and her then husband, George W. Washington (Calvert County Land Records, GWD 4, 245). Federal census records show Elizabeth and her family living in the area into the 1940s, although a 1938 aerial photograph suggests the house has been torn down by that time.

Archaeological survey identified two midden areas separated by a high point where the house likely once stood. On the northeastern side of the slope were larger artifacts including cast iron stove parts, buckets, and enamelware vessels associated with the abandonment of the house. The southern side of the slope, however, had a dense midden layer with large quantities of oyster shell and other domestic artifacts such as glass, ceramic, and metal (Figure 3). This southern midden is where the accordion reed key was recovered and includes material that accumulated while the house was occupied. The two broken reeds on the key suggest that it was probably thrown out with other trash when the reeds broke, and it had to be replaced with a new key.

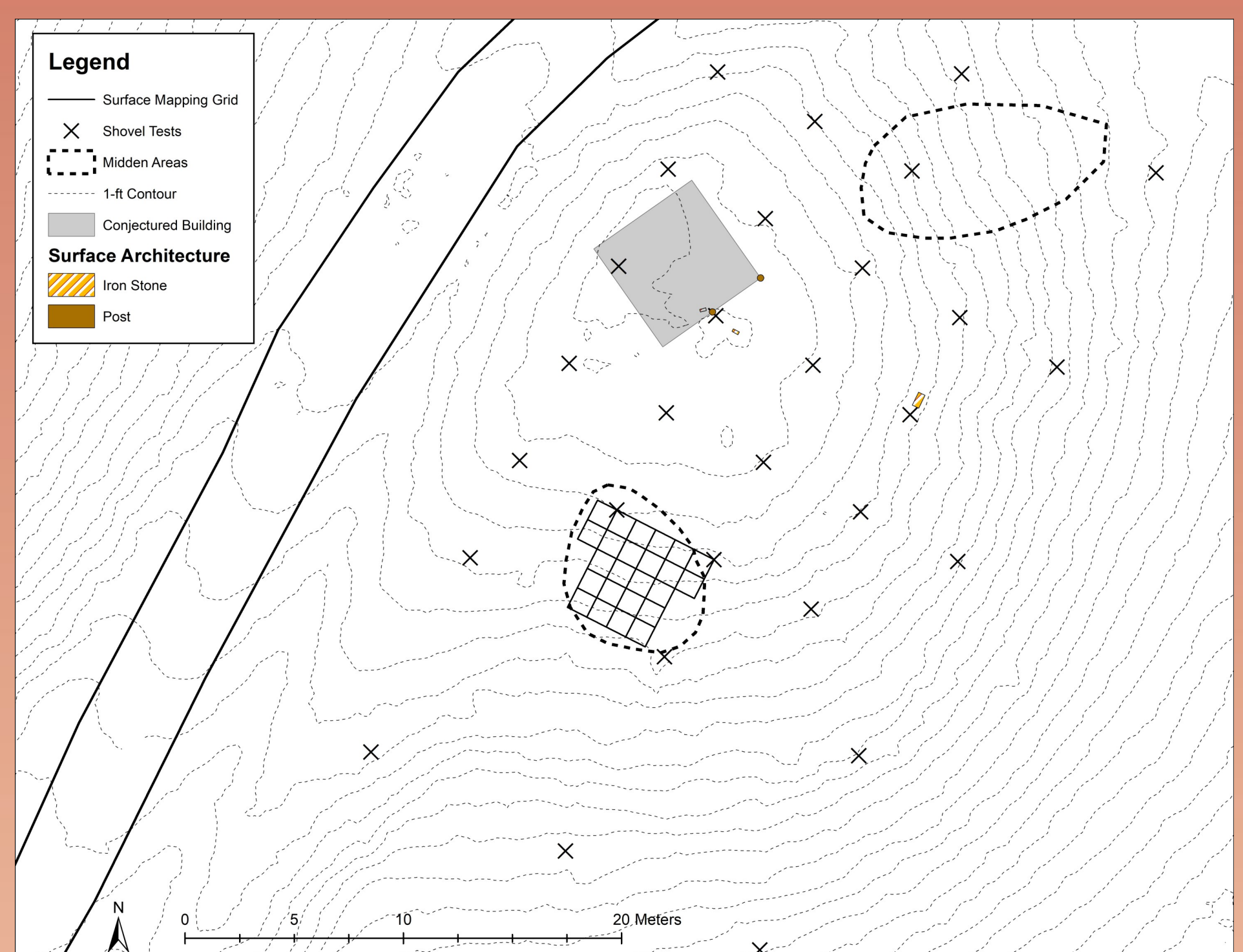


Figure 3. Eliz. Rawlings site map.



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