

Archaeologists in Maryland say they have found long-sought Zekiah Fort

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Archaeologists in southern Maryland say they have solved a mystery that has baffled historians since at least the 1930s. They say they have found Zekiah Fort.

The fort was established in 1680 by Gov. Charles Calvert, the third Lord Baltimore, for the protection of the Piscataway people and other Maryland Indian groups that were the targets of raids by "foreign" Susquehannock and Seneca warriors from the north.

Five weeks of digging this spring and summer, led by St. Mary's College of Maryland anthropologist Julia King, have turned up Indian pottery mixed with glass trade beads, arrowheads fashioned from English brass, gun parts and a silver belt hanger for an English sword.

The artifacts, the hilltop position, a nearby spring and rich soils to support an Indian settlement of 90 to 300 people - it all signaled that the search was over.

"I have no doubt this is the site of Zekiah Fort," King said. A formal announcement was planned for Thursday.

Anne Arundel County archaeologist Al Luckenbach, who visited the site with his crew to assist in the dig, said there's little doubt about the discovery.

"I think she's found it," he said. "The location is nothing but defensive.

It's hidden; it's away from the water where we normally find (Indian) sites; it's away from the road (Route 5, once an Indian trail), back in the interior there, sitting on top of this hill. ... The only reason for being here is if you're trying to hide."

Since the 1960s, "literally my entire career," he said, "I've known about the existence of this place. Everyone was always looking for it ... and it's quite a coup to finally find it."

King called it "a miracle" that the site had not been developed or ripped apart as a gravel mine.

The dig was supported by the Maryland Historical Trust and developer Michael Sullivan, who said he gave "in excess of \$200,000" to the project.

Sullivan's passion for Charles County history has led him, through his Sullivan Foundation, to support a series of recent archaeological projects, he said. He has secured a contract to purchase 94 acres to protect the Zekiah Fort site.

Sullivan invited members of Maryland's Piscataway community to consult with the archaeologists during the dig. Marylanders who trace their ancestry to the Piscataways have struggled for decades to win official tribal recognition.

Rico Newman, a spokesman for the Piscataway-Conoy Tribe, called the fort "an intricate part of the Piscataway story that needed to be told. ... Our children need something within their homeland that reflects their history and culture.

"... The preservation and tasteful development of this site as tangible evidence of our existing/having existed, should and will be a first."

The Piscataway and other southern Maryland tribes had been plagued by Iroquoian-speaking raiders from Pennsylvania and New York. They quickly saw that the English newcomers and their guns might help them fend off their enemies, who bore French arms.

The Piscataways left the fort in 1692. Some remained in Maryland, while others dispersed into Virginia and Pennsylvania.

The existence of the fort, the complex diplomacy, skirmishes and killings in the area during the years the Piscataways sheltered there - including one atrocity involving George Washington's grandfather - are known from Colonial records.

But its location had been forgotten. Generations of amateurs and university archaeologists had searched. King said the landowner had no idea what had once stood on her property.

King gave much of the credit for the find to Scott Strickland, a former student now working on his master's degree at the University of Southampton, in England.

Strickland said via email that his search began with a 1798 Federal Direct Tax record for Charles County. Sullivan found a reference to a place called "Indian Town," owned by Thomas A. Dyson, the county sheriff. Its location was unclear.

Searching county land records, Strickland found one Dyson-owned parcel situated in what had once been Zekiah Manor - the 8,800-acre property owned in 1680 by Calvert, the proprietor of the colony. The [archaeologists](#) believed that Calvert would have established the fort on his land. But Strickland still didn't know precisely where.

"After plotting the tracts and overlaying them onto current tax maps,

aerial maps, topographic maps and soil maps," Strickland said, "Julie, Mike and I began to try to evaluate. ... 'What would be a good defensive position? Where is the nearest fresh water source?' "

They zeroed in on a secluded knoll, a few miles south of Waldorf.

Strickland and Alex Flick, 23, a 2010 graduate of St. Mary's College hired to help, went out in February and began digging test holes.

"On our first day of digging, it was my birthday," Strickland said, "So I told Alex, 'Go find me something nice.' I had little expectation we would find anything." But "less than half an hour later, Alex walks up to me with a 17th century English white clay tobacco pipe."

By the end of the day they'd added Colonial bottle glass, European flint, Indian pottery and a glass Italian trade bead.

"This is pure 1680s," Luckenbach said - nothing prehistoric, nothing more modern; precisely what Zekiah Fort should contain. "You really get to see how the Native Americans were adapting to the new world they found themselves in."

Zekiah [Fort](#), and what it holds, he said, are "an important piece of the closing story of American Indian life in Maryland."

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