



April, 2012

Carlyle House

DOCENT DISPATCH

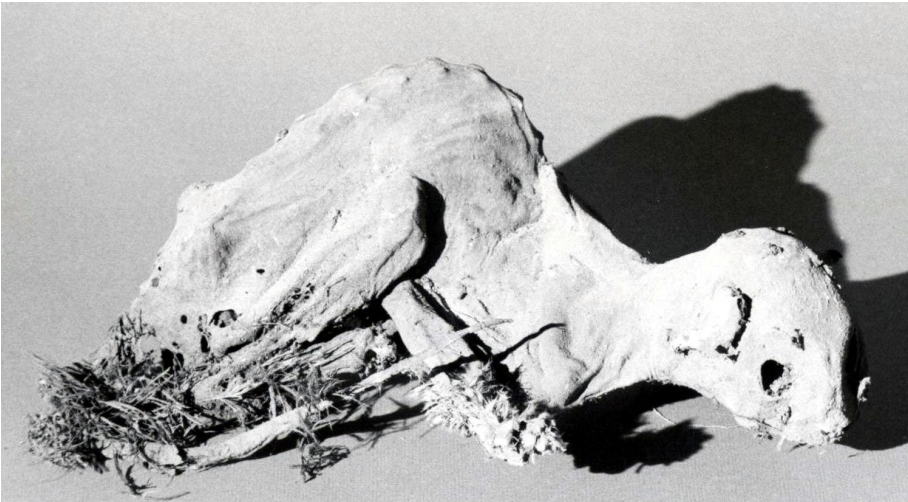
Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority 

“Burn Her!”: Witchcraft in Early Modern England

By Sabrina Crane

“And before we head upstairs, let’s have a look at our resident ghost, the only living thing buried in the house.” Many of our docents begin their tours with a tidbit such as this about the mummified cat buried in the wall at the back of the Servant’s Hall. The practice of burying a cat in a wall of a house under construction dates from about 1500 to 1800 in northern Europe and England, or what we call early modern times. It was believed then that the cat would protect the home and its

witchcraft, and it is thought that the small, cat-containing cottage belonged to one of the twelve women. Ten of the women were found guilty of being “witches” and hanged. But how pervasive was belief in witchcraft in early modern England? Did most people find it necessary to use talismans to ward off the evil attacks of witches? Was witchcraft seen as a serious problem that needed to be addressed? The short answer is that belief in witchcraft survived well into the modern era, and both ecclesiastical and secular authorities saw it as an issue that needed to be addressed.



Carlyle House’s mummified cat was removed from the southeast chimney in the 1970s, when it was discovered, photographed and returned to the wall where it remains today.

inhabitants from witches and evil spirits. Often cats were buried alive, although we do not know if this cat was buried dead or alive.

In November 2011, archaeologists digging at Pendle Hill, Lancashire, England uncovered a cat bricked into the wall of a small seventeenth-century cottage. The find in itself was spectacular and rare; yet, the historical context of the site tells a far more fascinating story. Four hundred years previously, in August 1612, twelve women from Pendle Hill were charged with murder by

deviant.

Few doubted that witches existed, and none doubted that being a witch was a punishable offense. But through the early modern era,

CARLYLE HOUSE

Sarah Coster, Site Administrator

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witchcraft was considered a normal, natural aspect of daily life, an easy way for people, especially the less educated, to events in the confusing world around them. ‘White witches’ or ‘cunning folk’ provided folk remedies, including medicinal cures for people and livestock, protection from evil and even matchmaking for lovelorn men. The authorities rarely became involved in cases of white witchcraft; their only real problem with white witchcraft lay in potential conflicts over power in the community. Black or evil witches, on the other hand, presented a problem to authorities because of their subversion of the standard rules of hierarchy and order, and to those who feared their vast powers for malice.

But “dark witchcraft” proved difficult to define, as it encompasses a variety of beliefs and practices. According to *Malleus Malificarum*, three things were necessary for black witchcraft: the evil intentions of a witch, the assistance of the Devil, and the permission of God. The Devil or Satan in his many forms collaborated with witches to cause evil and mayhem through bewitchment and enchantment. Many



Illustration from a 1608 edition of *Malleus Malificarum* of the Devil and Witches stomping on a cross. Courtesy of the History Blog.

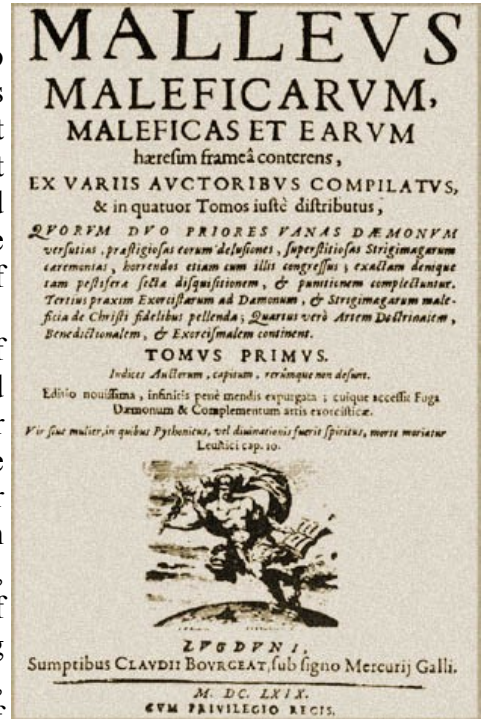
witches also supposedly derived power from association with evil familiars animals, usually cats, but sometimes also dogs and toads. Witchcraft was seen as a crime of heresy and blasphemy against God and the Church as well as a physically harmful crime against people; it could thus be prosecuted in both

secular and ecclesiastical court systems. An illness, the unexpected death of cattle, or even a natural disaster such as a long drought, could be seen as the result of evil witchcraft.

Anyone who was seen as socially deviant or even just slightly odd could be accused of witchcraft, particularly if they owned small dolls or had strange marks on their bodies; even Anne Boleyn, second wife of England’s King Henry VIII, stood accused of keeping her husband by using sorcery, partly because she had a

strange mole on her neck. Indeed the stereotype holds true, as older women, and particularly poor elderly women or women with a deformity, were those most likely to face accusations of witchcraft.

By the late seventeenth century, two opposing forces began to exert pressure on the belief in witchcraft, causing a fundamental shift in its perception. Religious authorities became less concerned with the problem of witchcraft, while at the same time natural philosophers and enlightened thinkers generally repudiated superstition. The last official English witch trials occurred in 1717, although the last woman executed for practicing evil witchcraft met her death in 1684 and the last recorded case of bewitchment did not appear until 1815. The last court cases focused more on the alleged physical harm done by the witch, rather than on any pact with



Title page from a 1669 edition of *Malleus Malificarum*. The title translates to the Hammer of the Witch, and describes how to recognize witches, try them and penalize them.



the Devil that caused a perversion of nature and God’s laws. England’s largely decentralized secular court system contributed to the slow, late decline in trials as there was no national-level judiciary to issue decisions unilaterally.

Parliament officially decriminalized the practice of witchcraft in 1736 as Enlightenment ideas of rational thought and natural philosophy spread outwards from European universities. However, decriminalization did not end witchcraft. The bill denied the reality of witchcraft while continuing to allow the prosecution and capital punishment of those accused of the non-crime of witchcraft. The decriminalization decision seems to have been based more on the increasing political divide between the more liberal Whigs and more conservative royalist Georgians than on any decline in belief.

The emergence of natural philosophy only marginally sped the process along. When the elite began reading the works of writers such as John Locke, they came to see miracles as ignorance of nature and the rational order of the universe; this appeared to leave little place for God, let alone the Devil, to intervene in the daily lives of people. Yet, Newtonian philosophers still accepted the mystical and the superstition. Newton himself believed in the possibility of alchemy. Many continued to believe in astrology into the eighteenth century, and only publically

abandoned the belief when it was widely satirized in popular literature, but not because they stopped believing in it. Witchcraft came to be seen by the enlightened elite as disgraceful and embarrassing. The less educated continued to hold superstitious beliefs because they were so entrenched in a largely uneducated local culture..

Religious authorities, on the other hand, did almost nothing to stop belief in superstition and witchcraft in the early modern era. To the more conservative Anglican clergy, denial of superstition lay along the dangerous path to atheism. Yet the same clergy continued to rail against the Roman Catholic Church and Catholic priests, as they had for some two hundred years, for promoting ritual and superstition. Wesleyans (modern-day Methodists) may have been the worst offenders, as they thought giving up belief in superstition meant giving up the Bible as a whole; even the founder of the faith, John Wesley, believed he had seen the Devil incarnate. While both enlightened *philosophes* like the writer Voltaire and religious leaders alike wanted to wean their followers off believing in witches and the supernatural, religious leaders attempted to separate followers from paganism and Satan’s influence rather than encouraging them to liberate themselves.

But although witchcraft was no longer a state crime that could be tried and punished it did not mean that unofficial trials and judgments ceased. In fact, some of the more heinous punishments were meted out in the period after decriminalization when ecclesiastical and judicial authorities removed themselves from the arena only to have their place taken by mob justice. The common folk took matters into their own hands when they felt that the authorities would no longer prosecute crimes in their localities. Ironically, one of the most well-known popular portrayals of a witch “water torture” or trial by water is historically inaccurate; such a trial appeared in the 1975 movie, *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, set in c. 932. Public trials-by-crowds did not begin until after the 1730s. In North London in 1751, a mob ordered the death of a couple accused by villagers of witchcraft; the wife drowned during the water trial and her husband was



Women in a position of power, like this female Quaker preacher, were sometimes depicted as witches, or being influenced by the Devil. Courtesy of Haverford College, Philadelphia.



kicked and stomped to death. Trial by fire seems to have been less common than trial by water, but it, too, did not take place until after 1736. Such public spectacles and mob rule only ceased with the creation of organized police forces between 1850 and 1880.

Nonetheless, belief in bewitchment and superstition survived, albeit in somewhat muted forms through oral histories and cultural knowledge. Belief died out slowly as fewer people became financially dependent on the kinds of lifestyles that witchcraft was thought to target – for instance, fewer people farmed to sustain themselves, and thus fewer people were likely to blame witchcraft for a problem with the quality or quantity of butter produced. After the Reformation, or the split of the Catholic Church into new denominations, literature continued to affirm the supernatural in all its forms at the same time that literacy rates began to rise; Romantic-era popular literature in the early nineteenth century did the same thing. Newspapers published sensationalized accounts of bewitchments, which kept the subject in people’s minds. Into the late eighteenth century, a rural Anglican minister continued to remind his parishioners of the link between evil witchcraft and black cats. Freemasonry, a cult-like social organization that counted George Washington and John Carlyle among its members, can be seen as a mutation in belief in the supernatural, ensuring ritual within a non-Church institution.

But what was happening in the American Colonies during John Carlyle’s time? The desire to create a purely religious community in Massachusetts hindered progress in stemming the tide of witchcraft, as it had in Scotland. At the time of John’s arrival in Virginia, the Salem (Massachusetts) witch hunts were still in living memory, only fifty years in the past. Today we would view the trials as the persecution of women and caused by mass hysteria.

The end of persecutions, such as in England, did not mean that people stopped believing in witchcraft. There are numerous records in the colonies, particularly in Massachusetts, of villagers nailing horseshoes above their front doors to prevent evil spirits from entering the home. Public lynchings,

water torture and mob rule trials survived in the colonies well into the eighteenth century. In the same century, the government of Massachusetts issued pardons and posthumous acquittals to those who had been wrongfully accused in the 1690s. It took significantly longer for Enlightenment ideals of a reason, natural order, and science to cross the Atlantic Ocean than it did to cross the English Channel.



Remains of a witch bottle from a 19th-20th century site in White Oak, MD. All that remains is the neck and the pins that were inside it.

But in addition to the cat in the wall, the Carlyle House also has a second object to protect the home from evil witchcraft. Somewhere in the pile of boxes in the archaeology collection is a stopper to a “witch bottle” – a wine bottle cork stuck with three wire-wrapped pins. These composite objects were made of a glass or ceramic bottle filled with urine and sharp objects (like pins), then corked closed and buried below the entrance to a house or building or underneath a hearthstone inside the home. The practice dates back to seventeenth-century England, the same period as the Pendle Hill witch houses. American examples have been found which date into the early twentieth century. Ours was found in a privy well between the Bank building and the north wall of the Carlyle House, and dates from 1795 to 1850 (Feature AX3C).

So what exactly was this witch bottle? A witch bottle was used as a folk white magic superstition to protect against the intrusion of evil witches; it was thought to redirect an evil spell back towards the spell’s conjurer. The Jefferson-Patterson Park and Museum’s Maryland State Museum of Archaeology Lab has two witch bottles. Rebecca Morehouse, the Curator of the state’s archaeology collection, was thrilled to learn that the Carlyle House has a witch’s bottle as their two witch bottles are incomplete, in pieces and lack their corks. Our witch bottle stopper is now historically important!

It was not until the advent of the Industrial Revolution



and an educational system that provided “reasonable” explanations for seemingly unexplainable events that belief in witchcraft began to die out. Reports of witchcraft, however, continued to surface through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, even in enlightened, industrial centers such as London. Such beliefs survived because they provided an easily-comprehensible framework for understanding seemingly unexplainable events, especially in rural regions where increased education and technology were slow to arrive. They survived because researchers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries attempted to actively study and record folk beliefs and practices. And they survived because, as Neil Gaiman and Terry Pratchett wrote, “many phenomena – wars, plagues, and sudden audits - have been advanced as evidence for the hidden hand of Satan in the affairs of Man,” phenomena that still seem to belie explanation in a modern world. People today knock on wood, avoid walking under ladders, read their horoscope to learn their prospects for the day, and look askance at the deviant.

Sources

Ankarloo, Bengt, and Stuart Clark, ed., *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*.

Morehouse, Rebecca. “Curator’s Choice: Witch Bottle.” <<http://www.jefpat.org/CuratorsChoiceArchive/2009CuratorsChoice/Aug2009-WitchBottle.html>>.

Morgan, Edmund S. *American Heroes: Profiles of Men and Women who Shaped Early America*.

Ravencroft, Nick. “‘Witch’s Cottage’ unearthed near Pendle Hill, Lancashire.” <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-lancashire-16066680>>.

Weisman, Richard. *Witchcraft, Magic, and Religion in 17th-Century Massachusetts*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984.

If you are interested in writing an article for the Docent Dispatch, or researching something at the Carlyle House, we are collecting articles to publish over time. We are always looking for articles pertaining to the history of the house and John Carlyle, the history of Alexandria and general 18th century history.

CHAD Events

Monday, April 9th
John Adams, Episode V: Unite or Die
 7:00pm

Join us for the next spellbinding episode of the much acclaimed HBO miniseries, *John Adams*. Elected America's first Vice President, Adams is frustrated by his exclusion from President Washington's inner circle. Though he is vilified for casting an unpopular swing vote in the Senate that ratifies a U.S.-British treaty, Adams is elected President in 1796. Still, there are hurdles and Abigail, undaunted as usual, rallies her husband out of a melancholy brought on by the burdens of the presidency and the nation's uncertain future.

We will have popcorn. Feel free to bring a beverage and a snack to share.

Sign up in the office, or call, 703-549-2997, or email Lacey at lvilliva@nvrpa.org

Monday, May 14th -
Richmond Day Trip
 8:45am-5:00pm



May’s CHAD field trip is a trip to Agcroft Hall and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA). Join us in visiting a transplanted 15th century British home. We will have lunch somewhere in Richmond, then head to the VMFA to visit exhibitions ranging from Jacob Lawrence to the art of Ancient Writing. We plan to leave from the First Baptist Church at 8:45a.m. to leave time for traffic on our way to Richmond. We plan to eat lunch in Richmond for about \$20 or less.

Sign up in the office, call, 703-549-2997, or email Lacey at lvilliva@nvrpa.org



Another Archaeology Bite...

The Carlyle House Collection at Mount Vernon

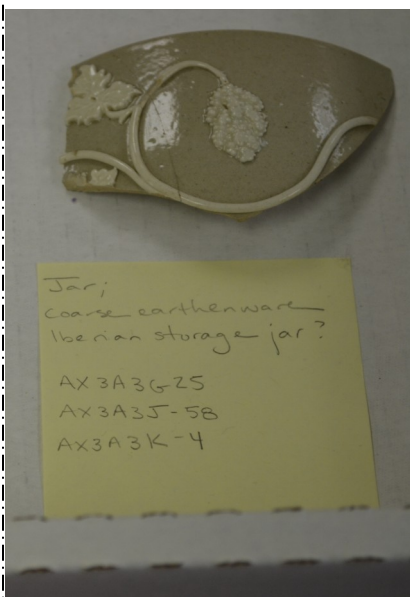
Last summer a portion of our Archaeology Collection was loaned out to Mount Vernon so that they could conduct research on the contents of our collection with respect to objects which have been found there.



Graduate Intern Eleanor Breen explaining the research into the Carlyle

Esther White, the Director of Archaeology, invited us to see what they had been doing with our collection, including rehousing the objects. Esther, and some of her staff took us on an archaeology oriented tour of the grounds, and let us visit their spacious lab and storage facility.

Many Thanks to Mount Vernon Archaeology!



A piece from the Carlyle House Collection. This style of pottery is called Iberian ware, likely referring to a Spanish origin.



Some of Mount Vernon's reconstructed archaeological finds. Each piece has a custom built mount to support the incomplete structure.

Carlyle House Garden Day

Sat. April 21, 2012

8 am to 4 pm

The grounds of Carlyle House will be filled with the wonderful scents of herbs and greens to fill your garden. Music will fill the air, as will the laughter of the crowds, and the scents of baked goods. We need your help to make our annual Garden Day a success!



On the grounds:

We need volunteers for the following:

FRIDAY:

- ◆ Plant pick up at Mount Vernon, 9am
- ◆ Presale in the Gazebo from 11am-3pm

SATURDAY (Shifts 7-11am, 11am-2pm, 2-5pm):

- ◆ Click/Count visitors at the gate
- ◆ 3-4 salespeople at the plant, bake sale and book sale tables
- ◆ Clean Up

To volunteer on the grounds please contact Shelly Miller, 703-549-6397 or shellspeech@comcast.net..

In the House:

We need your help in filling two shifts (10-1 and 1-4) for an open house format, very much like Candlelight Tours. Please RSVP to Lacey via phone, email or on the sign up sheet in the office.

Donations Needed:

We need cookies and bars to sell at the bake sale. Bring them on Friday, April 20 or by 8 am on Saturday, April 21. Please pack the cookies 2-3 to a zip lock bag and label it. Bags will be sold for \$1. Commercial baked goods do not sell well.

We also need children's books, garden books and cook books in good condition. Bring on Friday, April 20 or by 8 am on Saturday, April 21. Leftover books will be donated to the TC Williams Book sale.



Help support the museum you love AND have a fun night on the town with, friends, family, and fellow volunteers!



SAVE THE DATE FOR:
Tuesday, June 19th

A Night at the Theatre to Benefit the Friends of Carlyle House:
Performance of *All the King's Women* at the Little Theatre of Alexandria

Tickets are \$30 and can be purchased from Carlyle House Historic Park. All proceeds from the performance will go to support education, preservation and collections care at the museum. Tickets must be purchased in advance at Carlyle House, 121 N. Fairfax St. Alexandria, VA 22314, or by calling 703-549-2997.

A note from the Curator

A donation of two lovely period reproduction dresses was made by Deana Washburn LoConte in memory of her mother, Amanda Washburn, a former Docent, Friend and benefactor of Carlyle House. The dresses were hand-sewn and worn during the Fashion Promenade, for those of you who remember that festive event! We look forward to using the dresses to help with our interpretation of women's lives in the 18th century.



Many thanks to Deana and our best wishes to her family!

April 9, Monday

CHAD John Adams, Ep. V: Unite or Die
7:00pm

April 14, Saturday

Braddock Day
12:00-4:00pm

April 21, Saturday

Garden Day
8:00am -4:00pm—*Docents and Volunteers Needed!*

May 13, Sunday

Mother's Day Tea
2:00-4:00pm

May 14, Monday

CHAD Field Trip, Agecroft Hall and Richmond Day Trip
9:00am-5:00pm

May 14, Monday

CHAD Book Club: Benjamin Franklin, by Walter Isaacson
12:00pm

June 17, Sunday

Free Father's Day Tours
12:00-4:00pm

June 19, Tuesday

Friends' Fundraiser, with the Little Theatre of Alexandria: All the King's Women
7:00pm

June 26, Tuesday

Hands on History Tent
10:00am-1:00pm—*Volunteers Needed*