

Gwen: Our first story features a grisly mystery that's remained unsolved for 350 years. It's September, 2003. In a small field outside Annapolis, Maryland, a team of archeologists is excavating the remains of the early colonial settlement of providence. While digging in what was once a 17th-century cellar, one archeologist unearthed something completely unexpected, a perfectly preserved human skeleton. Who was this person? How did they die? What is the story of the body in the basement? These questions especially intrigued 22-year-old Corey Seznec, whose parents own the land where the skeleton was found.

Cory Seznec: I'm curious as to who this person was. What was he or she doing, and, you know, living on my land 300, 350 years ago? For me, it's fascinating.

Gwen: I'm Gwendolyn Wright and I've come to Annapolis, Maryland, to meet Corey and investigate this unusual case.

Cory: Hi.

Gwen: Hi, Corey, I'm Gwen Wright.

Cory: Nice to meet you; thanks for coming.

Gwen: It's wonderful to be here. It's a beautiful site.

Cory: Thank you.

Gwen: So what's up? Tell me.

Cory: Well, we have archeologists over here who have discovered a 17th-century home site. They've uncovered all sorts of interesting things, ceramics and pipes. What now seems to be really fascinating is that they have discovered a skeleton in what is the cellar of the house.

Gwen: That is a little spooky, literally.

Cory: Yeah, yeah.

Gwen: So what's your question?

Cory: My question is, who is he and how did he die?

Gwen: Well, what do we have to go on?

Cory: I have nothing, you know. I think we should go talk to Al Luckenbach, the archeologist, and see what he has to say about it.

Gwen: Okay, let's go.

Gwen: Archeologist Al Luckenbach runs the lost towns project, which locates and excavates colonial-era sites throughout Maryland's Anne Arundel County.

Al Luckenbach: This is our site.

Gwen: So this is it.

Al: Yep. It is a roughly rectangular earthen cellar. We've dug a number of these things filled with trash, and basically it's the artifacts that we were after. The surprising thing came in that we found someone under the trash in the corner of the cellar.

Gwen: And the mouth is wide open. Maybe we just are imagining that the person is screaming.

Al: Now there have been dozens of similar cellars excavated in Virginia and Maryland, the Chesapeake region, and to my knowledge, never a body in the cellar. I mean, realize they not only crammed this individual into too small a hole, but then they threw trash over him. So there's a certain degree of disrespect.

Gwen: To get to the bottom of this story, we're going to need some help. We've called in a team from the Smithsonian Institution, headed by forensic anthropologist dr. Doug Owsley.

Gwen: Nice to meet you. Well, come take a look and see what you think.

Doug Owsley: Well, my first impression is that it's beautifully preserved. The trash on top of it, all of that organic, helps preserve this. It's going to take me a little bit to kind of figure it out, but there's a number of things that first kind of jump out. For one thing, the positioning is very unusual compared to what we normally see. Sometimes you have a nice, formal burial. It can be nicely laid out. It can be shrouded; sometimes, rarely, but in a coffin. In contrast, some of what's going on here, they've got a pit that's not large enough for the individual so they've got this individual smushed in here a little bit. Something's going on. There's some sort of darker side of this that they're either...

Gwen: Next Doug examines the skeleton's skull looking for evidence of the person's ethnicity.

Doug: The prominence of his nose, you've got a nice, steep angle here with this nose; the size the cheekbones. Just looking at this, this is going to be somebody of European ancestry.

Gwen: So this was a European but male or female?

Doug: One of the contrasts that you see is females tend to have very little brow ridge development and they tend to have higher vertical foreheads. Now, just looking at it, you've got a little bit of brow ridge development here and you've got kind of a sloping forehead.

Gwen: So our skeleton seems to have been a European man. Then Doug spots something strange.

Doug: Yeah, because there's something funny that I don't understand. You see this right here? Why have we got a fracture coming up the back right here? And is there some source behind that that is the source of that or is that purely a post-mortem break? We won't know that till – until it comes out and we can see if there's anything else associated with it.

Gwen: Okay.

Doug: If there's trauma, we'll pick it up. The skeleton will talk to us. We just have to listen to it, know how to read those bones.

Gwen: To examine the skeleton more closely, Doug needs to take it back to his lab at the Smithsonian. So the archeologists painstakingly remove the skeleton...piece by piece.

Gwen: Meanwhile, Al and I head back to his laboratory. By analyzing the artifacts surrounding the body, we hope to pinpoint the date of death. First Al fills me in on the background to the dig.

Al: The Leavy Neck site, which is what we call this particular site, is part of providence, a 1649 settlement that we have been excavating at for nearly 15 years now. And we have been looking for the physical remains of this settlement to learn about what life was like back then.

Gwen: I ask Al if he can establish the approximate date our man was buried beneath the building.

Al: Well, obviously, the earliest it could have happened is 1649-50, when the Europeans first arrived. And then the question becomes, can we date the trash that was deposited on top of the body after it was buried. And that's where these

artifacts come in. We have here things like a brown clay tobacco pipe, which was actually quite high up in the cellar, meaning one of the last things thrown in. These date to the 1660s. We have the 1664 brass farthing. Then we have things like these ceramics. This is a Dutch tin-glazed earthenware. It has a lead glaze on the back and was made essentially before the 1660s. So if you add all this up together, you're thinking somewhere from the '50s to the '60s, probably '55 to '65.

Gwen: Dating the burial between 1655 and 1665 leads al to an intriguing theory.

Al: Amongst the various speculations of why this strange burial occurred, murder obviously being one of them, is the interesting fact that the land in 1655 was owned by a man named William Fuller, who was the puritan commander at something called the Battle of the Severn.

Gwen: What was that?

Al: It's sort of the last gasp of the English Civil Wars and the only real land battle in the new world that was part of the English Civil Wars.

Gwen: The English Civil Wars were fought between the Revolutionary Puritans, or Parliamentarians, and the Roman Catholic Royalists, or Cavaliers. The Puritans' victory, under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell, led to the beheading of King Charles I and a short period of time when England was a republic, ruled by its parliament. According to Al, the conflict reached the American colonies when commissioners from England attempted to impose the authority of the new English government. When the Catholic Governor of Maryland refused, he was forcibly replaced by a body of protestant representatives from providence, including the former owner of Corey's land, Captain William Fuller. On Sunday, March 25, 1655, these tensions erupted into armed conflict, a struggle known as the Battle of the Severn. Could our body be somehow connected? I've come to the John Work Garret Library at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, where they have a collection of materials on colonial-era Maryland. Now here's something. In 1655, the ousted Governor of Maryland led a party of 250 Roman Catholics to attack the settlement of Providence. They were met by 107 protestant soldiers under the command of Captain William Fuller. After a short but vicious battle in which they lost 40 men, the Royalists surrendered to the Puritans. But the killing didn't stop there. After the battle ended, the Protestant forces began executing their Catholic prisoners. They shot four men in cold blood before the protests of the women of Providence stopped them. Could our body be one of these executed prisoners of war? I'm heading to D.C. to meet Doug Owsley again. He's got the skeleton in his lab and has been busy at work, measuring the bones, taking x-rays and cat scans and testing bone samples to paint a picture of who this person was and how he died. If our man was indeed an executed prisoner, Doug will find traces of the violence.

Doug: You've got a central area in here from which these radiating fractures are emanating. But to cause this degree of fracturing, it would be a blow to the head and that blow would leave some sort of central defect, some sort of defect here from which you would follow these lines. And the way they're breaking indicates that the bone is dry. You can differentiate bone that is in a living person and how it fractures, the crispness of the fracture lines, the way they radiate, as opposed to bone that is much older, in the ground, post-mortem breakage.

Gwen: So all this is post-mortem?

Doug: It's post-mortem; it's post-mortem.

Gwen: There's no place on the rest of the body where there's evidence of a bullet hole or of a saber wound or of it being a battle?

Doug: It's not there.

Gwen: It's not there.

Gwen: This rules out our first theory. But if our body wasn't an executed POW, who was he? To determine how old this man was when he died, Doug looks at his teeth.

Doug: So we'll take x-rays, and as we look at this, we see the first molar's fully developed, the second molar's fully developed and the third molar is not quite up at the chewing plane; it's almost there, but its roots are about root $\frac{3}{4}$'s. It still has a little bit further to go. That, in terms of its stage of development, is 16 years.

Gwen: He's just a kid.

Doug: If you look at his back, one of the things that we characterize as we look at the end plates -- see they're depressed -- those are herniations. Those are called Schmorl's nodes or Schmorl's depressions, and what they reflect is the fact that he's carrying loads that are heavier than his spinal column is meant to hold. All throughout the skeleton you've got very pronounced, for a 16-year-old, very pronounced muscle attachment ridges, where the muscles attach. You've got evidence of heavy physical exertion.

Gwen: And what does that lead you to think?

Doug: It's a relatively short life. It's characterized by heavy physical labor. All of this trauma that we see in the back, development of the muscle ridges, I think this is one of the workers of the colony. I think this was an indentured servant.

Gwen: Indentured servants were young men and women who sold themselves into virtual slavery for three to seven years to earn their passage to the New World. If he was only 16 at his death, it's likely our servant hadn't finished his term. But how did he die?

Doug: Once I take that into consideration that I've got no trauma indicated, then I start looking for other, other evidence. And part of it is going to come from the teeth. When you look at his mouth, he has horrific dental decay. With so much decay you run the risk of getting bacteria into the blood system, into the bloodstream and then spreading to other parts of the body. Now one of the things -- and it's not very strongly developed, but I'm very suspicious -- is that as we look at his vertebra, you see how this is torn up and irregular?

Gwen: Mm-hmm.

Doug: And you've got this cutting in right here? One of the things that can destroy that is tuberculosis. And that carries down on some of these right here. So this is one of these individuals that developed spinal column tuberculosis. It's not very advanced. But because he's dealing with so many infections, he's got -- his immune system is suppressed and it gets him.

Gwen: So Doug's findings suggest our skeleton is that of a 16-year-old indentured servant who died of tuberculosis. But I still don't know why he was buried in the basement. I've come to historic St. Mary's city, Maryland's first capital and now a museum of living history. I'm meeting one of the leading experts on the Chesapeake colonies, Ivor Noel Hume. Noel thinks he might have the answer to my question, but first fills me in on what life was like for indentured servants in the colonies.

Ivor Noel Hume: They were being brought over simply as chattels, and they were treated as chattels. They were treated as property.

Gwen: Mm-hmm.

Noel: And sometimes you looked after your property and sometimes you didn't.

Gwen: According to Noel, indentured servants faced harsh conditions. Poignant letters home describe Indian attacks, miserable conditions of malnutrition and frequent physical abuse from their masters. What's more, many indentured servants died before finishing their period of servitude. And it's how their bodies were treated that could explain why our body ended up in the basement. Noel shows me a 1662 law from Maryland's neighboring colony of Virginia.

Noel: The law says a "burial of servants or others privately prohibited." and the act goes on to say that "it is against that barbarous custom of exposing the corpses of the dead to the prey of hogs and other vermin."

Gwen: So this act was passed to try to prevent something like this from happening, but it was happening.

Noel: All laws were the result of things happening. You don't come -- make a law until it's happened. And I think this must be very prevalent or they wouldn't have gone to the trouble of putting it down as a statute.

Gwen: So we know that Virginia colonists often treated the bodies of their indentured servants with complete disregard. But what about across the border in Maryland? Could a corpse have been disposed of so callously there as well? I've come to the Maryland state archives to see if I can find anything similar in their 17th-century documents. And here's exactly what I'm looking for. I'm heading back to Corey's house to tell him what I've learned. First, I tell Corey about Doug's findings and the Virginia law that Noel showed me.

Gwen: ...Thrown into ditches.

Cory: Wow, that's really abysmal.

Gwen: Then I show him the final piece of evidence I found, a law proposed in 1663 outlawing the private burial of servants in Maryland.

Cory: I can't believe it had to be put in writing.

Gwen: Passing laws is an indication of how prevalent a practice has become.

Cory: Absolutely. It's very revealing about the time period and how, how, how dire it was.

Gwen: Before I leave, I have a gift for Corey, a map of Providence based on 17th-century records.

Gwen: Here is the land --

Cory: Wow!

Gwen: -- That is identified as belonging to Captain William Fuller, where your family's house is.

Cory: Oh, that's amazing. Thank you very much, Gwen. I appreciate it.

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