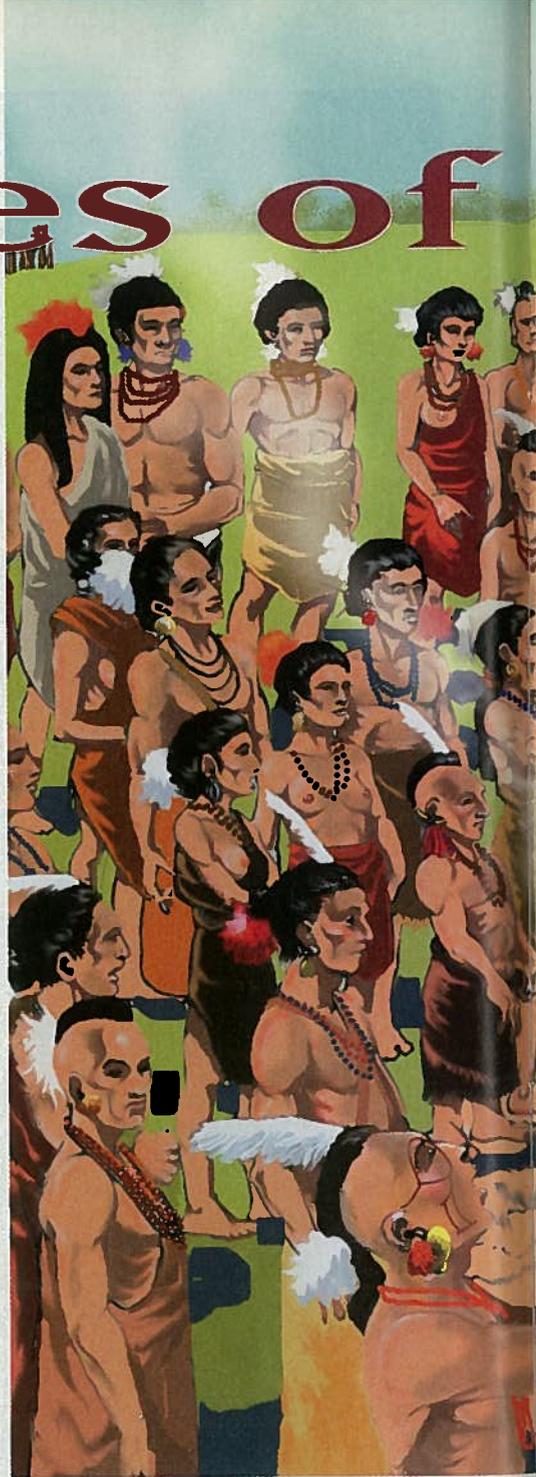


# Mysteries of

## Native Americans Reburied Relatives by the Score in Ossuaries

BY DENNIS C. CURRY

**T**he child died among the Piscataway people, in what is today Maryland, perhaps four centuries ago. The small body was buried and the years passed. The mother was not of the Piscataways. She was born to the Susquehannocks well to the north and married into this tribe as a girl. Sometime after the child's death, something important transpired — perhaps a chief died — and the people, as was their custom, gathered their dead. Bones were collected from the graves, scaffolds, and mortuary houses. In a pit just outside the stockade walls of their village, remains by the hundreds were neatly arranged. The Susquehannock woman, as her child's bones were laid on the pile, added two unusual, tiny pots. She had made them in the dimly remembered style of the Susquehannocks, as though to confirm this heritage as her child faced eternity among the other 647 Piscataway remains.



This speculative scenario fits some rather curious evidence from Moyaone-4, the largest of Maryland's ossuaries — the mass burials common among many Native Americans of what's now the eastern United States. Villages and groups periodically gathered the skeletal remains of deceased relatives and reburied them, amid feasting and prayer, by the tens or hundreds.

# Mass Graves



ILLUSTRATION BY MARK OPPELT

Though a few early European accounts describe the ritual (often with dubious accuracy), and ossuaries have been excavated for perhaps 200 years, the practice remains clouded in mystery. Only careful archaeological interpretation of scattered artifacts and often-meager excavation records will solve the puzzles. Ossuaries found in Maryland generally date from about A.D. 1400 to the late 1600s, though

variations of the practice are as much as 2,000 years old and reach from eastern Canada into the American South.

The Moyaone-4 ossuary is one of four excavated in the 1930s at Moyaone, a Piscataway village of bark-covered long-houses surrounded by a wall of upright timbers. The largest of the Moyaone ossuaries, it was about 300 meters (985 feet) beyond the palisades; the others

were evenly spaced within the walls. Unusually large for the region, Moyaone-4 sat atop a low knoll. One to one-and-a-half meters (3 to 5 feet) deep, it covered an area 9.7 by 6.4 meters (32 by 21 feet).

Entombed with the remains of 648 individuals were one crushed pot of local design and two unique pots that generally resemble the "Schultz" pottery made

by the Susquehannocks of Pennsylvania. They look very much like an attempt to imitate the northern pattern — an attempt that fell short.

Excavation records do not indicate whether the two pots were associated with a particular individual, but their miniature size — 5 and 7.6 centimeters (2 and 3 inches) — suggests children. It is not hard to imagine a Susquehannock girl marrying into a Piscataway tribe, then fashioning pots from her own childhood for burial with her lost child, in the

Susquehannock way.

Eyewitness accounts, notably a 1636 report by French Jesuit Jean de Brébeuf describing a Huron ritual on Ontario's Georgian Bay, tell of a days-long reburial ceremony called the "Feast of the Dead." Among the Huron, the dead from surrounding villages were collected from their initial graves every 8 to 12 years. The skeletons were stripped of any remaining flesh, wrapped in furs, bestowed with glass beads and wampum necklaces, and brought to the ossuary.

The grave pit was lined with beaver robes and covered with offerings of knives, beads, necklaces, and bracelets. Bundles of bones were arranged in the pit and covered with a layer of furs, then tree bark, and finally, earth and timbers. Large wooden poles were sunk into the ground around the ossuary. Each of nearly three dozen ossuaries found in Maryland, all on the middle reaches of tidewater rivers, holds from 10 to nearly 650 individuals.

**N**o historical accounts describe ossuary burials by the Algonkian peoples of Maryland. The archaeological record, however, indicates three forms of primary burial before the bones were collected for communal graves. Some people were buried in the ground, as proven by non-local sand and soil found in ossuary skulls and by empty grave pits in known cemeteries of the time. The use of scaffolds and mortuary houses (also called

## Ossuaries look at hodgepodge closer inspection

chapel houses) is implied by the heavy loss of small bones from hands and feet, either to scavengers or attrition, and the presence of mud-dauber wasp nests inside skulls. Evidence on the bones shows some bodies were cremated before going into the ossuaries.

Ossuaries look at first glance like a macabre hodgepodge of disarticulated bones. But closer inspection reveals distinct patterns, although they vary from one to another. Maryland arrangements include discrete bundles of bones; long bones stacked in orderly piles and

*The Tombe of their Cheromes or beife persons, their flesh cleve taken of from the bones, save the skyn and heare of there heads, w<sup>ch</sup> flesh is dried and confided in mats made at there feete. their bones also being made dry, or covered w<sup>th</sup> deare skyns not altered their forme or proportion. With there Kywash, which is an Image of woad keeping the dead. ~ ~ ~ ~ ~*



This 1585 watercolor by John White shows a Carolina Algonkian charnel house. Bodies were placed in such structures for months or years, after which the bones may have been interred in ossuaries.



In the 1930s, an archaeologist excavated Moyaone-2, one of four ossuaries at the Piscataway village of Moyaone, in present-day Maryland.

first glance like a **macabre** of disarticulated **bones**. But reveals distinct patterns.

capped by skulls; long bones arrayed along the edges of the pits with skulls in the center; and discrete pockets of cremated remains, including one instance in which the cremated bones were enclosed in a boxlike arrangement of long bones.

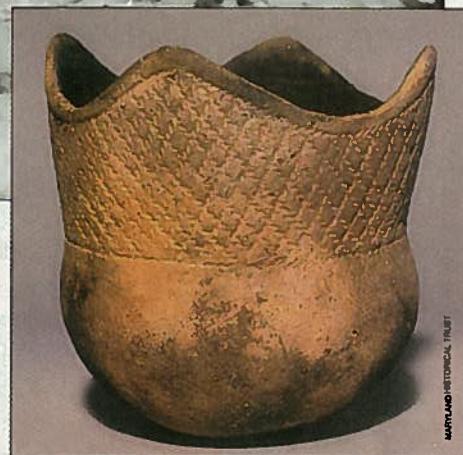
Complete skeletons were often placed at the bottom of the pit, but sometimes they were stretched out atop a pile of disarticulated bones. One ossuary features skulls in an upper layer, long bones below that, and other bones at the bottom. Whether these arrangements held special significance or merely reflect a sense of orderliness is unclear.

Ossuary artifacts also are sometimes described as a random scatter among the bones. Yet associations are common: Shell beads and necklaces are often

linked to individual skulls, especially those of children. Unusual and clearly associated offerings include a skull with a large shell bead in each eye socket, copper disks (possibly from a headdress) on either side of a skull, and a complete shell-bead necklace tucked inside a skull.

**S**kulls likely also served as handy containers during the reburial process, since an assortment of artifacts and bones is often found inside them.

Ossuaries have yielded items of adornment — necklaces, pendants, rings, bracelets, hawk bells, and occasional European medals and coins — and functional artifacts, including bone awls, stone tools, tobacco pipes, and trade goods, such as



A peculiar miniature pot from Moyaone-4 more closely resembles the pottery style of the Susquehannocks (an often-hostile north Iroquois group) than that of the local Piscataway. The pot, about 7.6 centimeters (3 inches) high, may have been crafted by a Susquehannock woman who married into the Maryland group.

iron hoes, scissors, even a snuffbox.

Such offerings may hold clues to the lingering question of just who qualified for the ossuaries. Some archaeologists argue that they were reserved for the elite, while others consider them the final resting place of common folk. At least along the lower Potomac, the evidence argues for the commoners' graves — or perhaps a mix of both groups.

In the ossuaries of Maryland, artifacts seem to be placed throughout the bone

piles and are often associated with children. Few bespeak the grandeur expected of the rich and powerful. Even such lavish ossuaries as those excavated on the Port Tobacco River in the 1930s — with shell and copper disks, strings of shell, copper, and glass beads, copper bracelets covered with woven bark, and tanned deerskins — merely recall the normal offerings among the Huron.

Perhaps location and treatment of bones within the ossuaries can illuminate social status. Brébeuf, the French Jesuit, noted that "whole bodies" were placed

on the bottom of the pit, and complete skeletons have been found at the bottom of a number of Maryland ossuaries. Could these be elite individuals? Did their deaths trigger the reburial cycle?

**C**remated remains are found at almost all Maryland ossuaries, but they generally account for no more than 10 percent of the individuals. Could these be the remains of honored leaders, singled out for special treatment before going into the ground?

The answers are far from clear, and the ossuaries of the eastern United States offer questions aplenty to keep archaeologists busy for years to come. □

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#### Further Reading

*Feast of the Dead: Aboriginal Ossuaries in Maryland*, Dennis C. Curry. Maryland Historical Trust Press and the Archeological Society of Maryland, Inc., 1999.

*Commoners, Tribute, and Chiefs: The Development of Algonquian Culture in the Potomac Valley*, Stephen R. Potter. University Press of Virginia, 1993.

## River People

### Algonkians of the East Settled Behind Stockade Walls

**T**he Algonkian peoples of the eastern United States settled into permanent farming villages, usually sprinkled along the fertile floodplains of major rivers. Faced with raids by aggressive groups of Iroquois to the north, Algonkians often surrounded their settlements with stockade-like fortifications of upright logs.

Tribes also formed political alliances. In Maryland, the Conoy confederacy allied the Piscataway, Potomaco, Nacotchtank, Nanjemoy, and Yaocomaco tribes.

The term Algonkian refers to a language family shared by widespread peoples. Eastern Algonkian comprised numerous individual languages, each further divided by dialects. Algonkian also refers to those who spoke the language. Thus, Coastal Algonkians may signify a broad range of peoples from the Carolinas to Delaware — scores or hundreds of distinct tribes. As the name implies, these people generally lived along the Middle Atlantic coastal area. The Algonkians of Maryland generally reflect Coastal Algonkians as a whole.

Villages were ruled by chiefs called *werowances* or *tayacs*. These leaders and their advisers and priests formed an elite segment of a largely egalitarian society. Villages consisted of various structures (the chief's house, other houses, a mortuary temple) and open areas devoted to communal activities and ceremonies, including ossuary burials.

Individual homes included longhouses, as well as smaller round, oval, and rectangular structures. In each case, the houses were constructed of a sapling frame-

work covered by tree bark or mats of grasses or reeds. Interior features included central hearths, sleeping platforms, and storage scaffolds.

Villagers were mostly farmers — growing corn, beans, and squash in the floodplains — as well as hunter-gatherers. Hunting with the bow and arrow and with traps focused mostly on deer, along with bear, turkey, waterfowl, turtle, squirrel, rabbit, and beaver. Plants, tubers, nuts, seeds, and shellfish (especially oysters) were added to the menu. Fishing produced a variety of seafood, including seasonally abundant sturgeon and shad, eel, and crab.

The Algonkians traveled on foot across the landscape and used dugout canoes on the many coastal waterways. Their technology was based on such locally abundant materials as stone, bone, shell, wood, fiber, hide, and clay. Arrows were tipped with small, triangular points chipped from quartz.

Clothing was fashioned from tanned deerskins, with beads and ornaments fashioned of stone, shell, bone, and teeth. Baskets, nets, and bags were woven from reeds, fibers, and grasses. Axe handles, canoe paddles, spoons, and ladles were carved from wood, while clay was mixed with crushed shell or quartz, modeled and decorated, then fired to produce earthenware pottery. □ DCC



This stone tobacco pipe — an animal effigy — was smoked by Maryland Algonkians centuries ago. The pipe is about nine centimeters (3.5 inches) long.

MARYLAND HISTORICAL TRUST



A somewhat idealized vision of an Algonkian village in coastal North Carolina was painted about A.D. 1585 and recreated as an engraving by Theodor de Bry.