



Historian Lois Carr of Annapolis has been an expert in St. Mary's since 1967.

By Bob Gilbert — The Capital

Her knowledge runs deep

If it wasn't for local expert Lois Carr, who's buried in those old lead coffins would be anybody's guess

By ALLISON BLAKE
Staff Writer

From her corner office in the Maryland State Archives, historian Lois Green Carr is helping to unravel a tantalizing archaeological mystery.

Are members of Maryland's founding family, the Calverts, buried in three lead coffins unearthed at St. Mary's City?

As experts prepare plans to open the 300-year-old coffins, the help of historian Mrs. Carr is invaluable.

"She, as historian, can provide a lot of essential background. Who could they be? Who was in the state of Maryland at that time?" said Henry Miller, chief archaeologist for St. Mary's City, the state-owned archaeological site of Maryland's founding city and Colonial capital.

If anybody knows who lived in St. Mary's City in 1670, it's Mrs. Carr, a long-time Annapolis resident. The New England native

started as an archivist at the old Maryland Hall of Records in 1956, and went on to pursue graduate work in history.

In 1967, her doctorate from Harvard University in hand, she returned to the archives as St. Mary's City historian. Her job? To learn as much as she could about the old city, which all but disappeared by 1720. In the 1690s, a growing population traveling to southern Maryland had moved the capital to Annapolis.

Mrs. Carr, hired as the state took over what has become an outdoor museum and dig, spent three years combing through accounts. Her expertise in Maryland county records helped her lay a historic foundation before the archaeologist arrived to exhume the city.

Now, her knowledge is helping to narrow down who is buried in the city's 323-year-old Catholic chapel.

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On May 31, the team of forensic experts discussing how to open the coffins will meet in Annapolis. Mr. Miller said the high-tech opening could take place late next fall. The range of interest is wide: NASA wants to know if 17th century air is trapped inside for use in various

experiments, said Mr. Miller. Forensic experts working on the project include Dr. Clyde Collins Snow, who worked on the case of Auschwitz's "Angel of Death," Dr. Joseph Mengele, and Smithsonian anthropologist Douglas Owsley, who has analyzed the remains of Civil War soldiers uncovered at Antietam.

The Calvert coffins were unearthed in 1989 as archaeologists dug at the site of the city's 323-year-old Catholic chapel. Right away,

experts guessed they'd found members of the Calvert clan.

Gov. Leonard Calvert arrived with the Ark and the Dove — Maryland's versions of the Mayflower — when the ships landed near the future St. Mary's City in 1634. His was likely the only Catholic family wealthy enough to pay to be buried in the chapel yard, and to afford expensive lead coffins, which help preserve remains.

Mrs. Carr's expertise helps to date the time of the burials at the chapel site.

"(The chapel) had glass windows installed in it that were broken in 1670, so it was completed or practically completed. In 1705, we know it was taken down.

"The Calverts seem the most likely people to be of a stature to use the coffins, and in 1682, two major members (of the family) died," said Mrs. Carr.

"William Calvert was Gov. Leonard Calvert's son. He drowned, but his administrative account doesn't include funeral expenses, so the

body may not have been recovered. Still, if there had been a funeral, I'd have expected the church to be involved. You had to pay to be buried in the chapel," she said.

More likely, the largest coffin holds Philip Calvert, the colony's chancellor and half brother to the second Lord Baltimore. He came to St. Mary's City in 1652, and died in 1682, said Mrs. Carr.

Philip Calvert did not leave an account, which is the estate administrator's record of the deceased's finances. But that was common; "by no means everyone left an account," said Mrs. Carr.

The other two coffins are much smaller.

"We don't know who is buried in either of those. Philip was married two times, and if he had children, they were probably by his first wife," said Mrs. Carr. "Mortality was very high."

Mrs. Carr has already nixed one of her earlier guesses.

"One person (~~Mrs. Carr~~) suggested was a son of Cecil Calvert, the second Lord Baltimore, who was age 14 when he died. We don't know where he died. He maybe was governor of Maryland at age 11," said Mr. Miller.

But: "In 1679, he was in school in England. He died in 1681, so I think the chances are, that's where he died," she said. ~~Mrs. Carr~~

Already, Mrs. Carr has spared the team from making an awful mistake made in 1799.

"There are five known lead coffins in the United States. All were 17th century (and) in St. Mary's City," said Mr. Miller. "Two were opened by so-called medical students in 1799."

Believed to be Lionel Copley, Maryland's first royal governor, and his wife, Anne Botler, the bodies had been buried since 1694.

"One was seemingly perfect, with hair on her head and rouge on her cheeks," said Mrs. Carr. "Within five hours, it had completely disintegrated."

"(Mrs. Carr) told everybody, and we said, 'Whoa, we're going to have to do something to make sure we open them in an oxygen-free environment,'" said Mr. Miller.

When she's not working on the Calvert case, Mrs. Carr looks forward to publication of the recently completed "Robert Coie's World." The book is based on the detailed account of a man who managed a plantation for 10 years in the absence of its owners. Like many of Mrs. Carr's writings, the account reflects details of Maryland settlements.