

THOUGH PEOPLE HAVE CONSUMED ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES FOR CENTURIES, ARCHAEOLOGISTS HAVE LARGELY IGNORED THE ROLE OF DRINKING IN THE PAST. BUT RECENTLY A NUMBER OF RESEARCHERS HAVE FOCUSED ON THIS TOPIC.

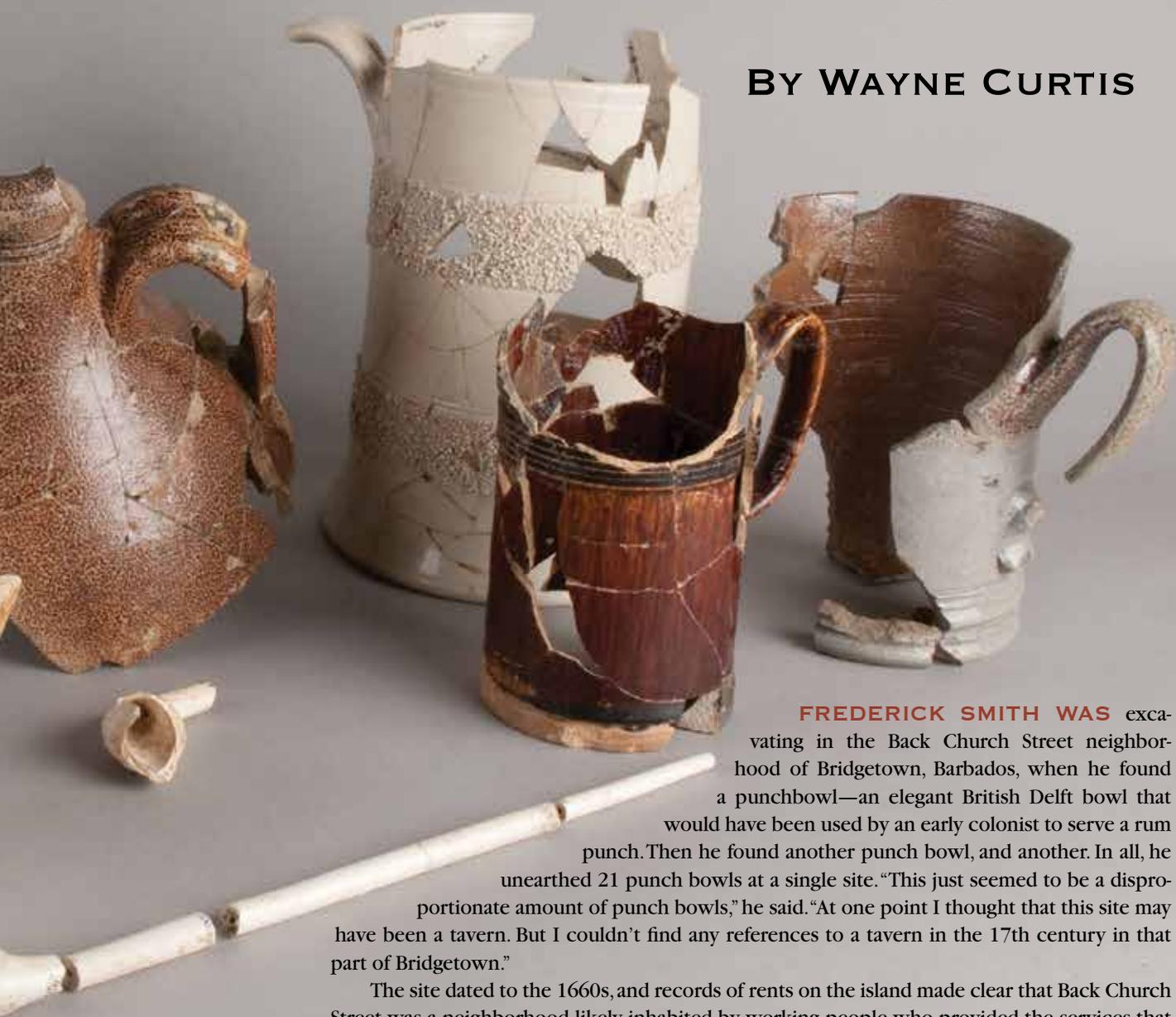


Drinking and smoking were among George Washington's pleasures, as these artifacts recovered from Mount Vernon attest.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF

Imbibing

BY WAYNE CURTIS



FREDERICK SMITH WAS excavating in the Back Church Street neighborhood of Bridgetown, Barbados, when he found a punchbowl—an elegant British Delft bowl that would have been used by an early colonist to serve a rum punch. Then he found another punch bowl, and another. In all, he unearthed 21 punch bowls at a single site. “This just seemed to be a disproportionate amount of punch bowls,” he said. “At one point I thought that this site may have been a tavern. But I couldn’t find any references to a tavern in the 17th century in that part of Bridgetown.”

The site dated to the 1660s, and records of rents on the island made clear that Back Church Street was a neighborhood likely inhabited by working people who provided the services that kept the sugar estates running. The punch bowls Smith found were varied in size, but tended toward the small, and several were of the type called “sneakers,” which might hold a quart and would be used for sharing table drinks among three or four toppers.

“There were a lot of stoneware bottles around that were used for transporting alcohol,”



Old Taylor Distillery was built in 1887. The Frankfort, Kentucky, operation was the first to produce one million cases of straight bourbon whiskey.

added Smith, an archaeologist at the College of William and Mary. “And this was a single residence. Either they liked to drink a lot, or they liked to entertain a lot.”

Which raises a few questions: Who needs 21 punch bowls? What was going on in Barbados in the 17th century? What exactly does this discovery say about those who lived there?

Smith, who’s the author of *The Archaeology of Alcohol and Drinking*, is among a cadre of archaeologists studying alcohol consumption in the past. “For the New World, for the last 500 years, there hasn’t been a lot” of scholarly work



University of Kentucky archaeology students excavate the Buffalo Trace Distillery.

on drinking, he said. But that’s changing. “People are paying attention to it in a way they weren’t before.”

“Alcoholic beverages have penetrated all societies in the modern world,” Smith wrote in his book, “and it would be difficult to find an archaeological site completely devoid of their presence.” Despite this, drinking has until fairly recently sidestepped archaeological scholarship. “It was not something to be taken seriously, said Nicolas Laracuate, an archaeologist with the Kentucky Heritage Council. Those who studied the role of alcohol in history tended to hail from the realms of medicine, public health, or social psychology, as University of Chicago anthropologist Michael Dietler concluded in his 2006 survey of alcohol studies. Drinking was regarded as a social problem and a marker of pathology and disease. When someone looked at the consumption of alcohol in the past, it was often done through the distorting lens of the 19th-century temperance movement.

That began to change in the 1980s. Researchers came to realize that the study of normal, non-pathological drinking of alcoholic beverages offered clues as to how people once lived, and how they created and maintained social networks. “There is a tendency in historical archaeology to subsume alcohol-related material culture under the heading of foodways or to treat alcohol-related materials as simply an expression of dietary habits,” Smith wrote. “Doing so, however, obfuscates the uniquely meaningful character of alcohol drinking.”

The drinking of alcoholic beverages is altogether different than communal dining, or sharing non-alcoholic drinks. When we make a conscious choice to consume intoxicating beer, wine, or liquor, we enter a world in which complex social rituals and rules apply, rules that don’t apply to, say, drinking milk. Patrick McGovern, scientific director of the Biomolecular Archaeology Laboratory for Cuisine, Fermented Beverages, and Health at the University of Pennsylvania Museum, observed that “considering the importance of alcoholic beverages through human history, it’s amazing how little it’s been talked about and described.”

McGovern is the author of *Uncorking the Past*, which he describes as “a kind of a manifesto for showing that alcohol isn’t just a subsidiary element in society, but it’s been there right from the beginning.” He’s also an innovator in biomolecular archaeology, using chemical analysis to parse traces of wine and beer stored in ancient pottery and metal vessels from around the world. He’s found the earliest chemical evidence of an alcoholic beverage: a cocktail dating back to 7,000 years ago in China. It was a blend of grape, hawthorn fruit, honey, and rice; hence, a wine, mead, and beer rolled into one.

Laracuate, who’s been involved in digs in Kentucky, focused on the long history of whiskey making, said that the archaeology of alcohol is still nascent in North America. The consumption of liquor—in grog shops, in homes, in taverns—attracts the bulk of scholarly study. The documentary research is often rich, drawing from journals and contemporary accounts featuring anecdotes about tavern life and



Frederick Smith, the author of *The Archaeology of Alcohol and Drinking*, has been investigating the role of alcohol in Barbados.

drinking in cities and remote settlements alike. (A favorite example: In 1744, Dr. Alexander Hamilton came upon a drinking club disbanding at a Maryland tavern. “Most of them had got upon their horses and were seated in an oblique situation, deviating much from a perpendicular to the horizontal plane,” he wrote. “Their discourse was as oblique as their position; the only thing intelligible in it was oaths and God dammes; the rest was an inarticulate sound like Rabelais’ frozen words thawing, interlaced with hiccupings and belchings.”)

Nonetheless, there is much to be learned from archaeology. Robert Clouse of the University of Alabama discovered numerous alcohol bottles at Fort Snelling in Minnesota, which was built in the early 1820s, concluding that drink allowed “soldiers to escape from the rigidity and rigors of military life.” During an excavation of the latrines at the Civil-War era Johnson Island Prison in Ohio, archaeologists found far more liquor bottles in the latrines of Confederate prisoners who had taken an oath of allegiance to the federal government, suggesting special treatment for those wavering in their loyalty to the South.

Historical accounts by temperance advocates claim they were winning the war on drink. But archaeological evidence of bottles in privy pits in New York City tells a more nuanced story, as archaeologists Paul Reckner with the Wisconsin Historical Society and Stephen Brighton of the University of Maryland found in a 1999 study of the temperance movement. In comparing 19th-century bottles found in immigrant (primarily Irish and German) neighborhoods near the Five Points area in Manhattan with those uncovered in nonimmigrant neighborhoods in Brooklyn, they saw little difference, and concluded that the temperance movement may have targeted working-class immigrants without cause.

The archaeological evidence also suggests some interesting conclusions about the evolution of drinking cultures across time. In the 1970s, the late James Deetz, a pioneer in the study of foodways and other aspects of daily life, embarked on an analysis of sherds from ceramics used for eating and drinking that were excavated in Plymouth, Massachusetts. The sherds date from 1620 to 1835.

The change in drinking vessels, from larger punch bowls for groups to smaller cups designed for individuals, confirmed other changes he’d seen in architecture and dining. Over the course of two centuries, there was a transition from communal to individual dining and eating. This marked a change in mindset, Deetz believed, in which the individual took primacy over the group.

As Smith noted, analyses by Deetz and others concluded



A bartmannkrug drinking jug found in Bridgetown, Barbados.



Archaeologists have been excavating George Washington's whiskey distillery.

that “the increasing desire for individualized drinking vessels reflected a growing shift in social habits from communal to individual and an increasing preoccupation with social differentiation.” Indeed, Reckner and Brighton suggested that the anti-drinking crusades may have been less about reform and more about maintaining one’s position in the social hierarchy as native-born, middle-class Americans.

PUNCH WAS DEFINED in 1676 in a letter from an East India Company doctor as being from the Hindu word for “five,” since it typically contained five ingredients: citrus, sugar, spirits, water, and spices (often nutmeg). That may or may not be true, but it’s clear that punch caught on with British sailors serving on the Indian Ocean, and they brought the recipe home. England went mad for punch, where it was often made from brandy or whisky. It was enjoyed by all social classes, as it lacked the stigma of swilling gin.

Then punch crossed the Atlantic, where it met rum. The rum industry was, quite literally, built on the dregs of the booming sugar industry. Most rum is distilled from fermented molasses, which is a byproduct of the sugar making process. Oceans of rum were produced on the Caribbean Islands starting in the 17th century, and it served admirably as a base for punch.

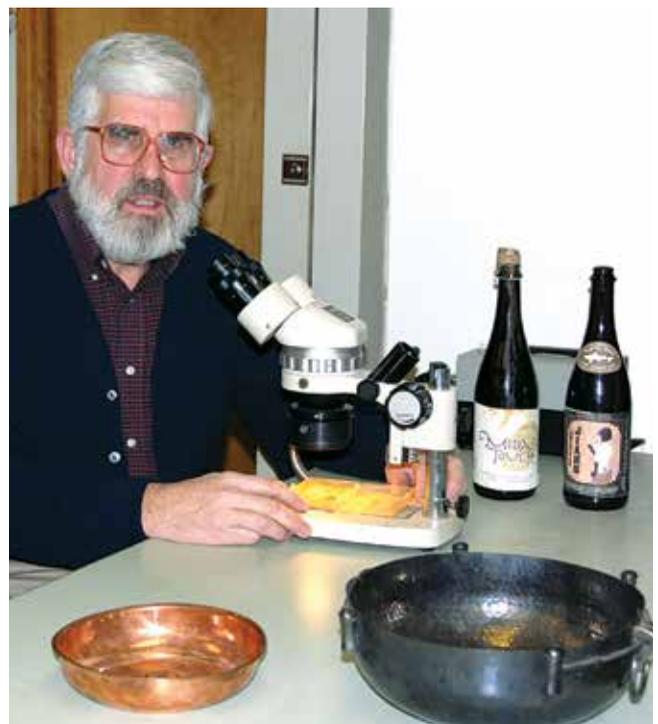
What can we learn from a Barbados residence that had

21 punch bowls in a variety sizes? For starters, that Old World drinking traditions were often brought to the New World. And here the rituals of drinking served much the same purpose as at home—they “often became markers of ethnic identity that expressed and defined boundaries between self and other,” Smith said, which was especially important in a chaotic and fluid society. He concluded that the drinking of punch and other alcoholic beverages showed that sociability was highly valued on Barbados, and he further posited that alcohol was essential in smoothing the anxiety bred from living in a culture that remained socially unstable amid rising affluence.

While wealthy planters and their workers were maintaining their drinking traditions on the island, a similar process was occurring with their slaves, who were brought here in great number to keep the sugar plantations operating. Mapp’s Cave is a hundred-foot-long limestone cave, located in southeast Barbados between two former sugar plantations. Archaeological tests, which were first conducted in 1972, noted there was a lot of “trash” there. That trash became the subject of later archaeological study, which concluded that the cave served as an informal tavern where slaves and maroons (runaway slaves) would congregate.

“In particular, the artifact assemblage contained a large number of alcohol-related materials,” Smith wrote, “which indicate that alcohol drinking was one of the primary activities that occurred at the site.” The ages of the artifacts ranged from the second quarter of the 17th century—shortly after British settlement in 1627—to the 19th century.

Numerous fragments of hand-blown black glass bottles found in the cave were presumed to have contained rum. Some of it was given to slaves as a reward by plantation



Patrick McGovern has found evidence of an alcoholic beverage being consumed 7,000 years ago in China.

MOUNT VERNON ARCHAEOLOGY

PAM KOSTY



Punch was a popular drink in Barbados. This 17th-century punch bowl was one of many bowls discovered in the Back Street Church neighborhood in Bridgetown.

owners, and some of it was likely pilfered from distilleries.

The evidence also suggests that slaves brought their own fermented beverage traditions from Africa. Smith noted that making alcoholic drinks from palm sap was widely practiced by African tribal societies, especially those around modern-day Ghana—a region that also provided many slaves for the sugar industry. Lacking palm sap in Barbados, slaves could have easily obtained sugar cane juice for fermentation. They likely carried this out in wide-mouthed, lidded, and glazed ceramic vessels, called conarees, that have been made by slaves in Barbados since the 17th century, and that were similar to vessels used to ferment palm wine in Africa.

Of the artifacts found in Mapp's Cave, 62 percent were sherds of conarees or similar vessels. "You find these around a lot of the cave sites. So there's speculation that these were used for carrying on the tradition of fermenting beverages—in this case sugar cane," Smith said. "The immigrants' desire to re-create traditional Old World drinking customs gave rise to distinct drinking patterns in the New World," Smith wrote, and allowed immigrants to "retain Old World drinking habits and sustain important social, sacred, and symbolic links to their homelands overseas."

Conviviality may not have been the only reason the slaves gathered together to drink; the timing suggests that they could have plotted revolts in Mapp's Cave while they drank. Slave revolts were frequent in the West Indies—at least 75 were recorded before 1837—and on Barbados the

largest occurred on Easter 1816, when slaves set several plantations on fire and burned sugar cane crops.

British troops were called out to quell the unrest, and in the end 50 slaves were killed in the fighting and 114 were executed in the days immediately following. Smith conceded that no archaeological evidence ties the cave directly to the organization of the rebellion, but those involved in the uprising, including Bussa, the suspected leader, were on nearby



From the 17th to the 19th centuries, Mapps Cave in Barbados was a place where slaves and maroons gathered to drink.



FREDERICK SMITH

Frederick Smith has been working at the St. Nicholas Abbey plantation in Barbados. There are claims that the plantation, which was involved in making rum, dates to the mid 17th century.

plantations, and oral tradition maintains the cave's role in what's been called "Bussa's Rebellion."

IN A STUDY published last year in the *Journal of Middle Atlantic Archaeology*, archaeologist Eleanor Breen of George Washington's Mount Vernon offered an overview of the role of punch bowls in early American life, and noted that "colonial punch drinking assumed an important role in the realm of gentility, sociability, and group membership." Punch was not something one drank alone, but in groups. "Punch drinking reinforced feelings of hospitality among the drinkers, which were cemented by rousing toasts to the host and hostess, the king, party guests, prosperity, and health," Breen wrote.

To achieve such conviviality, one required the right punch bowls for guests. While most people could get by with one or two bowls, the more affluent and gregarious wouldn't be satisfied with so few. Breen noted that at Mount Vernon, George Washington ordered punch bowls in nine different sizes, ranging from half-pint to two-gallon. (Archaeologists also uncovered remnants of a distilling operation at Mount Vernon and found that Washington wasn't engaged in distilling merely as a hobby, but was doing it on a semi-industrial level.)

The anonymous Bridgetown resident with the 21 punch bowls reflects a tremendously gregarious culture, one in which drinking communally was central to colonial life. "It highlights the sociability of Barbadians in the 17th century, and the factors that led to this hyper-sociability," Smith said.

Breen compiled data of punch bowls uncovered at 38 different sites, mostly in the Chesapeake region, but also in New England and Barbados. She noted that "urban occupants or tavern goers tended to have engaged in the punch ceremony and discarded the bowls more often than their rural counterparts." But the data also suggests that Barbados could have embraced the punch drinking ceremony earlier

and more eagerly than others.

"Boston was a big port, so by the end of the 17th century there was some equivalency in terms of punch drinking," Smith said. "But Barbados seemed to be really focused on drinking. It deals with issues of honor and status and masculinity. Chesapeake never placed that kind of emphasis on it—and it never had that urban life that Bridgetown did." He suspects this reflects a gap not only between urban life and rural plantation life, but also the less stable social milieu in Barbados, which prompted more banding together. Bridgetown in 1680 had a population of 3,000 (behind only Boston's 4,500 in the colonial world), and was filled with taverns—"as many as one tavern for every 30 residents," Smith noted.

Smith headed back to Barbados with some students for further excavations and studies this summer. "I've been working at St. Nicholas Abbey for the last five years," he said, in part searching for evidence that supports the claim that the plantation dates to 1658, as local lore has it.

"There are a lot of caves," he noted, with "tons of alcohol bottles." He hopes to get to those in time, and see if they can confirm some of the theories about slaves' drinking culture that he coaxed out of his earlier explorations of Mapp's Cave.

St. Nicholas Abbey plantation was sold a few years ago, and the new owners started up a distillery, and are again making rum from sugar on the estate. This, no doubt, will give future archaeologists plenty of work when someone proposes a study on the rise of craft distilling in the early 21st century. The effects of drinking may be fleeting, but the artifacts are not.

WAYNE CURTIS is a contributing editor at *The Atlantic*, and author of *And a Bottle of Rum: A History of the New World in Ten Cocktails*. His article "Digging Up America" appeared in the Summer 2012 issue of *American Archaeology*.