



# FREDERICK DOUGLASS

 **Wye House**

## ARCHAEOLOGY

**& African American Culture**



## IN MARYLAND



An exhibition featuring a decade of  
investigations by UMD archaeologists into  
the origins of Maryland's culture.

Written by Mark P. Leone

Exhibition co-curated by  
Tracy Jenkins, Mark P. Leone,  
Dr. Elizabeth Pruitt, Benjamin A. Skolnik,  
Dr. Amanda Tang, and Stefan Woehlke

ON DISPLAY THRU JULY 2017  
AT HORNBAKE LIBRARY ON FREDERICK DOUGLASS PLAZA

[wyehousearchaeology.org](http://wyehousearchaeology.org)



## INTRODUCTION

# Creating Culture

The archaeology of Wye House involves nine years of excavations examining slave quarters, the industries of the enslaved, the food of all its residents, and how an agricultural economy based on enslavement of African Americans made the plantation wealthy. A large number of enslaved people lived at Wye House, the most famous of whom is Frederick Douglass (c. 1818 – 1895).

The exhibition does not highlight the oppression of enslavement which is well documented by Douglass, other first person accounts, and scholars. This exhibition and the scientific research behind it focuses on how our work has been done collaboratively with the descendant communities, both black and white. It attempts to show how enslaved individuals made an independent culture. Thus, the violence that Frederick Douglass sought to end is now seen together with the production of Maryland culture, black and white, that archaeology finds.

Wye House, Eastern Shore of Maryland



*“The home plantation of Colonel Lloyd wore the appearance of a country village. All the mechanical operations for all the farms were performed here. The shoemaking and mending, the blacksmithing, cartwrighting, coopering, weaving, and grain-grinding, were all performed by the slaves on the home plantation...*

*... It was called by the slaves the Great House Farm.”*

*—Frederick Douglass*



## PEOPLE

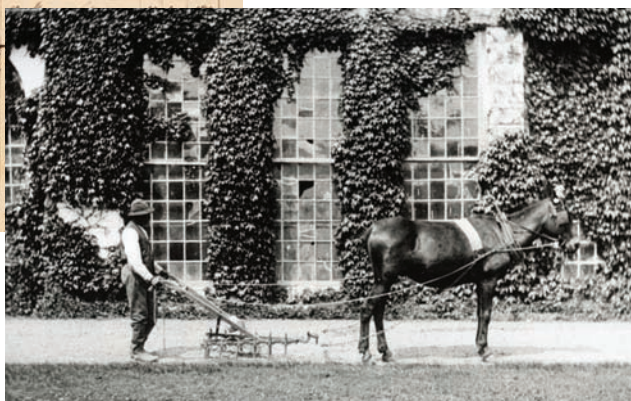
# African Americans at Wye House

Numbers impress. They can be overwhelming. In 1840, 168 slaves lived at Wye House Farm. At the same time, the Lloyds owned a total of over 550 enslaved peoples across 42,000 acres of their holdings in Maryland and other states.

The Lloyds invested heavily in slave based industrial farming after the American Revolution. Before the Revolution they owned about 55 people. The other side of numbers is that the Roberts family lived at Wye House, the DeSheilds family, the Copper family, the Bailey family, and about a dozen others. Their descendants still live in Easton, Unionville, Copperville, and Oak Grove.



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From top:  
Frederick Douglass, 1855,  
Agnes Demby, descendant  
of an enslaved family,  
the Lloyd family portrait  
by Charles Willson Peale,  
1771, Census of enslaved  
people using first and  
surnames, Harrison Roberts,  
formerly enslaved, near the  
greenhouse c.1900

# Food on the Plantation

Through thousands of artifacts, we can describe how food was made by enslaved people and by the Lloyds. Everything we know about eating and feeding black and white people is found through the archaeology and historical documents including recipes at Wye House.

Adding to this record of eating by the enslaved, we also have the sets of dishes saved by the Lloyds. We have two rare cookbooks, made and used at Wye House by four Lloyd wives and four African American women who cooked, wrote, and thought through recipes.

Over the course of the 350 years that people have been growing and cooking, eating and drinking at Wye House, a single Maryland cuisine came into being, one that is closely related to the Southern cooking we all enjoy today.



*Cattle and cuts of meat, 1901*

*Interior of the Wye greenhouse*



# Plants in the Greenhouse

*Genus Vaccinium*  
(berry bush)



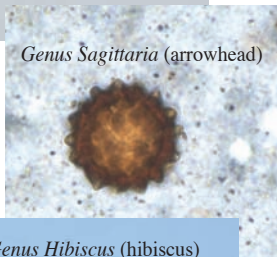
*Genus Pinus* (pine tree)



Family Liliaceae (lilies)



*Genus Sagittaria* (arrowhead)



*Genus Hibiscus* (hibiscus)



*Fossilized pollen specimens found in the greenhouse identified the types of plant species that were grown and consumed at Wye House plantation.*

Plants, water lilies, visitors, pollen, enslaved people, scientific gardeners, beauty, and science. There were hundreds of greenhouses built all over North America in the 18th and 19th centuries. While there are still plenty, the one at Wye House is the only one left from the 18th century that still stands.

The Wye Greenhouse was used to house tropical plants like oranges, lemons, hibiscus, bananas, plantains, and pond lilies. It was also used to propagate- and probably to domesticate- medicinal teas, analgesics, cure-alls and pain killers. The greenhouse was for ornamentals and for the improvement of food and health. It was for display and it was for scientific gardening.

The Lloyds used the greenhouse for show and productivity. Enslaved African Americans maintained the temperature in microclimates there and ran the waterpumps and thermometers to nurture hundreds of species of plants.

This greenhouse is special because we see how whites and blacks made the natural world more productive for both, using plants. Two separate gardening traditions came out of this: 'scientific' agriculture and African American yards.

# Religion

Excavations at Wye House reveal evidence of how African and Christian religious beliefs blended and merged in the 19th century. Our team dug up an intact set of objects which we hypothesize are religious symbols—traditional ones from Africa, but mixed with one we believe to be Biblical: a representation of Ezekiel's Wheel.

No one has found this combination before. It is a blending of religious symbols of a tenant farmer family after 1865. Christianity had not erased traditional African spirit practices; it had merged with them to form a moving blend that still thrives today.

This is the latest archaeological find from a nine-year-long excavation at Wye House, the site of a former plantation near Easton, Maryland. Frederick Douglass spent two years there as a child and wrote about his experiences in his three autobiographies. The new discovery helps flesh out his vivid, auto-biographical descriptions of African-American life.

University of Maryland Graduate students Benjamin A. Skolnik and Elizabeth Pruitt made the discovery and excavated the deposit.



*Ogun's tools found buried in a column on the lower right hand side of the deposit of circles and a wheel. Ogun is the God of the forge whose implements enable cultivation and warfare.*



*The circle and the cosmogram represented the universe, and the path we travel through this world and the afterlife.*

Photograph by Sarah A. Grady

# The Cosmogram and the Wheel

From the late 18th century, Methodist Episcopal, and later African Methodist Episcopal (AME) preachers successfully carried the Christian message along Maryland's Eastern Shore. They converted African Americans to Christianity, in part, by giving new meaning to traditional symbols.



*A cosmogram-like figure molded into the lid of a canning jar*

Photograph by  
George Holzer

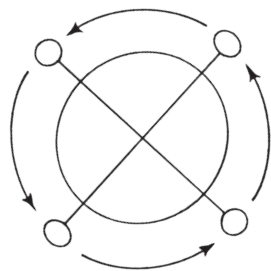
A powerful West Central African spiritual symbol—the cosmogram, a circle with an X inside may have been seen as Ezekiel's blazing chariot wheel. The archaeological discovery contains both. We call this the 'emergent wheel' because it shows the growing power of Christian imagery alongside the African. It shows us a moment in time when these symbols

literally lived side-by-side, says graduate student Stefan Woehlke.

Christian preachers had discovered the powerful resonance the wheel held. For those steeped in the cosmogram and circle, it is not hard to see how 'Zekiel Saw the Wheel' became one of the most powerful spirituals. It endures in AME churches and camp meetings on the Eastern Shore.



Illustration by Christopher Fennell



Photograph by Tracy Jenkins



*The cosmogram as a rose window  
in the pediment of St. Stephen's  
AME Church, Unionville, MD.*

AME preachers relied on the power of the circle, as the sixth AME bishop and founder of Wilberforce University in Ohio, Daniel Payne, reported in the 19th century:

This young man insisted that ‘Sinners won’t get converted unless there is a ring...at camp meeting there must be a ring here, a ring there, a ring over yonder, or sinners will not get converted.’

(Hazzard-Donald 2013: 97)

Bishop Payne referred to the Ring Shout—a traditional circle prayer dance.

Participants move counter clockwise singing and dancing. This motion is the same direction as the cycle of life in the cosmogram. The Ring Shout is still practiced occasionally at AME churches and frequently at camp meetings.

AME and Methodist Church members describe that Ezekiel’s wheel represents God’s presence among his people. Carlene Phoenix, a descendent of the Wye House Plantation enslaved community, still lives and worships in the area. She says the wheel retains its Christian symbolism and power.



Ruth Starr Rose, *Ezekiel Saw the Wheel*, 1941 Talbot Historical Society; Used with permission from The Estate of Ruth Starr Rose.

Barbara Paca, *Ruth Starr Rose (1887-1965): Revelations of African American Life in Maryland and the World*, The Reginald F. Lewis Museum; 1st edition (October 1, 2015)

*“For me the wheel is all about the presence of God. He is omnipotent and is anywhere and everywhere at all times. No matter what our ancestors endured during their captivity, God was there. For me the wheel was a reminder to them about the presence of God and the reassurance that no matter what we endure that He will never leave us nor forsake us.”*

Carlene Phoenix, 2016

## Zekiel Saw the Wheel

Wheel, oh, wheel  
 Wheel in de middle of a wheel...  
 ‘Zekiel saw de wheel of time  
 Wheel in de middle of a wheel  
 Ev’ry spoke was human kind  
 Way in de middle of a wheel  
 Way up yonder on de mountain top  
 Wheel in de middle of a wheel  
 My Lord an’ de chariot stop  
 Way in de middle of a wheel  
 ‘Zekiel saw de wheel  
 Way in de middle of de air...  
 De big wheel run by faith  
 Little wheel run by de grace of God  
 Wheel in a wheel  
 Way in de middle of de air  
 Wheel, oh, wheel  
 Wheel in de middle of a wheel

*The white wheel in the front yard of an African American home in NE Washington DC, 2016.*



*Cosmograms in an iron fence in NW Washington DC, 2016.*

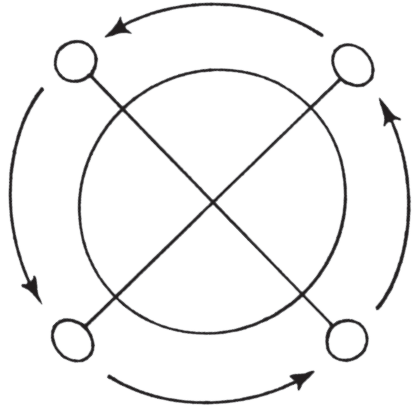


Photographs by Stefan Woeltke



*An African American yard with a silvered rubber tire with angels wings, symbolizing movement, 2016.*





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