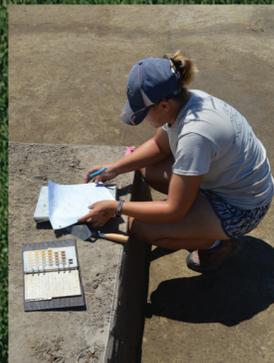


Elizabeth Key, the illegitimate daughter of Thomas Key and an enslaved African woman, was born near Denbigh, Virginia about 1630. A member of the first generation of people of African descent born in British North America, she stood up to emerging patterns of racial inequality through a careful argument about the relationship between labor, parentage, and faith based on her own life experiences.

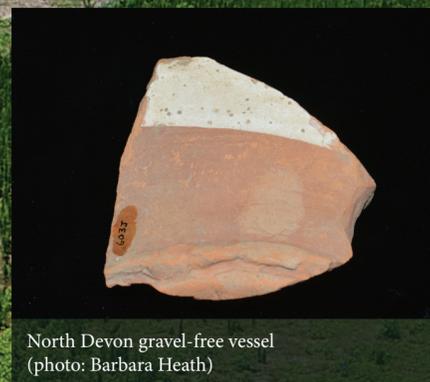
Following her father's sale of her labor to Humphrey Higginson in 1636, Elizabeth grew up at the Harrop Plantation near the colonial capital of Jamestown. An influential member of the Colonial Council and Elizabeth's godfather, Higginson pledged to treat her as a daughter, provide for her, and free her if he should die prior to the end of her nine-year term of service. Most of her time was likely spent working alongside Higginson's wife and daughter keeping house. Sometime before he left the colony for England in the 1650s, Higginson broke his promise to Thomas Key. Rather than freeing her, or taking her with his family, he sold Elizabeth's labor to John Mottrom.



(top row) Excavations at Coan Hall, 2011-2019; photos by Dr. Barbara Heath (three left) and Katherine Parker (two right)



Detail of "running deer" motif on tobacco pipe bowl (photo: Barbara Heath)

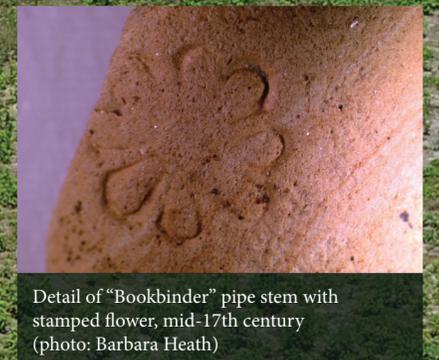


North Devon gravel-free vessel (photo: Barbara Heath)

Mottrom was among the earliest English colonists on the Northern Neck. The settlement he established at Chicacoan about 1640 became the core of Northumberland County. Elizabeth labored at Mottrom's Coan Hall plantation as a house servant for several years, during which time she bore two children fathered by English servant William Grinstead. Following Mottrom's death in 1655, with Grinstead acting as her representative in court, she sued for her freedom.



English white ball clay tobacco pipe bowl, 2nd quarter of the 17th century (photo: Barbara Heath)



Detail of "Bookbinder" pipe stem with stamped flower, mid-17th century (photo: Barbara Heath)

Her argument rested on three principles: that as the daughter of an Englishman, and as a practicing Christian, she should not be considered a slave, and that since she had served far beyond the term of her indenture to Higginson, she should be compensated for her time and immediately released from service. Mottrom's executors contested her claim, and over a period of six months, her case was heard by three legislative bodies. In July of 1656, she finally won her freedom. Shortly after the verdict, she and William Grinstead married. The couple had two surviving sons. Following Grinstead's death, she married John Pierce and had a daughter. Elizabeth died sometime prior to Pierce's death in 1667.

The broad outlines of Elizabeth's life have been preserved in documents relating to her legal case and in other government papers. Recent archaeological work at Coan Hall provides a new perspective on her daily experiences as a Black laborer, a mother, and a woman aspiring to be free.

Elizabeth Key

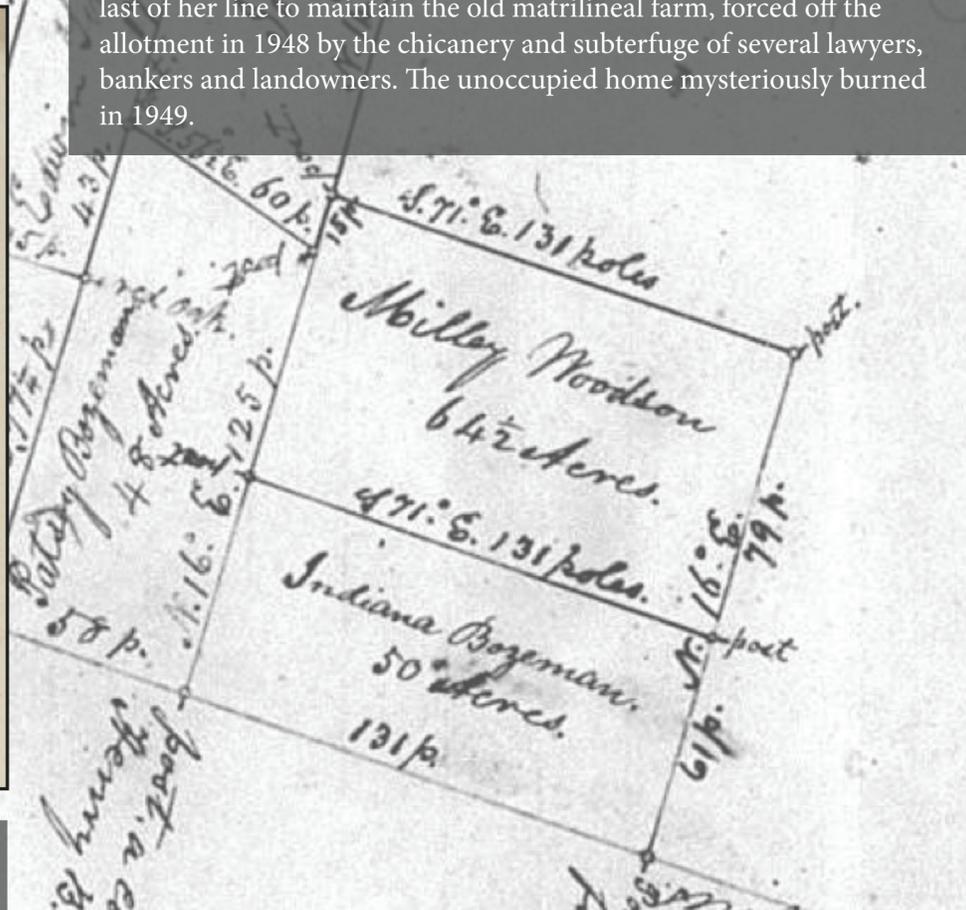
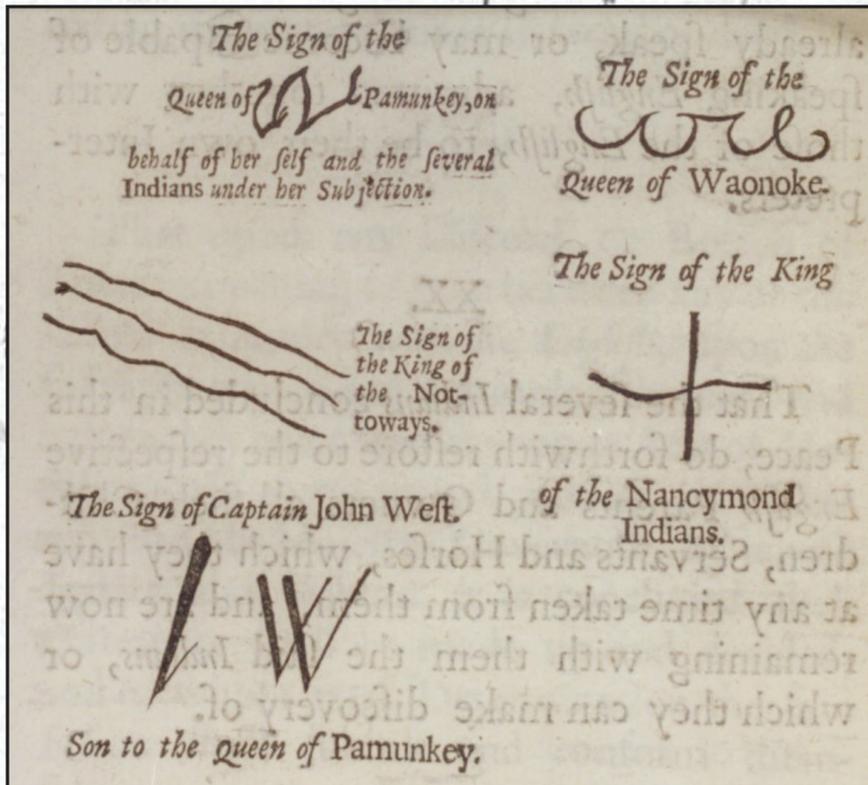
Coan Hall, Northumberland County

Women of Courage | Virginia Archaeology Month 2020

This research is being led by Dr. Barbara Heath at University of Tennessee Knoxville. She can be contacted at bheath2@utk.edu. (Background: Aerial view of Coan Hall manor house; photo by Aerial Video & Imagery, LLC)

Born c. 1831 at the Nottoway Indian Town, Millie Woodson-Turner was raised in a household where kinship was traced through her matriline and Iroquoian was spoken by her elders. As an adult, she applied for an allotment of tribal land, built a home and raised a family of ten alongside other members of her matrilineage. In antebellum Southampton County, Millie was classed as a “free person of color” and represented a rare demographic of non-White female property owners of successful small-holding farms.

After the Civil War, Nottoway allottees were identified as ‘Indians,’ but as an outcome of long-term intermarriage with peoples of African and European descent, Jim Crow Virginia increasingly subsumed Nottoway peoples under the category of ‘Negro’ within the Black-White racial binary. Predatory lending and structural racism stripped Nottoway descendants of their land through debt resolution, taxation and legal manipulation. At the time of the Second World War, few Nottoway descendants retained tenancy of their reservation tracts. Millie Woodson-Turner’s daughter Susanna Claud was the last of her line to maintain the old matrilineal farm, forced off the allotment in 1948 by the chicanery and subterfuge of several lawyers, bankers and landowners. The unoccupied home mysteriously burned in 1949.



An assortment of artifacts represented at the Millie Woodson-Turner farmstead (44SN341), including architectural remains, farm implements, household ceramics and glass, personal effects and clothing-related fragments.

The Iroquoian-speaking Nottoway Indians are indigenous to Southside Virginia. During the colonial era, the Nottoway were trading partners and military allies of the British. Per treaty agreements with the English Crown (above), two large reservations were established – the Circle and Square tracts – and eventually surrounded by Isle of Wight, Southampton and Surry counties. In 1824, the Commonwealth of Virginia agreed to the allotment of tribal land. Over the next 125 years, the Nottoway and their descendants divided, privatized and sold their reservation lands.

To date, 44SN0341 is the only archaeologically surveyed Iroquoian reservation site in Virginia, made possible by a National Park Service Underrepresented Communities grant.

Background: Detail of Indian Town allotment surveys, c. 1850-55. In addition to her allotment, Millie Woodson (center) inherited or purchased neighboring parcels from her tribesmen, creating one of the main Nottoway *ohwachira* (matrilineage) compounds during the last half of the nineteenth century.



The Nottoway Reservation land, c. 1864 (top), outside the county seat of Jerusalem, now Courtland, VA. An early photo of a Nottoway woman in Southampton County, c. 1875 (left). Born and raised at the family allotment homesite, Virgie Claud Hardy, c. 1940 (right) was the daughter of Susanna Turner Claud and the granddaughter of Millie Woodson-Turner.

Millie Woodson-Turner

Nottoway Reservation Allotment & Farmstead

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