

Famous Frederick author dies at 85

From news reports

Probably the two most famous serial archeologists in recent American fiction are Indiana Jones and Amelia Peabody Emerson. Jones starred in a handful of top box-office movies and was famous for looting sites and destroying provenience. Mrs. Emerson's care-taking exploits were detailed in a dozen books chronicling her decades of searches in the Egyptian desert about 100 years ago.

The author of the Amelia books knew whereof she wrote. Barbara Mertz (aka Elizabeth Peters) had a doctorate from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. She was a longtime resident of Frederick County and died there August 8 at age 85.

She lived in what one newspaper described as a "wonderful, haunted, 1820 stone house." She had a predilection for cats, a least a few of whom she named after Egyptian pharaohs and Washington Redskins players. When ASM was busy with the Rosenstock Site, she spoke to the group.

She churned out books with extraordinary speed, once remarking that she had lost count of them sometime around the publication of her 50th volume. She wrote more than two dozen gothic novels as Barbara Michaels and more than three dozen as Elizabeth Peters, including the series about the parasol-toting Victorian pyramid explorer, tracing her career from her first expedition in 1884 through her marriage to a fellow archeologist through the years to 1923 when were grandparents. She also published the fascinating encyclopedia-like compendium "Amelia Peabody's Egypt" combining her fictional characters with real history.

"Between Amelia Peabody and Indiana Jones, it's Amelia — in wit and daring — by a landslide," author Paul Theroux once wrote in the New York Times.

Mertz acknowledged that Peabody was not unlike herself. Fascinated from a young age by the ancient world of the pharaohs, she pursued a doctorate in Egyptology at a time when relatively few women sought and even fewer found professional career opportunities.

Learning of her area of specialization, her parents asked — "with perfectly good sense," Mertz said — "what are you going to do with this?" When she and her then-husband, Richard Mertz, came to the Washington area in the 1950s, she found it easier to obtain secretarial work if she omitted her doctorate from her qualifications.

Mertz said that she had planned to become an archeologist, not a writer. Jobs in Egyptology were "few and far between" after she graduated, and it was even worse for women, she wrote.

She wrote two scholarly but highly readable books on ancient Egypt, "Temples, Tombs and Hieroglyphs" (1964) and "Red Land, Black Land" (1966), but was unable to find employment in academia. When she turned to fiction, she discovered that she had a talent, and that readers had an appetite, for particular tales of historical intrigue, mixing solid background with adventure of the criminal kind.

Her fiction, Washington Post writer Sarah Booth Conroy once noted, was "the literary equivalent of multiple gin-and-tonics." They were "to be taken in times of self-indulgence, physical pain or mental anguish because they come with a guarantee that the evil will be punished, the good will be rewarded, pleasingly plump women will seduce brilliant men with bulging muscles and all will be set right in the world."

As a writer, she prided herself on offering readers a classy sort of romance even while assuring them that Amelia Peabody and her husband Radcliffe Emerson would continue to enjoy the carnal pleasure "until they're 90" just as they and their children continued to enjoy the lure of archeology.

One of her characters described the basic plot of the nonarcheology part of her stories: "'Another dead body. Every year it is the same. Every year, another dead body.'"

Her daughter, Elizabeth Mertz, a law professor at the University of Wisconsin, said her mother loved Frederick. She moved to the 1820s farmhouse from Potomac nearly 40 years ago after seeking out a spot to write. The home is surrounded by peaceful gardens.

"It just kind of fit her quirky lifestyle," she said, adding, "Frederick was the place she came out to to be a writer. She loved it here."

Elizabeth Mertz said her mother's death was the result of an unexpected pulmonary episode. She had had cancer and emphysema for the past 10 years.

Paid artifact hunts ravage Virginia

By Taft Kiser

Condensed from the New York Times, August 2, 2013

CHESTER, Va. — For archeologists like me, the Flowerdew Hundred Plantation near Williamsburg, Va., is our Woodstock, a sentimental spot where dozens of professionals earned their trowels. The farm's incredible archeological wealth ranges from 12,000-year-old Native American tools to a tree that shaded Union soldiers in June 1864.

Imagine our dismay, then, when a professed "relic hunter" from Texas named Larry Cissna sold some \$60,000 in tickets for his Grand National Relic Shootout — an artifact-hunting competition — at Flowerdew Hundred. The shootout took place in early March, and participants walked away with 8,961 artifacts dating from the Civil War or before.

In Virginia, as in many states, relic hunting is illegal on public land, but legal on private land. Flowerdew, it turns out, belongs to the James C. Justice Companies. A spokesman said chairman, president and chief executive is [James C. Justice II](#) was unaware of the "shootout."

Paid hunts like this have increased in the last 15 years, fueled by the market for Civil War relics, where a rare button can bring \$5,000. Cissna has built a small empire using a Web site to organize hunts and sell advertising, a job that became easier in June when the Travel Channel began airing his reality show, "Dig Wars."

Assuming a mean value of \$10 an artifact on the relic market, the Flowerdew participants took about \$90,000. But the lost history cannot be quantified. Competing to grab objects, the relic hunters shred the ancient matrix, erasing stories that remain written only in the soil.

Hunters on private property are required to get permission from the landowner and taking artifacts from archeological sites without permission is trespassing, a misdemeanor. Often the law is ignored.

"They always have a story," one 70-year-old landowner said. "They are always professors or writers." Or so they claim. Although recently threatened by a zealous relic hunter with a small shovel, he continues to defend his farm.

Most owners avoid confrontation. In 2006 Cissna collected about \$35,000 for a hunt near Fredericksburg, without permission. Police removed more than 175 trespassers, but the owner did not press charges.

That may be because relic hunters are a vocal lot. In 2005, Virginia's General Assembly considered a bill requiring written permission from the landowner and increasing the penalty for trespassing with the intent to take artifacts. Relic Web sites blasted it. Representative Kenneth R. Plum, the Democrat who sponsored the bill, told a reporter that "the floodgates opened" and the proposal faded away.

Even graves are in potential danger, though all human interments are protected by law. Pre-1900 burials, regardless of their demographic, are typically unmarked and easily violated by accident. Flowerdew has three known cemeteries, containing Woodland Indians, 1620s colonists and enslaved individuals from about 1760. All three are in the area metal-detected last March. In some burials, one blow from a shovel could destroy all surviving remains.

Another problem is the lack of awareness on the part of landowners. Imagine someone offering \$5,000 to remove "junk" from your yard. You may not realize that your familiar universe veils a lost world. Relic hunters exploit this. I have heard of organizers paying \$40,000 for a year's access to a farmer's field.

Preserving local history requires passionate locals and in today's era of shrinking budgets, the ideal model is a cadre of professionals assisted by volunteers. At the Little Bighorn Battlefield in Montana, volunteers have used their metal-detecting machines to pinpoint artifacts, whose position rewrote the story of Custer's Last Stand.

But archeologists, professional or not, do not hunt objects. We hunt lost worlds. Sadly, here in Virginia and elsewhere, those worlds are slipping away under the relic-hunter's shovel, all for the sake of a few bucks.

Bones, found in PG field, are reburied

By Annys Shin

Condensed from the Washington Post, August 4, 2013

Usually the Rev. Cynthia Snively knows a little more about the person whose funeral she presides over. As she stood over a gray coffin in an open field in Upper Marlboro on Saturday afternoon, all she knew about the man she had been asked to eulogize was that he lived long ago, he was African American and he probably had been a slave who worked on the tobacco plantation that once surrounded his grave.

After Snively finished, Chris Fuller, 64, said, "I just feel a connection. As African Americans, our history is very muted, having been robbed of it for so long. Unfortunately there are a lot of gaps. I am grateful to learn anything."

Fuller has lived nearby for eight years and said he had often wondered about the dilapidated house and surrounding fields where the remains of the African-American man were discovered by a developer in 2003. The bones were turned over to Prince George's County police, who arranged the reinterment.

The house, listed on the National Register of Historic Places as the Clagett House at Cool Spring Manor, was built around 1830 by William Digges Clagett, who ran a plantation on 297 acres surrounding it until he lost the land after the Civil War.

County police brought in archeologists who used radar to search for areas where soil had been disturbed. They determined that the remains were part of a small cluster of at least 13 graves probably belonging to slaves and freedmen who lived and worked on the property, county police said. It is located not far from the site of former slave quarters and is bounded by a swath of woods.

Forensic analysis by the Smithsonian Institution discovered that the unidentified African American had a back injury, ate a diet high in protein and smoked a clay pipe.

He could have been a slave. He could also have been a free man, or both, at different points in his life, Snively noted in her eulogy.

Census records show that in 1840, Clagett owned 39 slaves, said Jennifer Stabler, an archeologist with the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission. Stabler also found ads that Clagett ran in local newspapers at the time, offering a reward for a runaway slave named Joe, who "has lost two of his toes nearest to his large toe, I think, from his right foot."

Could the man in the coffin possibly be Joe? It is impossible to know.

Chapter notes

Anne Arundel

Meets the second Tuesday of the month at the Severna Park Branch Library, 45 West McKinsey Road, Severna Park. 7:30 p.m. Contact Mechelle Kerns at AACHapASM@hotmail.com or the chapter website <http://www.aachapasm.org/calendar.html>

September 10: TBA

November 12: Julie Schablitsky will speak on the War of 1812 Caulk's Battlefield.

Central Maryland

Central Chapter has no formal meetings planned, but it does engage in field work and related activities. Contact chapter President Stephen Israel, 410-945-5514 or ssisrael@verizon.net

Charles County

Meetings are held 7 on the second Thursday (September-May) in the community room of the LaPlata Police Department. Contact President Carol Cowherd at cowherdcl@gmail.com or 301-375-9489. Chapter website is charlescoasm.org and its blog is ccarchsoc.blogspot.com

Mid-Potomac

The chapter meets the third Thursday of the month at 7:30 p.m. at Needwood Mansion, 6700 Needwood Road, Derwood. Dinner at a local restaurant at 5:45 p.m. Contact heather.bouslog@mncppc-mc.org or 301-840-5848 or Don Housley at donhou704@earthlink.net or 301-424-8526. Chapter website: <http://www.asmmidpotomac.org> Email: asmmidpotomac@gmail.com Facebook page: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Mid-Potomac-Archaeology/182856471768>

September 19: Garrett Peck, journalist and local historian, will speak about his new book "The Smithsonian Castle and the Seneca Quarry."

October 17: The DVD "Jane: Starvation, Cannibalism, and Endurance at Jamestown," which details the archeological and forensics techniques used to uncover an incident of cannibalism during Jamestown colony.

Monocacy

The chapter meets in the C. Burr Artz Library in Frederick the second Wednesday of the month at 6 p.m. For more information, visit the chapter's web page at digfrederick.com or call 301-378-0212.

September 11: Troy Nowak, assistant state underwater archeologist, will present a program, "Underwater Archeology of the War of 1812 in the Chesapeake." NOTE: Related programs will be presented on September 10 and 12. Contact the chapter for details.

Northern Chesapeake

Meetings are the second Wednesday of the month. Members and guests assemble at 6:30 for light refreshments. A business meeting at 7 is followed by the presentation at 7:30. Contact Dan Coates at 410-273-9619 or dancoates@comcast.net Website: <http://sites.google.com/site/northernchesapeake>

Upper Patuxent

Programs are the second Monday of the month at 7 p.m. at the Ellicott City Colored School. Dinner is available at the Diamondback in Ellicott City at 5:30 p.m. Labs are held the second and fourth Saturdays of the month. For location and other chapter information contact Dave Cavey at 410 747-0093 or hoplite1@comcast.net On Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Upper-Patuxent-Archaeology-Group/464236446964358> or try UPArchaeologygroup@yahoo.com or <http://uparchaeologygroup.weebly.com/>

September 9: Jim Gibb will reveal the secrets found at ASM's St. Francis Xavier field school this summer.

October 7: Barbara Israel presents "Maya: with a Peppering of Olmec."

Western Maryland

Programs are the fourth Friday of the month, at 7:30 p.m. in the LaVale Library, unless noted. Contact Roy Brown, 301-724-7769. Chapter email: wmdasm@yahoo.com Website: <http://sites.google.com/site/wmdasm>

September 27: Fred Will presents a program on "Out Buildings" of rural South Central Pennsylvania.

October 25: Suzanne Trussell will report on the 2012 excavations held at a 19th Century homestead in Mexico Farms, Allegeny County.

November 2: Field Trip to historic Mount Savage, Maryland.

December: No meeting, due to holidays.

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ASM members receive the monthly newsletter, ASM Ink; the biannual journal, MARYLAND ARCHEOLOGY, reduced admission to ASM events and a 10% discount on items sold by the Society. Contact Membership Secretary Belinda Urquiza for membership rates. For publication sales, contact Dan Coates at ASM Publications, 716 Country Club Rd., Havre de Grace, MD 21078-2104 or 410-273-9619 or dancoates@comcast.net

Submissions welcome. Please send to Myron Beckenstein, 6817 Pineway, University Park, MD. 20782, 301-864-5289 or myronbeck@verizon.net

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