Bryantown, MD - Zekiah Swamp is a place of mud and mystery.

The Third Lord Baltimore, Charles Calvert, built a summer cottage there in the 1670s.

The Piscataway Indians took refuge and built a palisaded fort there in 1680 when Indian Wars with the Susquehannocks threatened their people.

The first Charles County Courthouse, built long before the courthouse that burned in Port Tobacco, was located near the swamp just south of present-day La Plata.

Following the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln in 1865, John Wilkes Booth and co-conspirator David Herold got lost and spent the night there before a former slave guided them out of the swamp prior to their crossing over the Potomac River into Virginia.

It’s said to be the home of Goat Man, a strange horned creature reported to be half-man allegedly seen in the mid-to-late 20th century.

It is the largest hardwood swamp in Maryland and the Smithsonian considers it one of the most important ecological areas on the East Coast.

Zekiah Swamp meanders some 21 miles through Charles and Prince George’s counties and is not an easy place to visit.

Most of its territory is in the hands of private landowners who have largely kept it undeveloped, but slowly over time, the swamp has revealed its secrets.

In 2012, Dr. Julia A. King, professor of anthropology at St. Mary’s College of Maryland, co-authored a 300-page document on their research in Zekiah Swamp highlighting the discovery of Zekiah Fort, found after a two-year research effort funded by Michael and Laura Sullivan of Mount Victoria.

Archaeologists had been looking for the fort since 1935, she noted, “but we found that sucker, not far from Waldorf.”

In 1680, the Piscataway Indians built the palisaded fort on a tall hill, seeking refuge when hostilities from neighboring warring tribes threatened their way of life.

A field crew digging a few last test pits near the conclusion of two years of research began unearthing Indian pottery shards, glass beads and clay tobacco pipes.

“It was an amazing day when they called me and told me what they were finding,” King recalled.

Even more amazing, she noted, was that gravel mining had been going on all around the site but hadn’t impacted it.

“The discovery was made just south of Billingsley Road,” King said. “It was near a huge gravel mine. The fact that it had not been mined was just unbelievable.”

Charles County has since placed the property in protected status, she noted.

One of her students knew how to plot land parcels using Geographical Information Systems, which she said was an immense benefit for the team’s research.

Facts gleaned from the historical record indicate the Piscataway people’s way of life was changing when the fort was built.

While the Indians used lithic technology for literally thousands of years, research revealed that a little over four decades after the Calverts stepped off the boat, natives abandoned bows and arrows for the white man’s superior firepower. Below, Colonial gun flints found at Windy Knolls in Charles County.

They pleaded with Lord Baltimore for powder and shot for their muskets, claiming in the written record that their young men no longer knew how to knap projectile points from stone.

The large number of colonial gun flints found at the site bear out this testimony.

Zekiah Swamp runs from Prince George’s all the way down to Allens Fresh in the Wicomico.

Charlie Murphy of Stonemur Vineyards in Bryantown, whose farm backs up to the natural greenway, said there is a lot of history associated with Zekiah Swamp.

“My great-great-grandfather worked at a wharf in Allens Fresh, which is basically part of Zekiah Swamp,” Murphy noted. “Back in the 1800s, it was just like a Port Tobacco thing, a small village.”

In the 1850s, he noted, an engineer attempted to construct a canal through the swamp to transport tobacco from the eastern portions of the county, but the attempt was either too difficult or too costly, because the ambitious project never materialized.

“Down in the swamp area behind our farm, there were dirt banks built up to clear fields,” Murphy pointed out. “Slaves built them. In the 1960s, the area was timbered out and they broke through those banks and the swamp flooded again.”

Murphy said he found the remains of a whiskey still Revenuers destroyed in the swamp back in the county’s moonshine days.

“The Revenuers blew it up,” he said. “There are still some cinderblocks down there and when they set the still off, the explosion sent a barrel ring into the treetops where it ended up wrapped around a limb on a tree.”
He added that in the late 1990s following a drought, his father-in-law walked all the way across the swamp.

"It's been fairly dry this year," Murphy stated.

"The amazing thing about Zekiah Swamp is that in over 350 years, it has not really been disturbed by humans at all," he said. "We do have coyotes in the swamp. One was shot just last year."

When asked if he'd ever seen the Goat Man, Murphy said no.

King was jokingly prodded as to whether her students found any archaeological evidence of him, she laughed and said, "No, we didn't find the Goat Man."

The Goat Man is an urban legend that emerged in 1957 when the first sighting of a strange hairy man with horns allegedly occurred. Reports of a hairy, manlike creature began surfacing in the areas of Forestville and Upper Marlboro in Prince George's County.

He is reported to have lived within the 21-mile confines of Zekiah Swamp.

In 1962, the killing of 14 people including 12 children was attributed to the beast.

Unnamed survivors allegedly claimed the creature hacked his victims to pieces with an axe while bellowing like Satan himself.

No police report of the incident has ever been found, however.

Another legend speculates that the Goat Man was the result of an experiment gone wrong, when a doctor at the U.S. Department of Agriculture Laboratory in Beltsville crossed the DNA of a goat with that of his lab assistant.

If this far-fetched compilation sounds a little "out there," it should be noted that the doctor, a fellow by the name of Stephen Fletcher, allegedly confessed to having created the monster.

Whether you believe such things is up to you, but you have to admit, such wanton ridiculousness does make a great story.

The Goat Man aside, King said their two-year explorations in Zekiah Swamp also revealed other important discoveries, as her students may have found evidence of a 17th-century servants quarters which possibly were part of Charles Calvert’s summer home, including—of Spanish origin—a piece of eight.

The house was built in 1674 on property originally noted in the record as His Lordship’s Favor. Although archaeological evidence was inconclusive on the site, King admitted that Zekiah Swamp probably has a lot more left for us to discover.

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