

Transcript of Episode 2: Old Jail Museum

Ayla Anderson 0:10

This episode features the old jail Museum in Maryland. And we talk about the legend of the witch of Leonardtown, you will learn about her life and her death and the curse that she bestowed upon the land. The museum actually has the very stone that she was found dead on. And legend has it that anyone who touches the stone is forever cursed. We also discuss a more sensitive subject, and that is of St. Mary's counties only documented lynching victim, Benjamin Hance, and how his story is tied to a jar of dirt that is housed at the museum. Thank you so much for tuning in. And I really appreciate your interest in these amazing stories. I hope you enjoy.

Ayla Anderson 0:53

Alright, we're going to get started. Okay, hi, everybody. I'm here at the old, is it the old town jail?

Ayla Anderson 0:58

Just the old jail in Leonardtown.

Ayla Anderson 1:01

And I'm with Katherine Davis, who I'm going to see if I get this right. You're a student at the George Washington University in DC. And you are currently interning and one of the projects that you've been focusing on is the work here at the old jail.

Katherine Davis 1:16

Yes, that's correct. Well, thank you for having me.

Ayla Anderson 1:21

I came here yesterday, actually, and did a little tour of the museum, and the jail. I mean, the jail and the museum. It's the same thing. And it's got some really cool things in here. But there's two particular items that we really wanted to talk about today. But the history of the jail and the area here, what is your background that you have for this stuff?

Katherine Davis 1:43

Oh, well I came to the county in like, say, 2012. So, I've been here for a while. I'm from a military family. So, we kind of, you know, jumped all over the place. But I grew up here mostly. And I have been focused on my research here, mostly in the old jail, kind of telling the stories of the people that haven't had their stories told, we'll get a little bit more into this later. But there's a lynching victim, who was actually the only documented lynching victim. His name was Benjamin Hance. And I did some research about him last summer so that we could create an exhibit in commemoration of him. And then this summer, I'm still interning through the St. Mary's County Museum division under Karen Stone, who's the museum division manager. And I'm working on telling the story of the Underground Railroad and its connections to the old jail. So, that's kind of where we're focused. But as far as the old jail goes, it used to be run by the historic society in the county. And recently, the museum division took it over. So, a lot of the artifacts and things in here were actually property of the historic society donated by people in the county. So, while they may not explicitly tell the story of the jail, they're still really, really cool county artifacts. And yeah, it's really neat.

Ayla Anderson 3:04

I know that when I was asking you yesterday, you said that you guys have some actual shackles that were used here?

Katherine Davis 3:10

Yeah, that's correct.

Ayla Anderson 3:12

So, when Anderson 3:12 was this jail originally started.

Katherine Davis 3:14

So, there were six jails in the county. And this being the sixth jail, the first two were actually down at St. Mary's City. Were kind of like, you know, the Capitol and all the first happenings for the colonizers started, and then the second two are kind of in Leonardtown across the way. And then the last two were here. So, there was actually a building that was constructed here, the first one in 1858. And it was two stories, but the county kind of decided that it wasn't doing that great of a job. There were lots of instances of people escaping, and I guess it just kind of needed redone. So, they actually rebuilt it. And that's the current building we're sitting in, and the building you see when you visit, it was built in 1876 and was then in use until 1945, when the base kind of got moving, and they needed a larger jail because at the time there were only three jail cells and I actually found the counts of like 19 people being held in one cell at a time.

Ayla Anderson 4:17

Where we are, this is the downstairs is like the living quarters of the jailers and the upstairs are the actual jail cells. And those are very small.

Katherine Davis 4:24

Yes, yeah. That's a lot of people to have crammed in there. Yeah. So, I guess the county decided that by 1945, with all the new population coming in, because of the bass and stuff they needed to get a new jail.

Ayla Anderson 4:37

So, the jail cells that are upstairs, they were segregated?

Katherine Davis 4:41

Yes.

Ayla Anderson 4:42

And so, you had the larger one that was black males and black females. And then you had on the other side, you had one that was for white males and one of those for white females.

Katherine Davis 4:51

Yes, that's correct. Yeah.

Ayla Anderson 4:53

Is there anything particular about any of the prisoners that you had here that was interesting or escapee stories?

Katherine Davis 4:59

Well, a lot of what I've been focused on, because we are a lot of people don't know this, especially leaving in the county. But the old jail itself is an underground road network to freedom site. So, we are technically on the Underground Railroad. And we didn't really have anything that was telling the story of that. So, you might think why are we a part of that, but it is true that freedom seekers, we call enslaved people, we call them freedom seekers, the freedom seekers were captured and held here, and some of them did manage to escape. So that took place like early 1800s up through the Civil War. A lot of the accounts we have are like the 1860s. So pretty much the height of the Civil War, and the county itself was very Confederate leaning, even our newspaper was suspended at the time. And there's a union

camp, it's like a prisoner of war camp, that's like 20 minutes down the road, that was one of the largest on the East Coast, obviously. But Point Lookout. And so, you can imagine, like the climate of the time, and it was just, it's incredible to learn about these stories, because the freedom seekers themselves had to escape local plantations, and were coming from different areas. And so, while the jail itself doesn't tell a very positive aspect of the Underground Railroad is still an important piece of that history. It's still important and research kind of gets lost, you know, people don't know and the freedom seekers were very brave. And we actually have accounts of accomplices as well that were charged of harboring a slave, quote, unquote, and held here. So, lots of interesting stories of people.

Ayla Anderson 6:50

When you say that the freedom seekers came, they were imprisoned and they escaped. And so was that like, this was a secret area of the Underground Railroad. So, they would purposefully catch these freedom seekers put them in here, but in reality, they were just trying to put them in a safe area, so they could free them later. So, were there people within the jail that were part of the Underground Railroad?

Katherine Davis 7:14

No, not to my knowledge, most of the escaping was done by the freedom seekers, they just kind of just broke out of jail. We know this, because a lot of the newspaper articles I was able to find and uncover were actually like, "This man escaped from the jail, ask if you find him bring him back." And, you know, a reward of however much money you know, because runaway ads and things at the time, so it was less of like, thinking of the jail is a stop on the underground road and more of like, an end.

Ayla Anderson 7:46

Yeah ok. And upstairs there are there are actually lots of windows. Yeah, I was very surprised to see. There's lots of windows and they do have bars. But that is probably one of the avenues that they utilized.

Katherine Davis 7:59

Yeah probably! I was also surprised my first time here, there's at least one window per jailcell. So, two in the cell that held women and then there's actually, I think there's two or three and the other one

Ayla Anderson 8:13

There were two people, I think we were talking yesterday, there were two women who were imprisoned here for helping the freedom seekers?

Katherine Davis 8:21

Exactly. Yeah, which is very incredible, the stories behind them. They were imprisoned here for aiding in the flight of freedom seekers. And one of them, her name was Millie Cooper, and she was actually a slave herself at one point. So, she was enslaved in her youth, and then was freed. We believe the most likely reason was through the last will and testament of Eleanor Cooper. So, she actually became a free black woman in the county in the early 1800s. Which, you know, that in itself is amazing. And then in aiding a freedom seeker, she was caught and then detained here actually, for four years. In this jail. And then the other woman, her name was Sarah Mccannon. And she was actually a white woman, which is kind of interesting, but she was detained, or I'm sorry, she was charged of the same crime and we actually do know the name of the freedom seeker she was helping, her name was Rose, and she was a very young girl. And Sarah was charged and was actually sentenced to six years, but through their multiple pleas within the county for her pardon, including the man who owned, quote, unquote, Rose requested that she be pardoned and she actually was pardoned. So, it's kind of interesting to compare the stories or just think about them because she was pardoned. And we actually have evidence that the man that owned quote unquote Rose attempted to sell her. And so, we actually know that she was 13 years old at the time.

Ayla Anderson 10:14

Okay, and so I'm guessing it wasn't successful then because she was later sold?

Katherine Davis 10:19

Exactly, yeah.

Ayla Anderson 10:20

Okay. And do you do you by chance know what ended up happening to the women afterwards?

Katherine Davis 10:26

I know more about Millie Cooper just through my current research and how far I've gotten. But Millie actually, after she was out of jail, I have records of her living well into her like 60s and 70s, in the same area, yet still here in St. Mary's County, and she seems to be the head of the household. And there are at times three or four young black men and women black children that were living in our household with her, I'm still unsure about how they're related to her if they're related to her. But yeah, she was living well into her 70s and was working as a cook. And, yeah, it's a pretty incredible story. As far as Sarah Mccannon goes, I do know less about her. But she was pardoned. So, after the four years, Oh, she didn't serve time. She was pardoned before being incarcerated. Yes, Millie was the one that served the four years. And then Sarah was actually pardoned. So, as far as I'm aware, she would just continue to live in the county. That's, yeah, it's pretty incredible and pretty exciting to uncover their stories because, I

mean, especially Millie Cooper's story, once being enslaved herself, you know, and then pretty incredible that like, if this is correct about her being freed through that will and testament, she probably was only free for like two months before being charged and then put into the jail here. So, she really was committed to, you know, helping other freedom seekers.

Ayla Anderson 12:13

This is a pretty small museum, a small jail, but it has a really big history. It has a really big important part in what happened here in Maryland.

Katherine Davis 12:21

Exactly.

Ayla Anderson 12:22

Yeah. And so, another thing that, you know, kind of gliding into one of the big topics that we want to talk about. Especially right now with the BLM movement, and everything and the importance of telling these kinds of stories, you have a very important jar of dirt.

Katherine Davis 12:37

Yes, we do have a very important jar of dirt.

Ayla Anderson 12:41

So, what is this jar?

Katherine Davis 12:42

Upstairs, is a jar of dirt that we collected last November on Maryland Emancipation Day, because Maryland Emancipation Day actually happened later than the Emancipation Proclamation. So not so many people know that. But yeah, it was a little later along the road, but so November 1, and we had a soil collection ceremony. And essentially, just to say a little bit about Benjamin Hance himself, the idea behind the soil collection is to, was actually the Equal Justice Initiative, which is based in Montgomery, Alabama, they have this kind of like project going on, where they encourage counties across the country to really dig into the research and their history and try to uncover as many lynchings as possible. And then what they do is they actually will put on ceremonies and stuff to collect dirt from where the person was lynched. So, the jar of dirt signifies kind of the idea is that like the soil remembers, and because a lot of times there isn't any other artifacts or anything.

Ayla Anderson 13:59

There wouldn't be like a marked grave that was maintained or anything like that.

Katherine Davis 14:02

Exactly, exactly, especially with, you know, the nature of the crime. So, our story that we have here is the only documented lynching victim in the county. His name is Benjamin Hance, he was lynched in 1887. Just five minutes down the road from here, he was accused of assaulting a white woman down by the wharf and was actually held here in the jail upstairs. And one night, early in the morning around like 2am, a mob of white citizens actually came to the jail, attempted to break in, the jailer at the time actually did try to prevent them from coming into the jail, but he was ultimately unsuccessful. They actually managed to get in, keep him locked in one of the rooms down here, go upstairs and actually break down the jail door and then take Benjamin Hance out of the jail. So, a pretty Davis 14:02 violent crime. They took them down, back outside, they were actually going to lynch him in the yard right out here where that huge tree is right in front of the courthouse.

Ayla Anderson 15:15

Yeah because where this jail is situated right now, just kitty corner is the courthouse.

Katherine Davis 15:19

Exactly. Yeah. So, they were prepared to take his life right on the lawn in front of the jailhouse in front of the courthouse, pretty much like in the square of the town, which is, you know, bold as brass. And they didn't, because a local doctor actually came outside and told them that it would upset his wife, because she was pregnant and didn't want any bad energy or negative things to affect his wife's pregnancy, but that if they took him somewhere else, it was okay. So, can you think business is an interesting thing, but so they did heed his words. And they did take him further down out of town where actually, if anyone's local or visits, the letter town wineries actually where we were able to locate where he was lynched, through looking at maps of back in the day and comparing them and the accounts of the people that reported on it. But yet he was lynched, right, kind of in the back of the woods there over in a witch hazel tree, overhanging the road.

Ayla Anderson 16:37

So, it's easy to find the relative area to that, because you do have documentation of where the roads are.

Katherine Davis 16:42

Exactly, exactly. Yeah. And again, in a very public place, you know, so, I mean, he didn't receive any justice, any sort of trial, there was a trial after the fact to kind of, you know, figure out who did it. And there were jurors that refused to speak on it. In fact, one man said he knew who did it, but wouldn't say who did the who did the actual crime? And wouldn't say and basically, the jury, the jury just, like, closed, and they called it a day.

Ayla Anderson 17:17

And so, no one was ever charged, no one was ever punished, or even just even just a fee, there was nothing.

Katherine Davis 17:23

Exactly. And it's pretty incredible, considering, I mean, there were whisperings in the town that there were witnesses to seeing him get taken down the road and things and still no justice, everyone just kind of kept quiet. So that's kind of his story and researching last summer was really powerful. And it's those kinds of stories that we really want to tell, especially like you mentioned in the light of the BLM movement and things like that, because a lot of people around here and across the country don't know the specifics of the story, or they just think, Oh, you know, lynching's happened in the 1800s. But to actually be able to put like a name to it and be like, no, in this county, this is the exact person and this is the story. You can come into this jail, and you can walk right up the stairs and see the jail cell where he was held. And you can imagine, you know, if you sit right outside, there's that tree there. And then if you walk down to the winery, you know, it's all right here, and we're working on getting a historic marker that'll actually commemorate him. And so, in addition to our soil collection ceremony, that we had to actually collect the jar after we're working on still continuing to preserve his memory, so that we don't forget.

Ayla Anderson 18:46

So, you can come inside, there's the jar of dirt here to commemorate him. But then there's also two jars of dirt?

Katherine Davis 18:54

That's correct. There are two jars of dirt. And that's kind of what the Equal Justice Initiative does, we actually had a representative come and give a very nice speech at our ceremony, but they will collect one jar to kind of keep circulating in the county or to keep wherever deemed appropriate. So, in our case, it's the jail where he was held, but and then they take a job with them back to Alabama, because they have a museum there that they collect all of these jars. And I mean, it is just very overwhelming and very powerful. I want to go down there someday to see it because it is just like walls of jars dirt. And

it's such a powerful imagery because it's not just like someone putting up a plaque, which you know, is very great in itself but to actually have the dirt from these different places. It's just something like tangible. Yeah, is very amazing. And all of the So, names of the victims are on all the jars. So, like we were talking about earlier with knowing the names of the victims. It's So, very powerful.

Katherine Davis 19:13

Well, I'm going to have to go and maybe do an episode.

Katherine Davis 20:03

Highly recommend it. I haven't been there myself. But it's just an incredible, incredible place. And they're doing really incredible work. Not to get off too much of a tangent, but the Equal Justice Initiative I recommend everyone look into, they have a great website, but they're also working on prison reform and kind of current political movements as well dealing with inequality and justice. So, it's, it's they're doing really great stuff.

Ayla Anderson 20:33

And I'll put the link in the webpage for this.

Katherine Davis 20:35

Yeah, that'd be great. Yeah.

Ayla Anderson 20:37

So, kind of continuing our theme of injustices, not that the jail itself is evil, but the history of some really unfortunate events happening. And one of the things that I was really, really interested in is I heard the history of the tragic tale of the witch of Leonardtown and so, there is a particular rock outside here, that is important. And then this witch story.

Katherine Davis 21:09

Yes, we have a legend in the county. And there's actually been some great research done to actually say this woman actually existed, which is incredible. Her name was Moll Dyer. And as far as I know, she was a witch, quote, unquote, in the county in the late 17th century. And as far as I know, she lived in the woods, and would have these herbal remedies of sorts and things. And I guess at some point, the townspeople were just on the witch hunt craze.

Ayla Anderson 21:53

unfortunate events and they needed something to blame.

Katherine Davis 21:55

Exactly, an explanation. So, yeah, they went out and they Davis 21:55 actually burned her hut. And there's this legend goes then that she fled into the woods, and was caught, and actually froze, kind of with her hand and knee on the rock, and one, like reaching towards the sky, kind of like in anguish, at the injustice that happens. So that rock was actually uncovered and is now what you can see outside of our jail.

Ayla Anderson 22:28

Yes, so it's just right here and touch it if you dare!

Katherine Davis 22:34

Exactly. There's a bit of superstition around it because, you know, bad things happen when they moved it or if you touch it, then there's this kind of curse.

Ayla Anderson 22:47

And so, there's actually this book that I got, and it's called "Moll Dyer and other which tales of Southern Maryland" and it's by Lynn Bovary, maybe? I'll include the link. But what's really interesting is she actually really delved into the research and background behind this Moll Dyer, or Maria Dyer. And I mean, I highly recommend it. It's just a small book, but it's packed with information, they have genealogy, she has all of her reference points. And so, what also was really interesting is back in the time, the late 1600s, there were a lot of people who did herbal medicines and things like that. And it seems from what she was talking about, is that as long as things are going well, people continue to go to these herbal women for their remedies and their medicines. And it was really only once things started to turn bad that they claimed that they were a bad witch. And what's really interesting about her story is like you said, they were actually able to find, you know, she was a real person. They found birth certificates and baptisms. And she originally was from England. And she came over here to immigrate. But she had to do indentured servanthood because she didn't have enough money. She came from a really low-class family who had many siblings. And it was estimated that she probably helped raise them and took care of them. She never had any children of her own. And she became an indentured servant on the Nevis Plantation in the West Indies. And that was how she was making her way down to come to America. And while she was there, she worked on this plantation for four years. And it was during that time where, there were indentured servants, but it was more profitable, unfortunately, for the plantation to have more slaves because slaves you could keep indefinitely, they low-class created more slaves for you to do with what you wanted. And I mean, it was just free, horrific labor. Yeah. So, if this

was at a time where they were kind of phasing out this indentured servanthood, and she was living on this plantation with many different slaves and many of these slaves were brought over from Africa, where they brought over their own kind of herbal remedies and their enchantments and their own kind of rituals. Which later we call Voodoo. So, she, it's likely that she learned a lot of things there. And then she brought them with her when she did arrive to Massachusetts, or Maryland.

Katherine Davis 25:23

Maryland. Yeah.

Ayla Anderson 25:25

And so, when she got here, she had these remedies. She had this background in what would be considered being a witch. And then it wasn't until she had lived here for 20 years. She was in her 60s. And she was a single old woman, spinster living in the woods, not really being a huge part of the community. And then what happened was, it seemed like there was an unprecedented cold winter. And during this cold winter, people started getting really sick with influenza. And there was a lot of sickness and things happening. And they look to her and she seemed relatively healthy. And, you know, she was an old woman who lived by herself, which already is apparently this horrible thing in those days.

Katherine Davis 26:05

Right, red flag or something.

Ayla Anderson 26:07

So, it's likely that she was really well equipped to handle the different sicknesses because she had gone through these ships, which were horrible slave type ships where, diseases were rampant, so she survived that. And then she survived the trek here. So, she probably had quite a lot of immunities. So, I mean, this is all in this book. I just read it last night. I'm not just randomly an expert in this one story, I just did my research. And then so everything kind of started going wrong. And they needed somebody to blame. And there was old Maria Dyer, who was just an easy target, and like I said, they burn her house down. She ran out in the woods. And then a few days later, they story found her body on the stone. And then, you know, they just assumed she must have cursed the land, which I mean, if I was her, I would have too.

Katherine Davis 26:57

Right, exactly!

Ayla Anderson 26:59

But yeah, and like you said, there's like this whole kind of history about it. And there's this whooo spooky, like if you touch the rock, you're going to be cursed with bad luck that she was cursing the area with. And it's pretty cool. And you know, it said, you could actually see her knee right in their palm print down the rock. But you said something that they actually might be moving the rock, correct?

Katherine Davis 27:24

Yes. so, like I mentioned earlier, the historic society used to run the old jail. So after the museum division took it over, it was decided that the historic society, which is located in Tudor Hall, which is another pretty cool, historic building, but it's actually just across the way where the Historic Society is, that they would actually be taking and relocating the rock over there, and then trying to take measures to preserve it, and actually put it on display. Because it's just kind of been outside of the old jail. I mean, if you come to see it, it's just on the ground, you know, and it's been kind of a while, since the 17th. century. So, you know, weathering has taken place and stuff like that. So, in an effort to preserve it, we're considering to move it.

Ayla Anderson 28:12

So, if you're wanting go and touch that rock, you better come soon.

Katherine Davis 28:17

Exactly. Yeah. So, if you would like to touch it, yeah, you should probably come soon. But they're going to probably they're going to do a great job of putting it in a safe location and trying to preserve it, and maybe hopefully even doing some panels or interpretation around it, which would be pretty cool. But it's still kind of in the works.

Ayla Anderson 28:38

Great. That's awesome. Well, I really enjoyed this museum here and the stories that you share behind it. And it's cool, because last week, I went to the St. Clement Island Museum, which was the first landing site of the pilgrims that actually came to this area. So, it's cool to kind of come over here as well, and see the history of you know, once it's kind of goes down the line there and actually out front you even have a canon that is from the original Ark. So, you actually have a piece of that history here. I just want to say, I know people don't love museums.

Katherine Davis 29:14

I know I agree, personally I may be a little biased but it's great. It's so great. And really, the history in this area is just so deep, and there's so many facets. I mean, you can visit like Sotterly Plantation, which was one of the largest plantations in the county and they have that manor house is still standing and they actually still have slave quarters that you can visit and they're doing great interpretation there. You can go down to Point Lookout where the like I mentioned before, the prisoner of war camp for Confederate soldiers is and I've also done a little bit of research about freedom seekers kind of taking refuge there as well. So, if you're interested in the Underground Railroad and the history of flight in Maryland, I mean, we have multiple sites and like we mentioned earlier, multiple people that were involved in that. So, it's just pretty interesting. So also, if you check out our Facebook page, which is just St. Clements Island Museum, our director has been filming and recording these videos we call Wayback Wednesday videos that kind of started initially when everything shut down do the pandemic as a way to keep people interested in the county's history and the museums in the area. And we actually do have two episodes that kind of pertain to the jail, one on Benjamin Hance, and then one on the old jail and the Underground Railroad itself that kind of touches on what we mentioned before, you know, the history of the jail on the freedom seekers and accomplices. So definitely check those out too. And there's plenty more if you're just interested in other instances of really cool history in the county, so definitely check those out.

Ayla Anderson 29:30

Okay, great. Thank you so much for doing this.

Katherine Davis 30:52

I really appreciate it. Thanks for having me.

Ayla Anderson 30:54

That was great.