

DISCOVERIES SHED NEW LIGHT ON TRADITIONAL JAMESTOWN STORY

Launched by the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA Preservation Virginia), the Jamestown Rediscovery Project, at the site of the first permanent English settlement in America, is considered by many experts to be one of the most significant archaeological digs in the United States. Led by Dr. William Kelso, APVA director of archaeology, the multi-million dollar archaeological, research and interpretation program was initiated in 1994 to identify and interpret the remains of the 1607 James Fort and James Towne on Jamestown Island, Virginia. When archaeologists found remains of the fort in 1996, APVA Preservation Virginia dispelled the long-held belief that the fort was lost to the James River.

The need to save Jamestown Island and other threatened historic landmarks was the reason APVA Preservation Virginia was founded in 1889. Today, it is the oldest statewide preservation organization in the United States. APVA Preservation Virginia currently owns or manages 34 historic properties throughout Virginia and provides advocacy efforts, resources and advice to help others save and restore endangered historic properties.

Traditionally, the Jamestown settlement effort has been considered a “fiasco.”

Some historians have argued that the 1607 Jamestown settlement, the first permanent English settlement in America, was the dismal failure of lazy, inept gentlemen and naïve, greedy London investors. They propose that the Virginia Company officials did not anticipate the problems inherent in the Virginia settlement, and the settlers were incapable of doing anything to make the venture a success.

Although some of the players in the venture were ill-chosen, the Jamestown Rediscovery excavations are providing more detail and a more complete view of the early years at Jamestown that suggest a more positive story about the “Virginia Adventure” than the written accounts reveal.

In addition, since the project began, archaeologists have discovered and pieced together enlightening new information about the settlement and how the colonists lived. For example:

- Identifying the location of the fort and confirming that it was sited strategically on the very best military position on Jamestown Island proves that the settlers had sound military experience. Many of the gentlemen settlers were veterans of the Dutch wars and had accrued years of practical experience protecting themselves and fighting in a riverine marsh environment.
- Uncovering artifacts related to trade and industry indicate that the failure of the settlement was not caused by a lack of effort. It is clear that the scientists and craftsmen at Jamestown had and used the equipment for metallurgy, and made glass

and smelted iron in the fort. Although their efforts did not produce the riches the Virginia Company had hoped for, they were trying to turn a profit.

- It is clear from the copper, glass beads and other items for trade in the Jamestown Rediscovery collections that the colonists at times tried a peaceful co-existence policy with the Powhatans. The settlers came with prior knowledge of the American Native copper-oriented culture, a material that could instantly be traded for food.
- The settlers adapted some of their English traditions to the alien environment. For example, at least one structure seems to have been originally built with English mud and stud techniques, but was quickly changed to a more environmentally practical post and bark construction used by the native Americans. It is also clear that the settlers had limited meat supplies from England and could not match the hunting skills of the American native. Apparently, the survivors learned to live on sturgeon and turtle.
- The trans-European nature of the James Fort period artifacts graphically suggests how open trade was in Western Europe before the age of strongly nationalistic European states. Objects made in England, France, Holland and Spain, and other western European countries are represented in the collection. Over 500,000 artifacts have been found so far, including a silver ear pick, a Cabasset helmet and breastplate, other pieces of armor, glass and copper beads and ornaments, ceramics, tools, coins, jewelry and personal items.
- The high quality of much of the Jamestown collection indicates that the settlers sought to have as high an English lifestyle as the harsh Virginia environment would allow. Therefore, the traditional stereotypical image of the “civilized Englishman in the bush,” so evident a part of the British Empire, began at Jamestown.
- Settlers died from disease, starvation or wars with the Powhatan, but friendly fire and civil unrest may also have taken their toll. The investigation of one burial proved that probably in 1607, presumably before the Powhatan had muskets, a colonist died from a gunshot wound.

Significance of the Jamestown Rediscovery Project

Jamestown is the birthplace of the United States as it is known today, and a key part of the common history of the United States, England, other western European countries and Africa. Jamestown began in 1607 as a commercial enterprise that grew into a British colony. The first representative government in America was established here in 1619, and Jamestown was the first capital of Virginia until 1699. This is where America’s current form of government, political traditions, culture and language began.

As discoveries are made, APVA Preservation Virginia is sharing new information about the lives of the early colonists at Jamestown and the life they left behind in the European communities from which they came. Research findings from the project will contribute to the interpretive plan for the national celebration in 2007 of the 400th anniversary of the landing at Jamestown. Updated information about the findings is available at www.historicjamestowne.org.