

## Jamestown Rediscovery: an introduction

By WILLIAM M. KELSO

Since 1994, archaeological area excavation at Jamestown, Virginia, the first permanent English colony in North America, has uncovered the remains of the 1607 James Fort, long thought destroyed by shoreline erosion of the adjacent James River (Figs 1–2). Almost all the complete triangular perimeter of the 1.1 acre (0.45ha) timber fort has now been identified and approximately 35% of the interior either selectively excavated or mapped and protectively reburied (Fig. 3). Excavations so far identified more than 2,100 archaeological features including over 800 feet (244m) of the construction trenches of the original fort walls, some containing palisade post-moulds. Other features include backfilled trenches of the dry moat, earth-fast building postholes, stone building and brick fireplace foundations, cellars, borrow pits, trash pits, drainage ditches and burials (Fig. 4).<sup>1</sup>

Over 750,000 artefacts have been identified and catalogued, at least a third found in sealed features which contained strata dated by coins, jettons, cloth seals, and other artefacts to the period 1607–11 (Fig. 5). Ceramic cross-mends indicate that a number of pits, the dry moats, cellars, and the main fort well were filled contemporaneously in 1610, probably as a result of a ‘clean-up’ and building revitalization effort backed by new and more realistic funding of the sponsoring Virginia Company of London. The shared sealed context of features across the site offers a unique tightly dated artefact collection, ideal for qualitative, quantitative and comparative research. Excavation of five of 22 burials in the fort dating to the first three months of settlement (14 May to 5 September 1607) and 72 burials from a 1610–30 burial ground west of the fort enclosure, offer insight into the general health,

burial practices, life expectancy, and in some instances the cause of death, during the first two decades of the colony. Analysis of the burials is in the early stages, but preliminary in-depth study of other artefacts is producing significant results. Some of this research serves as the basis of the Jamestown articles that follow in this Journal.

For some, understanding these Jamestown archaeological research reports may require a basic review of the history of Jamestown.<sup>2</sup> So it was that, on 14 May 1607, just over 100 men and four boys chose to settle on an island some 35 miles (57km) from the sea coast on the James River in Virginia. From there, the colonists began to seek the means to show a profit for the Virginia Company. Their mission was primarily to establish a permanent base from which they could search for gold, find a short western route to the Orient, and convert the Virginia Indians to Christianity. Hostilities with the Indians, shortage of food, and the alien environment that first summer quickly took the lives of half the colonists soon after they struggled to construct the palisaded fort. With better weather in the fall, game plentiful and food from the Indians, the colony began to take root under the leadership of Captain John Smith. Conditions grew worse in the winter of 1609–10, a period known as the Starving Time, resulting in a move to abandon Virginia and sail home. However, within a matter of hours, the first resident governor of the Virginia Company arrived with fresh supplies and a contingent of men, women and children to re-energize the venture — enough to assure that Jamestown would live on to be the capital of Virginia for almost a century. The original fort fell into disrepair in the 1620s, and in 1624 King Charles I revoked the Company Charter and declared Virginia a Royal Colony.

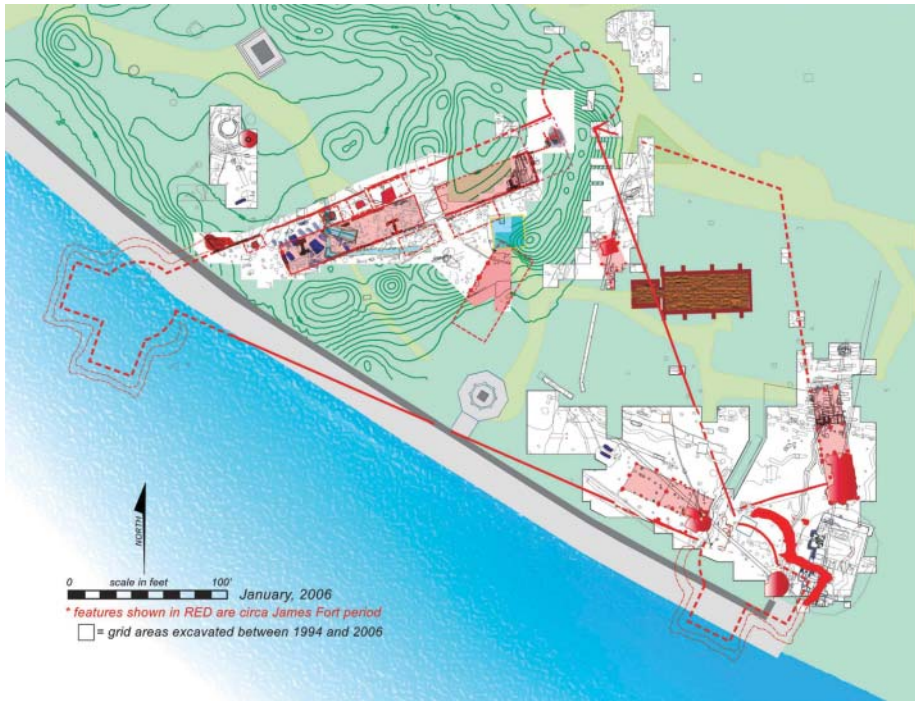


FIG. 1

Archaeological plan of Jamestown, Virginia, 2006. Excavations since 1994 have uncovered the perimeter of the surviving triangular fort, two bastions, nine building footprints, nine cellars, two wells and 29 burials within or related to the fortification of 1607–24 (APVA).



FIG. 2

Conjectural reconstruction of James Fort as it may have appeared in 1607–11, based on archaeological and documentary evidence. ‘Ghosted’ walls and buildings are working models that can guide future excavations (APVA).



View of the western palisade with posts excavated and a saw pit adjacent to it (foreground), a cellar, two double burials, a chimney foundation and cobble wall footing of a 1611 'row' house (middle). The 17th-century brick church tower in the background post-dates the fort (APVA).



FIG. 4

Remnants of the Factory cellar, an example of the strata typical of early James Fort period cellars: collapsed earthen walls below an infilling of domestic refuse from the 1610 'cleansing of the town' (right foreground) (APVA).



FIG. 5

Over 750,000 artefacts have been identified and catalogued from the James Fort site, at least a third found in sealed features which contained strata dated by coins, jettons, cloth seals and other artefacts to the period 1607–11 (APVA).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> For a general survey, see Kelso 2006. For summaries of work in progress, see Kelso 1995; Lucchetti & Straube 1996; Lucchetti & Straube 1997; Lucchetti & Straube 1998; Kelso *et al.* 1998; Kelso *et al.* 1999; Mallios & Straube 1999; Kelso & Straube 2000; Kelso *et al.* 2001; Kelso & Straube 2004.

<sup>2</sup> For general introductions, see Noël Hume 1994; Haile 1998; Horn 2005.

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