

Dennis B. Blanton

Looking Beyond the Town

Archeological Survey at Jamestown Island

I still find it hard to believe that Jamestown Island beyond the colonial town site was *terra incognita*, archeologically-speaking, when we began our survey for the National Park Service in 1994. The comprehensive, systematic survey was the first of its kind there and central to the archeological assessment project. When our William and Mary team started Shovel Test 1 that October day, only three sites were officially recorded on the island; when Shovel Test 5709 was back-filled almost a year later, 58 additional sites were on the map. Moreover, our team had documented evidence of human activity there over the full span of our species' existence in eastern North America, and showed that virtually every part of the now-dry upland areas were utilized at one time or another.

The fundamental goal of the survey was simple: find all the sites that survive in the uplands and assess the potential of today's wetlands for additional cultural resources. Because Jamestown Island is now entirely vegetated, we resorted to systematic shovel testing to locate the evidence. Tests were excavated every 20 meters as we marched across the area generally east to west. It took about six months of fieldwork to complete the task, which was broken into two stages, in part to take advantage of the winter seasons. At this time of year underbrush and the hordes of ticks are less troublesome. Our systematic testing was confined to present day uplands, representing about 600 acres, for the simple reason that the sediments

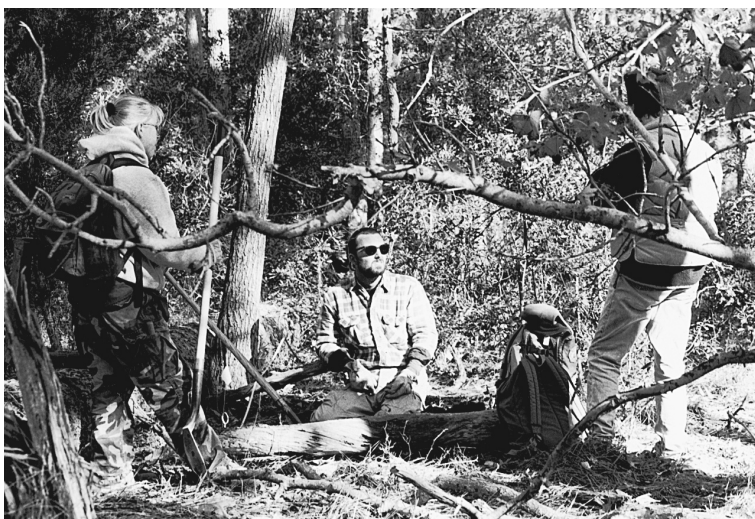
there are not waterlogged. The remaining two-thirds of the island are wetlands, most of which are fringing tidal marshes. These conditions have not been constant over the last 12 millennia.

Punctuating the basic goal of site inventory were a number of specific problems or topics we hoped to address with the survey results. One was to establish the duration of human occupation at Jamestown Island which began well before the first load of Englishmen arrived in 1607. We found that people have made use of the island for about as long as is possible. I will never forget discovering the first of two fluted, Clovis-like points on a beach exposure. Both are made of fine, non-local stone and represent variants typical of about 10,500 BP.

Another issue was to get some sense of human adjustments to the changing local environment. Geologists tell us that the landscape has evolved according to three basic stages. These represent the shift from a well-watered, dissected upland peninsula between 12,000 and 6000 BP, to the transitional emergence of an estuarine environment from 6000 to 3000 BP, to the fully estuarine setting we see now. This progression transformed the island from a virtual Eden to a place less attractive to native inhabitants. Over time, the extent of well-drained uplands was reduced and freshwater became very scarce.

The heyday of prehistoric settlement occurred before 3000 BP. Archaic projectile points occur at many sites, and even Paleoindian evidence is present. These encampments were relatively frequent and coincide with an interval when the island was a well-watered, dissected peninsula. After this time, during what we call the Early and Middle Woodland periods, the island was virtually abandoned. This is in stark contrast to what was occurring within sight of the island on the mainland. The uplands there became the focus of intensive settlement by 2000 BP, potentially because places like Jamestown Island were rapidly losing the margins of their uplands and their reliable freshwater sources to inundation as the sea level rose. Sea level rise has also submerged many Archaic sites offshore or beneath marsh deposits. In essence, the unprecedented transformation of the lower James River was requiring an adjustment among local groups.

Field school conducting shovel testing in the densely wooded portion of Jamestown Island.





A Clovis point dating to c. 10,500 BP which greatly altered the time frame of man's presence at Jamestown.

We also wanted to understand why local Native Americans were not utilizing the island intensively when those three ships sailed up the James River nearly four centuries ago. They had, indeed, begun to use the place again after the Early-Middle Woodland hiatus, but in more specific ways. It was during the Late Woodland period that native Algonquians adopted a more sedentary, horticultural lifestyle. Small nucleated vil-

lages and dispersed communities were established at key locations, while peripheral areas were utilized selectively. Jamestown became one such latter locale. We know that a permanent Indian community was never established on the island, although many small habitations were located by the survey. These are indicative of short-term, perhaps winter-season residences, for small, task-oriented parties intent on hunting and fishing. Down-river, even within view of Jamestown, more intensively utilized sites are known where oyster reefs begin, and the closest village site is not far upstream at the strategic confluence of the James and the Chickahominy rivers. In fact, it is from this village that many of the smaller parties using Jamestown Island probably came. Paramount chief Powhatan's remark that the island was "a piece of waste ground" the English were welcome to may have been a slight overstatement, but clearly it was not regarded as a pivotal location.

Associated with the survey was an attempt to improve knowledge of environmental conditions in the colony's earliest years. Certainly it was described at times by the English as inhospitable. We resorted to a bald cypress tree ring study for precise answers, in collaboration with David Stahle at the University of Arkansas. The findings were startling: tree rings document that the worst regional drought in the last 770 years occurred between 1606-1612. This revelation helps us comprehend complaints about corn and fresh water shortages and, by extension, the alarming mortality rate and intercultural tensions.

Discovering several of the first English farmsteads in this country was also an exciting outcome of the survey. By the second decade of the 17th century the tiny colonial enclave at Jamestown was celebrating successes. Rising confidence led to establishment of a few small plantations outside the confines of the fortified settlement, and some of the earliest were scattered across the island. A cluster of them has been identified by our work at the eastern end of the island, which is relatively

remote from the fort and town at the western end. Their archeological traces are not impressive as viewed from shovel test samples, consisting at best of tiny brick nubs and occasional pipe, ceramic, glass, or nail fragments. Sometimes, however, substantial features like cellars were encountered and these, along with knowledge of similar sites studied nearby, tells us that they are information-rich. In fact, the island appears to boast some of the best preserved 17th-century farm complexes, as they are unplowed and virtually pristine time capsules.

By the 18th century, the island's many farms were consolidated into two typical, expansive Tidewater plantations. One occupying the eastern half belonged to the Travis family. The precise location of their well-appointed plantation home had been lost to recent generations and was a place we sought to pinpoint. Near the still-marked family cemetery, not surprisingly, ample evidence of a substantial structure and smaller "dependency" buildings were identified, along with the requisite array of colonial debris.

A closing chapter of historical use of Jamestown Island occurred during the Civil War. No less than five impressive earthen redoubts were placed at strategic points by Confederates anticipating Union advances. Some were connected by a new road which can be traced even now. U.S. troops swarmed the James-York peninsula, to be sure, but the island's redoubts saw little or none of the action.

Jamestown has been pivotal in the annals of archeology as it has been in the nation's history. Here we can chart advances in historical archeology from the more particularistic early excavations to today's more expansive, interdisciplinary effort. With our systematic survey and the complementary studies of the assessment, the island's archeology has entered the contemporary period. The results provide much-needed local context for fully comprehending the early colonial experience. Along with the research contributions, new information is available to guide management of the cultural resources. The Park Service has effectively established an archeological preserve at Jamestown where sites can be relatively safe. Some, however, are still threatened by things like shoreline erosion and the survey findings are helping to set priorities for protection. This work has set the stage for future cultural resource management and planning for the anniversary celebration in 2007.

Dennis B. Blanton is the Director of The College of William and Mary Center for Archaeological Research.

Photos by Tony Belcastro.