Marley R. Brown III and David Orr

The Jamestown Archeological Assessment

Jamestown and Williamsburg, the first and second capitals of the Colony of Virginia, are close rivals as the most excavated historic sites in the United States. But it was at Jamestown that modern historical archeology was born when J.C. Harrington was lured there in 1936 while still a graduate student in anthropology at the University of Chicago. Harrington, who died at the age of 96 in April 1998, reflected on his work at Jamestown in a reminiscence published a few years ago. He acknowledged that his and subsequent excavations of the town site emphasized architectural remains at the expense of other physical evidence, but he stressed that he did recognize the importance of archeology as a way of understanding how the early colonists lived. He remembered that "we even talked in such broad terms as attempting to show the adaptation of an English cultural tradition to a frontier existence." He goes on to note, however, "very little was done in this direction, just as so few true anthropological objectives, although much talked about, are realized today."

These 1930s aspirations of Harrington are the very same that created the scope of work for the Jamestown Archeological Assessment—truly anthropological objectives rendered in the broadest terms possible. Although the questions Harrington wanted to ask have changed little, the range of evidence that can be marshaled to answer them has greatly expanded. Another important change since his days at Jamestown is the emergence of cultural resources management as a recognized profession. Both developments are evident in the intellectual perspective guiding the current round of archeological study of the National Park Service property on Jamestown Island, a project that began officially in the fall of 1992 with the negotiation of a cooperative agreement between the National Park Service and the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. This agreement was based on a scope of work distributed in June of that year which identified a number of interrelated studies needed to properly evaluate and manage the island's cultural resources. These included a detailed bibliographic survey of all sources—written, photographic, and drawn—that shed light on Jamestown's history, a series of interpretive studies based on these sources, notably a reconstruction of the island's physical development over the last 12,000 years, and a thorough inventory and evaluation of prehistoric and historic archeological sites located on the island.

Andrew Edwards, archeologist, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, and staff conducting magnetometry testing.

In its breadth, concern for new techniques, and commitment to the conservation ethic in American archeology, the scope of the Jamestown Archeological Assessment shares much in common with the Park Service's *Systemwide Archeological Inventory Program,* that was officially unveiled in October of 1992. This program represents a concerted effort on the part of the National Park Service to "locate, evaluate and document" archeological resources on park lands so that they can be appropriately "conserved, protected, preserved *in situ*, managed, and interpreted." The systemwide program requires "systematic inventory" of archeological resources using "efficient and effective advanced technologies" such as remote sensing, geophysical prospecting, and geographic information systems, that minimize the destruction of archeological sites. Funds made available through this program are not intended for large-scale excavation (data recovery) for this very reason. Inventory activities must also be conducted in light of a research design that considers problems and questions "relating to broad trends, patterns, or themes about an area's prehistory or history." The research design should be very flexible in order to "address the widest range of relevant research issues and historic contexts practicable."

The nature of the studies called for in the original scope of work for the Jamestown

Archeological Assessment and their management implications argued for a particular intellectual perspective, that of human ecology or environmental archeology and history. This approach offered several advantages for integrating Assessment research on Jamestown Island. By emphasizing the interdependence of natural and cultural factors in reconstructing the physical development of the island, it has been possible to break down the traditional barrier separating the natural and cultural programs at parks like Colonial. From the outset, the intention of Assessment projects has been to establish the groundwork for management and interpretive plans featuring the integration of the Island's natural resource attributes with those representative of important cultural developments.

In many ways the Jamestown Archeological Assessment has followed the advice given to the discipline of historical archeology by National Park Service archeologist John Cotter who published the results of his 1954-56 excavations in 1958. Cotter, who remains a very articulate critic of things archeological, commented in his Jamestown report:

Results of the Jamestown Archeological Assessment

- The first comprehensive archeological survey of Jamestown Island locating 58 sites representing 10,500 years of human presence.
- Clear evidence of the 17th-, 18th-, and 19th-century landscapes in the form of boundaries, ditches, roads, agricultural fields, and military earthworks.
- A study of environmental change on the Island, including the examination of cypress tree rings that identified 1606-1612 as the driest seven-year period in southeastern Virginia in nearly 800 years. Coinciding with the first years at Jamestown, the drought most likely contributed to the settlement's struggle to survive. The study made the front page of the *New York Times*.
- The use of geophysical prospecting techniques (ground penetrating radar, magnetometry and soil resistivity and conductivity meters) to determine the most effective and efficient remote-sensing instrument for future research on Jamestown.
- The use of limited excavations on the town site designed to address specific research questions concerning the preservation of botanical remains, the re-analysis of particular buildings, and the "ground-truthing" of documented economic activity areas.
- Archival and historical research, hampered by the destruction of county records during the Civil War, culled data from private family papers, English records, military data, personal narrative, and maps. This research in conjunction with computer mapping of the Island allowed for the first time a reliable association of known structures and properties with their owners.
- A new understanding of what Jamestown looked like in the 17th century. A re-evaluation of the 600,000 artifacts from previous excavations in conjunction with the interdisciplinary research revealed the haphazard nature of the town's development. New information on the age, use, and relationship of buildings and economic activity at specific periods provided data for a series of GIS generated and enhanced maps of Jamestown during specific decades in the 17th century.
- More than 30 papers were given at professional conferences and/or published in a variety of journals and magazines. New generations of archeologists were trained through archeological field schools. One Ph.D. dissertation and several academic papers were completed.
- The knowledge gained will be used to address the critical issue of erosion on the Island, the federal highway project to upgrade the tour roads, and development plans for 2007.
- Artifacts and elements of the project will be incorporated into Colonial Williamsburg's 300th anniversary exhibit at the prestigious DeWitt Wallace Decorative Arts Gallery in 1999.
- The establishment of a strong partnership with The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation and the College of William and Mary.

Jane Sundberg
CRM Specialist
Colonial National Historical Park

Martha McCartney, project Historian; Marley Brown; and Del Moore, bibliographer with The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, reviewing pottery developed for the Artifact Assessment Results workshop.

Thus, the story of social and historical trends at Jamestown, evident in the records, is given fuller meaning by data derived from the earth at the site. Here, then, history tells about dates, events, and people; sociology, anthropology, and ethnology combine to throw light upon the acculturation of settlers and Indians alike in the filter of the frontier; archeology checks, tests, and illustrates them all.

Certainly the Jamestown Archeological Assessment has utilized archeology as the "check" for many disciplines. The Assessment has indeed given true meaning to the old sawhorse of "interdisciplinary research." The final products of the Assessment illuminate this by clearly illustrating the many intellectual avenues which lead to the interpretation of Jamestown Island.

In addition, the Assessment used the "new field techniques" that Cotter had argued should be employed at sites like Jamestown long before the 2007 celebrations. The Assessment tested a great variety of geophysical prospecting methodologies in order to evaluate the effectiveness of these techniques in site discovery at Jamestown. A combination of magnetometry and soil conductivity surveys emerged as a very useful adjunct to site survey at Jamestown. The National Park Service has been a leader in such geophysical survey dating back to the 1950s. The use of ground penetrating radar, for example, was successful in nearby Civil War parks such as Petersburg National Battlefield. The National Park Service invests in such methodologies because of its desire to conservatively conduct site discovery with a minimum of damage to subsurface features. Although the anomalies that result from such survey then need to be tested ("ground truthed"), ephemeral areas—such as small scale prehistoric sites—can be preserved more effectively when a specific site strategy is to obtain archeological data from larger historic components. The final objective here is to minimize archeological destruction in the quest for new sites.

Before the advent of the Jamestown Archeological Assessment it was decided that the Jamestown collection itself should be evaluated and that the objects should be cataloged according to the current NPS system. This had a most positive effect on the research generated by the Assessment since a good knowledge of the collection was a mandatory imperative for a proper interpretation of Jamestown. This work led to the Assessment's task of artifact evaluation and the reanalysis of the collection in the future interpretation of the Island.

The Jamestown Archeological Assessment has provided the Park and all who study the full long-range cultural history of tidewater Virginia with a thoroughly researched grounding in the "local history" of Jamestown Island. It is a long-held maxim in archeology that all archeological endeavor is originally only local history; it is only our carefully wrought inferences which make it anything else. The many volumes of data produced by this cooperative agreement will fuel and fan the fires of such investigation for decades to come.

The past five years of active research have produced important results along these lines. Some of the most significant of these are briefly described in this issue of *CRM*. Notable among these are the results of the Island-wide survey and climatological reconstruction using cypress tree rings, the detailed reconstruction of historic property holdings, and the synthesis of previously excavated archeological material—both architectural and artifactual—with the results of very selective new test excavations. In the latter, especially, may be seen some of the most convincing answers to the questions posed so long ago by a young anthropologist, whose expectations for what could be learned through archeology at Jamestown could not fully be realized during his tenure on the Island. Harrington wanted to know more about how the English adapted themselves to a brand new environment. And he wanted to know how the colonists really lived. If he could review the results of the Assessment today, he would hopefully conclude that some of his "true anthropological objectives" have, indeed, been realized by today's generation of historical archeologists.

Marley R. Brown III, Ph.D., is the Director of Archaeological Research, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

David Orr, Ph.D., is Chief, Division of Archeology and Historic Architecture, Valley Forge National Historical Park.

Photos by Tony Belcastro.