

Audrey J. Horning

Finding the Town in Jamestown

Archeology of the 17th-Century Capital

Whereas his sacred majestie by his instructions hath enjoyed us to build a town...

Act for Towns, 1662

Archeological and documentary research carried out through the Jamestown Archeological Assessment has provided a revised understanding of the 17th-century town and its sporadic development, which has squarely addressed the time-honored question, “why did Jamestown fail?” This re-evaluation has been achieved through selective excavation, documentary research, architectural analysis, environmental sampling, geophysical prospecting, integration with geological and hydrological data, and a thorough review of artifacts and documents in the collections of Colonial National Historical Park. Rather than searching for “new” archeological sites, the hallmark of previous archeology at Jamestown, the Assessment embraced the restrained approach outlined in the Systemwide Archeological Inventory Program (SAIP) in place at the start of the cooperative agreement.

Employing a generally non-intrusive policy, our aim was to obtain an overall understanding of the town’s physical appearance and how it functioned and grew in order to guide future interpretation and research.

Geophysical prospecting has been intensively employed, in one case pinpointing a previously-undiscovered cluster of brick kilns. Excavations have been limited in extent, designed to address specific research concerns. To quantify previous recovery biases, samples of backfilled archeological soils have been re-excavated, screened, and analyzed. The detailed reconstruction of properties, discussed by Martha McCartney in this issue, has allowed us to place individuals on the map—the keystone which has structured our analysis of the town’s attempted development and eventual failure. Predictive modeling based upon these property reconstructions can now be employed to guide archeological research.

Spatial analysis of the multitude of artifacts unearthed in the past has similarly been crucial to understanding Jamestown’s growth. In 1993, dates of pipestems from archeological features across the

Aerial view of the townsite by Aerial Survey Corporation, courtesy NPS.





Excavation in Refuse Pit 1 in Governor Harvey's manufacturing zone.

townsite were re-examined and plotted spatially. Immediately evident was the haphazard nature of town development. The pipestem data revealed three peak periods of activity, each followed by abandonment, which correspond to three periods of officially-sanctioned building schemes in the 1630s, 1660s, and 1680s. The spatial analysis also revealed that development occurred in discrete areas of the townsite, suggesting a lack of continuity in occupation. The overall history of the town further divides itself into five distinctive periods: initial town establishment in the teens and twenties, officially sanctioned mercantile and manufacturing in the 1630s, a period of stagnation until the 1660s, building activity following the 1662 Act for Towns, and two decades of post-Bacon's Rebellion (1676) rebuilding, all winding down to the 1699 transfer of the capital to Williamsburg.

Only two archeological sites are known from the earliest period of town settlement, but property research suggests much activity along the waterfront. Corollary material evidence presumably escaped previous discovery because of the ephemeral archeological trace cast by earthfast construction, the predominant technique employed in the early Chesapeake. Examination of sites from this period promises to illuminate our knowledge not only about domestic life in early Jamestown, but also about mercantile and waterfront activities.

One early structure was investigated in 1998. First uncovered but barely recorded in 1934, Structure 24 represents a small, brick-nogged timber structure situated near the river on the east end of town. Artifacts found in a nearby well and refuse pit in the 1950s suggested an early domestic complex. Subsequent research traced the property to a gunsmith named John Jackson, who lived in

Jamestown in the 1620s. Findings from the recent re-excavation of Structure 24 suggests occupation of the building by the Jackson family. Quantities of lead casting waste and fragmentary gun parts support the presence of a smithy. Beyond corroborating the documents, the excavation provided a material basis for addressing the daily life of an artisan, shifting the spotlight which has traditionally played only upon Jamestown's elite.

The following period, under the leadership of Governor John Harvey in the 1630s, was perhaps the most active in Jamestown's history. Concerned with economic diversification and town growth, Harvey passed laws designating Jamestown sole port of entry and requiring artisans to settle in towns. Incentives were offered to those building in the capital. Secretary Richard Kemp collected on one such incentive when he erected Jamestown's first all-brick house (recently identified as Structure 44, unearthed in 1935 and re-excavated in 1994) in 1638-39. Kemp soon left Jamestown and built a better house on his Rich Neck plantation, illustrating the insurmountable difficulties faced by Harvey in combating the dispersed settlement pattern necessitated by the emergent tobacco economy.

Harvey's ownership of a piece of property where a brewhouse and apothecary, a series of kilns, and an iron manufactory were situated (uncovered in the 1950s) illustrates how the governor backed up his beliefs about economic diversification with his own speculative investments. This manufacturing zone in the northwestern part of the town was subjected to an intense case study, with a thorough re-examination of all field drawings, notes, and artifacts, combined with limited archeological sampling designed to retrieve environmental data. Reputedly an autocrat, Governor Harvey was forced out of office and subsequently bankrupted in 1639. Examination of artifacts and the micro-stratigraphic analysis of a soil thin-section from a refuse-filled clay borrow pit in the manufacturing enclave indicate that activity ceased by the 1640s.

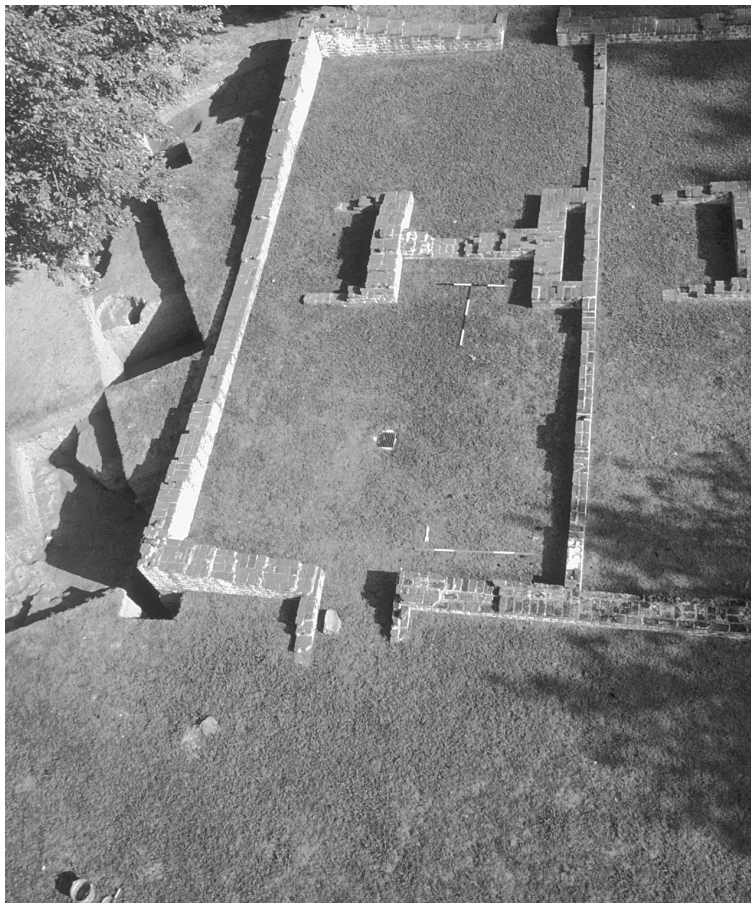
That the craft production ended shortly after Harvey's ouster from office illustrates the extent to which development in Jamestown was reliant upon individual action. Speculators like Harvey hoped to not only reduce reliance upon imports but also aspired to export finished goods. Within England, a number of towns were being successfully expanded and developed upon specialized manufacturing predicated upon speculative investing. Harvey promoted the similar development of Jamestown in anticipation of the same profits. Unlike England, however, there was no influx of labor. Immigrants to the colony were attracted by

land and tobacco, not manufacturing work in towns.

Although Governor William Berkeley, in office from 1642 to 1650 (and again 1660-1677) also sought to develop Jamestown, the political realities of the Commonwealth (1650-60) hindered his attempts, leading Berkeley to confine his enterprises to nearby Green Spring, where he experimented with rice cultivation and numerous industries. Jamestown itself served mainly as a watering hole during this period, richly illustrated in the complaint of one visitor in 1660 that there were “scarce but a dozen families in residence, all of them keeping ordinaries [taverns] at extraordinary rates.”

The restoration of Berkeley and the passage of the 1662 Act for Towns prompted a flurry of speculative building. With instructions to erect 32 brick houses backed by government subsidies, investors built rowhouses. The Act was soon revoked by the Crown, perhaps fearful of encouraging urban growth and diversification to the detriment of the profitable tobacco economy, and the required number of houses was never achieved. Excavation in 1993 at one set of rowhouses, Structure 17, uncovered an incomplete foundation for an additional unit. The image of a gaping, garbage-filled cellar hole called into question

Overall view of the 1993 excavation at Structure 17.



accepted perceptions of tidy brick rows housing fashionable elites. Similar instances of failed speculation dot the town and the documents. Houses which were finished did not always serve as dwellings. Shortly after the construction of the four-unit Structure 115, one unit became the public jail, clearly proof that lessees were difficult to attract. Destroyed during Bacon’s Rebellion in 1676, only the eastern end of Structure 115 was ever rebuilt.

The damage inflicted by the disgruntled rebel Nathaniel Bacon that fateful September night in 1676 is readily detected in the archeological record. Most notorious was the destruction of the statehouse, recently identified as Structure 112, a sizable brick building which began its life as the frame dwelling of Governor Harvey. Another town act, also disallowed by the Crown, was passed in 1680 to encourage rebuilding and several impressive brick houses were constructed. Artifacts from nearly 30 structures show activity during this period. Despite this apparent growth, Jamestown’s rowhouses would be described as “decayed and ruinous” by the time a devastating fire in 1698 wiped out the rebuilt statehouse. The agitation of several key political figures who owned land in Middle Plantation soon prompted the transfer of the capital to that locale, renamed Williamsburg.

Despite the move of the capital to a more salubrious location, it would be another half century before Virginia saw any urban development. By then, economic dependency upon Britain had lessened enough to not only allow town growth in the Chesapeake, but to soon permit the emergence of an independent United States. The tobacco economy and Crown opposition may have eventually doomed Jamestown, but it was not for lack of trying. Jamestown’s archeology encapsulates the speculative dreams of investors throughout the century, dreams fueled not by a New World frontier experience, but by a keen awareness of the nature of town building and profit making in England.

The challenge of employing a non-intrusive, interdisciplinary approach to understanding the 17th-century town has paid dividends. A holistic understanding of the town has been achieved which serves as a powerful management tool, not only guiding public interpretation, but providing the framework to direct future research detailing myriad human dramas acted out on the stage of the ill-fated 17th-century capital.

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Photos courtesy Andrew C. Edwards, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.