

## A SHOWCASE FOR HISTORICAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN AMERICA: THE ARCHAEARIUM AT JAMESTOWN, VIRGINIA

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THE NEW NATALIE P. AND ALAN M. VOORHEES  
ARCHAEARIUM, curated by Beverly A. Straube.

THE ARCHAEARIUM: REDISCOVERING JAMESTOWN,  
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The word “archaearium,” defined as “a place of beginnings,” symbolizes Jamestown’s role in the English settlement of North America. This review discusses the museum of that name (fig. 1), which opened in May 2006 and which features results from the ongoing Jamestown Rediscovery archaeological project, begun in 1994 by the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities (APVA).

The Alan M. and Natalie P. Voorhees Archaearium is named after a couple who made a significant donation to the museum’s establishment. Alan Voorhees (1922–2005) was a transportation engineer and urban planner who played a major role in establishing the American interstate highway system. Historic maps from his personal collection were donated to the Library of Congress, the Library of Virginia, and the Virginia Historical Society. Together, the Voorhees also funded lecture series and research centers at various universities and a nature preserve near their home in Virginia.

The Archaearium’s displays largely represent the culmination of a 14-year effort by the project that has accomplished something many historical archaeologists and historians viewed

as unlikely. The team’s excavations have uncovered substantial remains of Fort James (fig. 2), established in 1607, which many researchers assumed had eroded into the James River, a major tributary of Chesapeake Bay in southeastern Virginia. Archaeologists have found nearly two-thirds of the fort, an incredible volume of artifacts—more than one million at present and counting—and an amazing degree of preservation for buildings, the fort’s palisade lines and bulwarks, wells, and other features. The range and depth of surviving evidence is truly significant for historical archaeology in America, particularly for contact-period and early colonial studies.<sup>1</sup>

For those unfamiliar with Fort James and Jamestown, these locations mark a common history of early European conquest and colonialism and do fill the modern American need for a starting point in its national narrative. As part of Great Britain’s efforts to lay claim to and colonize what became the New World, King James I granted a royal charter to the Virginia Company, a joint stock organization of London entrepreneurs, to establish a settlement in the Chesapeake region. Making landfall in May 1607, the 108 English colonists erected a defensive perimeter (and a triangular fort soon thereafter; see fig. 2) to ward off hostile Native Americans and ultimately to be prepared for Spanish or other European attacks. Fort James bore witness to partially successful trade and political alliance with the Powhatan, but eventually, deteriorating relations with this tribe (including wide-scale attacks in 1622), high

<sup>1</sup> See Kelso and Straube 2004; Kelso 2006.



Fig. 1. Exterior view of the Natalie P. and Alan M. Voorhees Archaearium, Jamestown, Virginia (courtesy APVA Preservation Virginia).

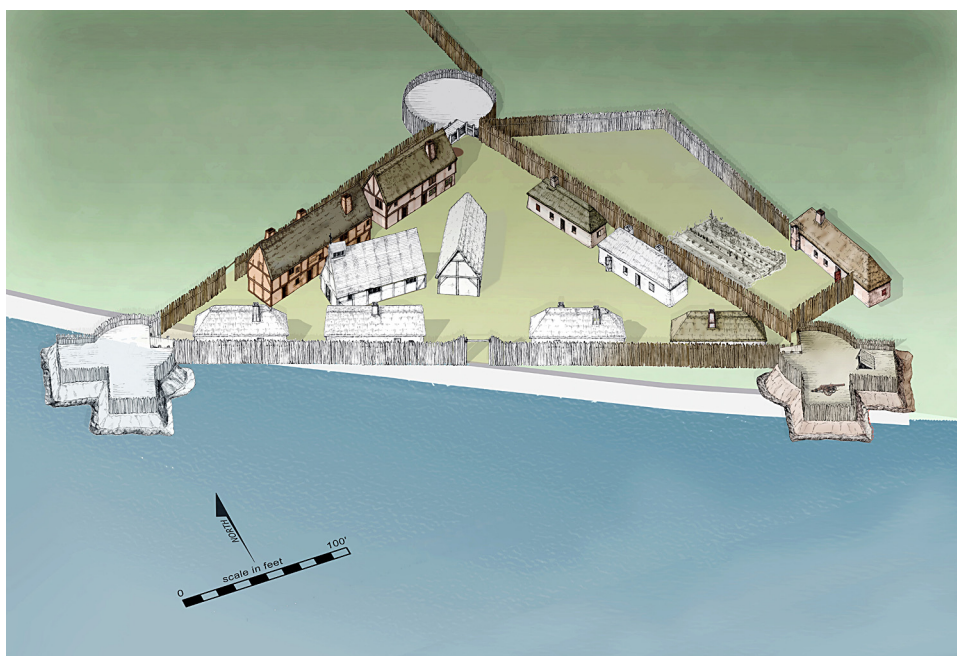


Fig. 2. Artist's reconstruction of Fort James, ca. 1611, based on archaeological excavations and documentary history (lgth. of river side 128.016 m [140 yards]; lgth. of east side 91.44 m [100 yards]; lgth. of west side 91.44 m [100 yards]) (courtesy APVA Preservation Virginia).

death rates, starvation, political infighting, and the lack of economic and civic improvements led to the revocation of the Virginia Company's charter, with the colony coming under royal control in 1624.<sup>2</sup> Despite this checkered history, Jamestown did survive its frontier hardships to evolve into a major regional port and the colony's capital—until 1699, when it was moved to Williamsburg, Virginia.

Since the 19th century, Jamestown has been interpreted as a significant place and period in American history. At the same time, popular perceptions of Jamestown have varied, often in tune with scholarly debates over its meaning and appropriate commemoration, right up to the present. In brief, Jamestown became part and parcel of American patriotism and hagiographic history, with the stories of the best-known settler, Captain John Smith, often at the fore. Taking charge after a period of turmoil and little progress, Smith led the way in the colony's relations with local Native Americans, especially with paramount Chief Powhatan (or Wahunseanacawh) and his now-fabled daughter, Pocahontas. Hollywood's cinematic attempts to construe a romantic relationship between Smith and Pocahontas notwithstanding, the ultimate failure of diplomacy set the stage for either the physical displacement of Native Americans or their segregation to reservations, a practice repeated across America in the 18th and 19th centuries. Although not the intended centerpiece of its commercial enterprise, the eventual success of tobacco production at Jamestown and in the surrounding area put the Virginia Colony and the Chesapeake region on the international map. The import of captive Africans to Jamestown in 1619 marked the initial inroads of slavery, a labor system that replaced indentured servitude in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The vicissitudes and contradictions inherent to this history of subjugating native peoples, promulgating mercantile capitalism and European geopolitics, and setting the groundwork for institutional slavery and racism while establishing the conditions for American-style government and democracy have kept Jamestown in the center stage for conflicting interpretations.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>Morgan 1975, 71–107; Kelso 2006, 9–43.

<sup>3</sup>Morgan 1975; Scham 2006; Baker 2007; Lepore 2007; Rothstein 2007.

<sup>4</sup>Nearby is another museum complex, the Jamestown Settlement, which encompasses recon-

The Archaearium museum at Jamestown has a complex geographic setting of which visitors should be aware. The museum rests on the smaller portion of Jamestown Island owned by APVA Preservation Virginia. The island's larger segment belongs to the National Park Service, which interprets the broader history of English settlement at Jamestown throughout the 17th century, including when the small city functioned as colonial Virginia's capital. In contrast, APVA Preservation Virginia focuses its attention on the period's early decades and especially on Fort James. The National Park Service and the APVA cooperate in telling the Jamestown story, and one must enter the Park Service's new visitor center to gain access to the APVA property. Both organizations embarked upon major investments and new facilities for Jamestown's 400th anniversary in 2007.<sup>4</sup>

As visitors approach the Archaearium, they walk through a parklike landscape that contains the archaeological site of Fort James, recently established reconstructions of the fort's palisade and a mud-and-stud (earthfast) building, along with other memorial markers, Civil War earthworks, and information plaques. Visitors also pass by ongoing archaeological excavations of the fort. While not reviewed here, this setting bears a critical link to the Archaearium, since the fort's excavations form the primary source for much of the material on display in the museum. Visitors can read information panels about the archaeological research and talk with staff interpreters and archaeologists, which is important in fully understanding the site. One must integrate partial reconstructions of the fort with areas of ongoing excavation, usually holding a complex range of evidence and time periods, along with former excavation locations that are either covered up or minimally interpreted. Nonetheless, this visual and verbal introduction to the Archaearium is most appropriate; archaeology and artifacts are both the means and the highlights of the displays yet are balanced with a great deal of historical information that provides the period context.

In tandem with its distinctive name, the Archaearium displays distinctive modern

structions of Fort James and of the three ships that established this colonial outpost, along with new large-scale exhibitions devoted to the intersection of English, Native American, and African cultures at Jamestown.

architecture. Designed by Carlton S. Abbott and David M. Stemmann of Carlton Abbott and Partners, the 700 m<sup>2</sup> (7,500 sq. ft) structure consists of simple shapes, including rectangles attached to a large shed roof. Two of the building's front sections, which are almost entirely composed of glass, allow in large amounts of natural light and enable impressive views of the fort site and the James River. Constructed of special load-bearing piles and structural cantilevers, the museum structure appears to hover above the ground. Part of this design serves to preserve brick foundations of the late 17th-century Jamestown statehouse, which can be seen through glass "floor portals." The structure also incorporates "green design" building technologies (geothermal heating and cooling, lower water consumption, interior use of day lighting) and is clad in copper, a key item of early trade between the colonists and Native Americans. The interior's architecture is similarly light and easily negotiated by visitors (fig. 3). Above the exhibition panels and cases, the building's open construction of warehouse-style structural steel framing and the utilities are all visible, although muted by their uniform gray color. Black lighting fixtures form only a slight contrast, allowing visitors to stay focused on the installation itself.

As stated in the museum's lobby, the Archaearium has a basic purpose, to tell "the story of the founding years of Jamestown as seen through the eyes of the people who lived it" and through "the artifacts they left behind." A more complex story and multifaceted narrative comes to light within the displays; the narrative retains an essentially descriptive tone while detailing an intriguing process of frontier adaptation and of how archaeologists figure out "what life was like at Jamestown." In this opening space, Jamestown is referenced as the "birthplace of many modern American traditions and institutions," but the remainder of the exhibition does not take up or reinforce this statement. Instead, the visitor moves right into the galleries that address a series of topics about how Jamestown came into being, what happened between 1607 and ca. 1630, and the nature of daily life for New World settlers.

After entering through the museum's lobby, the installation's overall organization depends on visitors proceeding clockwise through

eight galleries and ending at the gift shop.<sup>5</sup> This procession runs in roughly chronological order, beginning with the Virginia Company's organization and purposes prior to embarkation and the initial establishment of the fort. More general themes make up the majority of the displays (e.g., "Life and Death," "Trade and Industry," "Daily Life," "Survival"). The galleries come to a close with the section entitled "End of an Era," when Fort James gave way to the larger settlement of Jamestown during the second quarter of the 17th century. The gallery titles found on a site plan in the lobby are not consistently repeated in the installation's relevant sections. In general, the individual galleries are visually appealing; they contain high-quality materials, and panels and objects are sufficiently lit. Thankfully, from this reviewer's perspective, the display galleries are not overwhelmed by music, sounds, or heavy narration. As with most history museums, the visitor finds a traditional mixture of artifacts in Plexiglas cases with identifying labels and variously scaled period images and quotations from historic documents to set the context and offer explanatory notes. Photographs of archaeological fieldwork in action accompany most gallery topics. Textual material is not overly long, sticking to basic information and interpretive points.

While scholars and archaeologists may be disappointed by the lack of broader discussion, more detailed analysis, and comparisons with other early colonial settlements and contact-period encounters, one should keep in mind the Archaearium's primary audience: the general public. During my multiple visits, the public seemed to be pleased and to find the artifacts and information entertaining, educational, and compelling. Most visitors only know the broadest and most basic outlines of the Jamestown story, so the installation accomplishes the essential task of developing a more nuanced and detailed interpretation of Jamestown's early years and the settler's living conditions, activities, social aspirations, and intentions. Visitors learn about archaeological methods and concerns in concert with the artifacts on display and within the context of the galleries' topics. Recovering artifacts and gathering information involves controlled excavation, screening, mapping, and photography. Similarly, putting

<sup>5</sup> Haley Sharpe Design from Leicester, England, is responsible for the Archaearium's gallery installations.





Fig. 3. Interior view of the galleries within the Archaearium (courtesy APVA Preservation Virginia).

artifacts in a cultural context and interpreting their use and meaning requires archaeologists to conduct background research on a variety of issues, whether social history, architecture, coffin construction, or artisans' trades. Other display panels bring artifact preservation and conservation into play.

The exhibition section on "Life and Death" addresses "The People of Jamestown" through burial excavations and physical and forensic anthropology. Actual skeletons are central to the display, with signage warning visitors that they are about to view human remains. Archaeological crime scene investigation, if you will, forms the prevailing theme for this gallery, namely how archaeologists use a variety of techniques—human osteoarchaeology, DNA, facial reconstruction—to determine age, sex, health, diet, social status, occupation, and manner of death. The deceased of the Jamestown frontier are compared with those in 17th-century London or, as in one case, with modern English descendants of Bartholomew Gosnold, captain of the ship *Godspeed*, who died at Jamestown in August 1607.

Modern technology is brought to bear in some places, whether through digital facial reconstructions of human remains or a limited number of ceiling-height flat-screen monitors that show videos of archaeology in progress,

such as the excavation of a well and artifacts at the moment of discovery. Especially appealing are the "virtual viewers" along the building's long glass wall that allow visitors, with a push of a button, to see images of fort-period construction superimposed on the modern landscape, along with text and an audio narration of the nature and origins of the former buildings or landscape features. These virtual reconstructions incorporate evidence from the archaeological excavations.

The Archaearium contains a sizeable array of 17th-century artifacts, symbolizing the significant collection held by the APVA, which will be invaluable for future research and analysis. Approximately 1,000 artifacts are well displayed and conserved. Although they make up a minor portion of the overall assemblage, the materials make for good viewing, ready comparisons, and thoughtful reflection. The artifacts range from weaponry and tools to pottery and glass to jewelry, game pieces, food remnants, parts of musical instruments, and medical devices. In the last category, a silver "earpicker" in the shape of a dolphin has become the installation's showpiece (fig. 4). Both an ornate object and a multifunctional tool for cleaning ears, teeth, and nails, it underscores the odd encounter between upper-class European sensibility and the Virginia frontier that was Jamestown. The



Fig. 4. Ornate silver ear- and toothpick discovered within the extension of Fort James (lgh. 5 cm) (courtesy APVA Preservation Virginia).

sheer volume of the artifact collection for the Jamestown Rediscovery project alters standard images of frontier isolation and privation. Jamestown's settlers, at least at times, had lots of "stuff," and the process of adaptation led to great amounts of refuse at other times.

The displays also provide a useful sampling of period military artifacts such as body armor, sword hilts, and a Cabasset helmet in the "Fort James" section—reminders of the colony's military purposes and the background of numerous settlers, including its leading gentlemen.<sup>6</sup> One display within the "Trade and Commerce" gallery contains several coins and counters of the late 16th and early 17th centuries, demonstrating the international value of hard currency, whether of English, German, Irish, Swedish, Spanish, or Dutch origin. Clay tobacco pipes at Jamestown also had diverse beginnings. Native American pipes reflect the use of tobacco for social and religious purposes, while pipes locally produced by the English sought to commercialize an export crop that would soon become a consumer good in Europe. Imported English and Dutch tobacco pipes indicate that larger-scale production across the Atlantic would eventually dominate the trade and make smoking a regular habit for different ages and genders.

<sup>6</sup>The term "Cabasset" derives from the Spanish word *capacete* (cap) and denotes a popular type of light headgear used by European foot soldiers in the 16th and 17th centuries. The first intact helmet excavated at Fort James is of this type.

Some minor constructive criticism of the Archaearium's displays and interpretations is in order. While mentioned in passing, the timeline and evolution for Fort James lack clear delineation. Its demise, namely from falling out of use and necessity, deserves further explanation, as the "End of the Era" gallery remains confined to one brief panel and a single display case of bottles, bricks, and miscellaneous artifacts from a post-fort structure. While rightly avoiding major archaeological resources for the Archaearium's placement, the museum structure does rest on top of the statehouse's foundations and an area of 75 burials. Its hollow interior forms a glass-walled "courtyard . . . dedicated to their re-interment and memory." Despite these appropriate intentions, the space does not have the access or feel of a normal courtyard, consisting merely of stacked brick (to represent the foundations) and pea gravel, less than emblematic of a memorial burial ground. The galleries' period images overwhelmingly rely upon Dutch and Flemish 17th-century paintings. While there were many parallels between the material culture of Great Britain and what is now the Netherlands, it seems odd that few English images are presented, other than some portraits.

Finally, the theme of the copper trade with Native Americans would benefit from additional discussion (fig. 5). The "Trade and Industry" gallery properly addresses the broader range of exchanges between Native Americans and settlers, including positive and negative outcomes for both cultures. As to copper specifically, a panel mentions the Native American premium for this metal as an exotic material with spiritual, prestige, and "monetary" values. Also noted is Chief Powhatan's likely strategy of allowing the early settlement at Jamestown to survive in order to secure a better source of copper for himself and other political/religious elites. Still, the panel's text does not address the full implications of the copper exchange. As copper became more and more available to Native Americans below the highest rank of Powhatan society, its religious and political force was undermined; thus, the oversupply of European copper inadvertently devalued the Native American sense of this



Fig. 5. Copper scrap, coins, jettons, and tubular beads from Fort James (courtesy APVA Preservation Virginia).

metal. From this standpoint, a basic metal had far-reaching effects, demonstrating the power of material culture.

While portions of the installation use artifacts to illustrate aspects of daily life known from period documents, other sections offer up new findings made by the Jamestown Rediscovery team. Documents and recovered artifacts demonstrate that the colonists' diet mixed European crops and meats with New World game, fish, and corn, while their range of material and social exchanges with Native Americans encompassed copper, beads, ceramics, arrows, and even intermarriage. Faunal materials indicate that during a period of starvation, settlers turned to eating cats, dogs, rats, and snakes to survive. A wide variety of artisan-based materials underscores the new interpretation of an active, industrious, and multifaceted group of settlers to counterbalance the older, negative historical image of indolent gentlemen and a colonial enterprise that foundered from lack of effort and direction. Glassmaking, coopering, blacksmithing, metallurgy, masonry, and woodworking trades all contributed to Jamestown's commerce and the colony's attempts to extract New World

profits and sustain a growing and diversified settlement. Recovered artifacts, by-products, and/or tools for each trade contribute to this display. Similarly, the colony's leaders were experienced military commanders with international backgrounds who maintained close involvement with strategies for settlement, trade, and industries.

Another revelation derives from the realm of architecture. Beyond the mere tent shelters and brush huts erected in the opening days and months of Fort James, settlers next established mud-and-stud buildings based on small, closely spaced posts daubed with mud stucco and fitted with thatched roofs. Used as crowded, barracks-like structures, these buildings would later give way to the rapidly developing practice of earthfast (post-in-the-ground) structures that relied upon fewer but larger posts and a covering of riven clapboard siding and roofing.<sup>7</sup> Beyond the framing for a mud-and-stud building reconstructed in the fort area outside the Archaearium, the gallery section on "Survival" employs another partial reconstruction to demonstrate this type of period architecture and to frame a display on Jamestown's "Starving Time," the winter of

<sup>7</sup>Stone 2004.



1609–1610, when numerous settlers died and some even resorted to cannibalism.

Additional considerations should compel archaeologists to visit the Archaearium in Jamestown. First, the galleries do not wear down the visitor with tedious detail and dense argumentation. Second, one can easily maneuver the gallery spaces, which offer side paths for avoiding crowds or for moving to another gallery. Unlike some museums, the visitor does not feel trapped in a maze of dimly lit rooms. Last, given the continued pace of archaeological excavations and the near daily rate of new discoveries at Fort James, one can readily imagine that the Archaearium's displays will be updated and revised. Beyond the publications mentioned earlier, the Jamestown Rediscovery project's Web site contains considerable information on the artifacts, the interpretation of archaeological evidence to date, and Jamestown's background history.<sup>8</sup> Also on the Web site are additional images of the recovered artifacts and of the Archaearium and its displays.

In closing, and returning to Jamestown's broader implications, the settlement did become known for a number of "firsts." For example, it is considered the first permanent English settlement in mainland America and in 1619 was the site of the first representative assembly of government officials in the Western Hemisphere. More debate arises over such monikers as "the birthplace of America"; obviously, many other European settlements contributed to the ultimate establishment of what became the United States. Virginia's competition with New England's Puritan version of colonial American history at Plymouth, Massachusetts, and competition over tourism dollars also explain some of the political and popular debates over Jamestown's place in history. The story of Jamestown told by the Archaearium does not enter the fray of these disputes in a serious fashion, although other

publications of the Jamestown Rediscovery project do.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, it does engage in a type of revisionist history, viewing past portrayals of Jamestown—showing it as an inauspicious beginning, a fiasco, and a failure of idle English gentlemen—as unfair and not guided by the full range of facts. The Jamestown story, at least the Fort James portion of the story, is more complex and contains a mixed history of successes, mistakes, enterprise, frontier adaptation, and attempts to establish a new and changed English culture in the midst of other cultures.

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<sup>8</sup><http://www.historicjamestowne.org>.

<sup>9</sup>Kelso and Straube 2004, 8, 193–94; Kelso 2006,

1–8, 190–94, 214.