

Remains of 4 leaders identified at early English settlement of Jamestown

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Crosses mark where the remains were found of four of the earliest leaders of Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in America. They were buried for more than 400 years near the altar of what was America's first Protestant church, in Jamestown, Virginia. Joe Fudge/The Daily Press via AP

WASHINGTON — Archaeologists have discovered the human remains of four of the earliest leaders of the English colony that would become America. They were buried for more than 400 years near the altar of what was America's first Protestant church in Jamestown, Virginia.

The four burial sites were uncovered in the earthen floor of what was Jamestown's historic Anglican church from 1608, a team of scientists and historians announced July 28. The church is where Pocahontas, the daughter of a Native American chief, married Englishman John Rolfe. Their marriage led to peace between the Powhatan Indians and colonists at the first permanent English settlement in America.

Beyond the human remains, archaeologists also found artifacts buried with the colonial leaders. One of them was a mysterious Catholic container for holy relics or objects.

"Nothing Like It Anywhere Else"

The Jamestown Rediscovery archaeology team revealed its discovery at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History. The museum is helping to study and identify those buried in the church. The burials were first uncovered in November 2013, but the scientific team wanted to trace and identify its findings with some certainty before announcing the discovery.

Archaeologists have been studying the site since 1994 when the original James Fort was rediscovered.

The team identified the remains of the Reverend Robert Hunt, Jamestown's first Anglican minister who was known as a peacemaker between rival leaders. Also identified were Captain Gabriel Archer, an enemy of one-time colony leader John Smith; Sir Ferdinando Wainman, likely the first knight buried in America; and Captain William West, who died in a fight with the Powhatan Indians. The three other men likely died after brief illnesses, and were buried between 1608 and 1610.

"What we have discovered here in the earliest English church in America are four of the first leaders of America," said historian James Horn, president of the Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation. "There's nothing like it anywhere else in this country."

Perhaps just as interesting as the newly discovered human remains are some of the artifacts buried with the bodies. Burial items were rare in English culture at the time, archaeologists said.

A Small Silver Box With Bones

In Archer's coffin, archaeologists found a captain's staff as a symbol of his military position. Historical records indicate Archer helped lead some of the earliest expeditions to Jamestown. He died at the age of 34 during a six-month period known as the "starving time" when many died due to disease, starvation and battles with Indians.

Mysteriously, a small silver box resting atop Archer's coffin turns out likely to be a Catholic reliquary — a container for holy relics. Inside were bone fragments and a receptacle for holy water. Archer's parents were Catholic, which became illegal in Protestant England. So the discovery raises the question of whether Archer was part of a secret Catholic cell — or even a Catholic spy on behalf of the Spanish, Horn said. Catholic Spain was the enemy of England at the time.

Catholic relics have been found in the Jamestown archaeological site before, but the placement of this box seems particularly symbolic, the historians said. They used CT imaging scans to see inside the sealed box without damaging it, something that wouldn't have been possible 10 years ago.

An alternative theory holds that the religious container was simply used for the Protestant church. Historians said more research must be done.

"It was a real kind of ah-ha moment for a lot of us," said William Kelso, Jamestown's director of archaeology. "It was oh, religion was a big deal here, and that's often overlooked. Everyone thinks that people came to Jamestown to find gold and go home and live happily ever after."

Searching For An Early Governor

In West's burial plot, archaeologists found remnants of the military leader's silver-edged sash in a block of soil. The silk material was too delicate to remove from the dirt, so archaeologists removed an entire block of dirt.

Archaeologists will continue searching the church site and expect to eventually find the burial of Sir Thomas West, the early governor of Virginia. He led a rescue mission to save Jamestown when the colony was collapsing, Horn said. The Delaware colony was named after West, who was also known as Lord De La Warr.

Artifacts from the burials will go on display within weeks at the site known as "Historic Jamestowne." The site also plans to memorialize the men and will keep their bones in an accessible place for preservation and future study.

The Smithsonian created a 3-D scan of the excavation site, bones and artifacts to give people a look at the discovery online.

The team is more than 90 percent certain of the colonists' identities, Kelso said. Still, they will work to complete more testing and potentially DNA analysis.

The archaeology team said the discovery is a riddle they must figure out over time.

"The things that we look at and can read from the bones are simply details that you're not going to find in the history books," said Douglas Owsley, an anthropologist at the Smithsonian who studies ancient bones. "These are men that you might not know their name. But these are men that were critical to who we are in terms of America today."

Quiz

- 1 How have the artifacts found in this discovery revealed a new understanding about the Jamestown colony?
- (A) The artifacts have proven that the disease, starvation and battles with the Indians during the "starving time" affected colonial leaders as much as it affected common people.
 - (B) The artifacts gave insight into the military traditions of colonial Jamestown and suggested that those in the military were given special significance in the church.
 - (C) The artifacts revealed that burial items were used in English culture during colonial times, which was previously thought to be inaccurate.
 - (D) The artifacts revealed the significance of religion to the Jamestown colony and prompted questions about Catholic influence on Archer.
- 2 According to the article, researchers most likely want to make the excavation site and its findings available to the public for all of the following reasons EXCEPT:
- (A) they want to clarify misconceptions people have about the Jamestown colony
 - (B) people can learn about history in a way that cannot be experienced in books
 - (C) the finding of these early colonial leaders and their artifacts is unprecedented and unique
 - (D) Americans can learn about people who played a central role in shaping their national identity

- 3 Read the following sentence from the section "A Small Silver Box With Bones."

So the discovery raises the question of whether Archer was part of a secret Catholic cell — or even a Catholic spy on behalf of the Spanish, Horn said. Catholic Spain was the enemy of England at the time.

Which of the following phrases BEST explains the meaning of the word "cell" as used in the sentence above?

- (A) a small room in a monastery
- (B) a living organism
- (C) a group of people with the same belief
- (D) a section of a town

- 4 Read the following sentence from the section "Searching For An Early Governor."

The site also plans to memorialize the men and will keep their bones in an accessible place for preservation and future study.

How does the word "memorialize" affect the tone of the sentence?

- (A) It conveys a sense of discovery and revelation.
- (B) It conveys a sense of significance and respect.
- (C) It conveys a sense of faith and conviction.
- (D) It conveys a sense of mourning and loss.