

Jamestown Rediscovery

HISTORIC JAMESTOWNE

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Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation Awarded \$100,000 Grant for Faunal Analysis

JAMESTOWN, VA. (June 20, 2024) –

The Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation has received a Material Culture Studies of the Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Chesapeake grant to fund identification and research of animal bones found in the fort's First Well, in use from 1608 and filled in after the Starving Time winter of 1609-1610. With over half a million zooarchaeological specimens recovered from the feature, the data produced by this grant-funded research will be a significant contribution to foodways history in the Chesapeake.

Jamestown's first well was constructed in 1608, when John Smith was president of the struggling settlement, who wrote "*we digged a faire Well of fresh water in the Fort of excellent, sweet water which till then was wanting.*" However, contamination from brackish groundwater and other impacts caused the well to spoil quickly, thus becoming a convenient place to dispose of trash. The First Well was filled in during a cleanup period in the spring of 1610 designed to restore order after the Starving Time. The short period of use combined with the specific events of filling in and capping of the well created a tightly datable time capsule of James Fort's earliest, and most difficult, days.

Faunal investigation of James Fort's earliest features has transformed our understanding of food and livestock in early 17th-century Chesapeake. Before James Fort was discovered in 1994, faunal analysis on Virginia sites from the second quarter of the century (1620-1650) showed that less than 10% of the colonists' diet was made up of wild animals, while livestock animals such as pigs, cattle, or sheep made up a majority of the protein in their diet. After the discovery of James Fort, which meant features dating earlier than 1620 were available for research for the first time, analysis showed that Virginia colonists' diets were nearly opposite in the first quarter of the 17th century, suggesting an early reliance on hunting and fishing, as well as trade with Indigenous peoples.

Initial analysis of the faunal material from the First Well revealed an unusual creature – the bones of an iguana. Found by zooarchaeologists and long-time Jamestown Rediscovery research partners Stephen Atkins and Susan Andrews, these iguana bones may be among the earliest archaeologically-identified iguana in North America. The iguana was likely found on the Caribbean island of Mona, where the settlers stopped for supplies en route to Virginia. George Percy, one of the original settlers who traveled to Virginia aboard the *Susan Constant*, recorded this, writing, "*We also killed Guanans in fashion of a serpent.*" Complete analysis of the First Well could illuminate more species brought to Virginia from elsewhere, including animals obtained on various island stops during the three-month journey across the ocean. This research may also shed light on what colonists were importing and how livestock was shipped, whether "on the hoof" or as barreled provisions.

The colonists at James Fort have often been accused of being lazy and causing their own demise in an area with abundant resources. Based on preliminary analysis, faunal research of the First Well will show how colonists adapted to new food sources while they struggled to establish a foothold in their new home. “Research at Jamestown has often changed what we think we know about life in the 17th century. The faunal research of this well will be no different,” said Director of Collections Michael Lavin. “Uncovering an iguana was entirely unexpected, but it speaks to the resourcefulness of the colonists as well as the worldliness of their travels to Virginia. Consuming new foods was part of the larger experience of coming to this new place.”

For thirty years, archaeology at Jamestown has revealed how colonists’ lived in times of both prosperity and strife. How they fed themselves is a significant part of that story. Small changes in provisioning strategies can reveal times of peace, when trade with Indigenous peoples was frequent, or times of growth, when rapidly-increasing populations necessitated the careful management of livestock herds. We’re grateful to the Conservation Fund for their ongoing support of research at Jamestown.

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Available photos can be found [here](#). All images courtesy of Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation.

About Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation

The Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation (JRF) is the steward of the original site of James Fort and Jamestown, established in 1607. JRF is dedicated to uncovering, preserving, and sharing Jamestown’s diverse history, and highlighting its major contribution to the foundations of modern American society. Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation is a private 501(c)(3) nonprofit. JRF jointly administers Historic Jamestowne alongside the National Park Service. For more information about visiting Jamestown, please visit www.historicjamestowne.org or call (757) 856-1250.