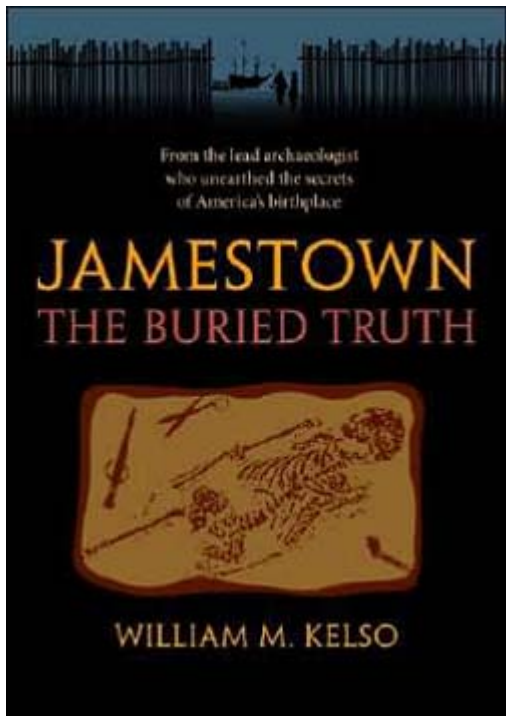


Jamestown ®



William M. Kelso, *Jamestown: The Buried Truth*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006. 248 pp., cloth, \$29.95.

There are two Jamestowns. The first is a physical location near the territory inhabited in the early seventeenth century by the Pasapeghs, one of the thirty or so indigenous groups who lived in a region they called Tsenacommacah. The English called these people Powhatans. The second Jamestown is a mythic place that reappears every fifty years and becomes the focal point of a national discussion about the meaning of "America." The first place has been studied by historians, anthropologists, and archaeologists; the other has been (and remains) fodder for politicians and entrepreneurial patriots. The tangible Jamestown was initiated by 107 English men and boys who settled there in May 1607. The imaginary Jamestown has been created and recreated by presidents and promoters who have seen opportunity in boasting that it is "the cradle of American democratic traditions, cultures, ideologies and principles," in the words of the official anniversary Website. William M. Kelso's *Jamestown: The Buried Truth* merges both Jamestowns and leaves the reader wondering where "truth" can be found.

As is obvious to every early American historian and thousands of other readers, books about Jamestown have never been so popular or received such wide attention as in this four-hundredth-anniversary year. Any serious review of the field will need to include Kelso's study, which is one of the most significant works of American archaeology to appear in recent years. The University of Virginia Press has produced a beautiful book containing scores of images, many

in full color. Kelso has given the press much to work with: he has been, as he reveals in these pages, the most important archaeologist working at what has become one of the most intensively studied archaeological sites in eastern North America. Digs at Jamestown have produced around seven hundred thousand artifacts.

In such able hands as Kelso's, archaeological evidence can reveal a past hidden to those who study only texts. Careful digging in Jamestown has shown, for example, the size of dwellings, the contents of diets, and the range of goods that arrived in this small seventeenth-century outpost on the edge of the Atlantic economy. Even the garbage is revelatory: the abandonment of goods such as suits of armor reveals major shifts in settlers' perceptions of the region and its challenges at any given time. When archaeologists find valuable clothing in graves, it suggests that colonists died of something so dreadful that none of the survivors wanted the hand-me-downs. An excavation of a well might reveal what kinds of pathogens, if any, invaded the bowels of those unfortunate enough to ingest them. This kind of analysis can provide clues into the desperate early months of Jamestown when sixty-seven of the first settlers died. Kelso and his team investigated these questions along with more mundane artifacts—such as Delft tiles, Elizabethan coins, conch shells from Bermuda, and a German stoneware bottle. These reveal, among other things, settlers' engagement with the larger Atlantic economy. Kelso ably demonstrates how the analysis of human detritus can reveal what lies invisible in texts, thus substantiating the special role of archaeologists in the collective scholarly understanding of the past.

While archaeology lies at the heart of this study of the tangible Jamestown, other parts of the book promote the mythic Jamestown. "The American dream was born on the banks of the James River," Kelso writes in the first sentence of his introduction. In case the reader becomes so lost in the minutiae of archaeological reconstruction that she or he forgets this motto (and to his credit Kelso is a far more felicitous writer than many who fill the pages of archaeological journals), Kelso repeats this theme in the last sentence of the book: "The American dream was born on the banks of the James River, at a place first called James Fort, in 1607" (214). Why such a deliberate redundancy? Perhaps because the mythic Jamestown has cast its spell over even the most scientific scholar to study the place. Yet some might question the idea that the "American dream" was born at Jamestown, and Kelso is too capable a scholar to ignore the fact that the establishment of a permanent English presence in North America proved nightmarish for Native peoples and Africans.

Nonetheless, it is hard for Kelso to shake off a heritage that seems at once so romantic and so compellingly patriotic. "The ideals that distinguish and guide the United States today trace back to the Virginia settlement where free enterprise, the rule of law, and the spirit of discovery took hold in the hearts and practices of the American people." Those words are not Kelso's. They come instead from President George W. Bush's proclamation marking the anniversary, issued by the White House on April 6, 2007. This is how Kelso put

it: "There is evidence that some of the immigrants worked hard and achieved a better life. Those who first met them at the shore usually did not share this good fortune. Still, a political system was born and migrated across the seventeenth-century Jamestown landscape establishing principles that would some day make possible a more equal access to that better life" (214).

There is nothing wrong with writing a work of history that emphasizes the contribution of a particular individual or group or place to a larger historical drama. Kelso, who spent many years digging at Jamestown, certainly deserves the opportunity to tell his readers about the significance of what can be found there. The question for many readers will not be the conclusion, which will either seem an accurate reflection of the American past or an apology for it. Instead, the issue here is the nature of historical truth. Presidents can be forgiven an excess of rhetoric, for in our time no one seems to expect them to speak honestly. But Kelso, the scholar, has claimed in this book that archaeological analysis has brought us closer to what he calls "the buried truth," as if material objects tell only a single story that is obvious to those who unearth them.

It is true that documents often obscure as much as they reveal. But so do material objects, including those found at Jamestown. Remains from the site provide evidence about the complexity of the settlement's founding but speak less explicitly about the decline of Native Americans or the birth of the English mainland slave trade. Those other stories, although equally true, do not fit so well into the versions of Jamestown that the current president and fellow organizers of the official anniversary celebration have been marketing to the nation in public spectacles, children's stage plays, or trademarked mugs and caps. Sometimes archaeology helps to rebury elements of early Virginia's past rather than reveal them as, for instance, when Kelso writes that "documents and digging lay bare the places of American democracy" (213). When Kelso lets the patriotic past promote the mythic over the tangible Jamestown, readers of this book will need to trust their judgment about where the truth lies.

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