

Jamestown Rediscovery

HISTORIC JAMESTOWNE

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From Food Dependence to Independence:

Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation completes analysis of faunal remains from James Fort's Second Well with support from the Conservation Fund.



Associate Curator Alexis Ohman examining just a small fraction of the faunal material recovered from Jamestown's second well.



More bones from birds of prey were found in the second well than in any other previously analyzed feature. Of the 124 raptor bones recovered, 67 were attributed to the bald eagle. Above is a bald eagle cranium and beak.

JAMESTOWN, Va. (December 9, 2021) – This fall, Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation concluded a two-year zooarchaeological analysis of Jamestown's second well (ca. 1610-1611), in which hundreds of thousands of animal bones were found during 2006 excavations. This work was accomplished in part with a grant provided by The Conservation Fund, which was generously matched by donors to the Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation, enabling a more complete analysis of the well.

Jamestown collaborated with an extraordinary team of zooarchaeologists throughout this project. The team includes: **Dr. Joanne Bowen**, who retired from her longstanding position as Curator of Environmental Collections at the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation in 2016; **Stephen C. Atkins**, who worked alongside Dr. Bowen at Colonial Williamsburg as Associate Curator of the Environmental Collections; and **Susan Trevarthen Andrews**, independent contract faunal analyst. The team has extensive experience working with faunal assemblages throughout the Chesapeake and beyond.

Previous faunal analysis at Jamestown has focused on material dating to the early Fort period and Starving Time (1607-1610) as well as features that postdate 1620, but until this project, faunal material from the second decade of the 17th century had not yet been examined. Jamestown's second well is believed to have been dug in 1610 or 1611 but rapidly spoiled and was used as a trash deposit until about 1617 or 1618. The contents of the well represent an unexplored period of change and continual food challenges at Jamestown as the colony began to stabilize and achieve self-sufficiency after the Starving Time Winter of 1609-10.

Faunal analysis of earlier Fort-period features revealed that while some hunting and fishing occurred, colonists were heavily dependent on English supplies and trade with Virginia Indians. During the Starving Time, when imported supplies were scarce and trade was cut off, colonists were forced to rely on many taboo and unconventional animals for survival, such as raccoon and opossum. These types of species were much less abundant in the second well, suggestive of a shift beginning just after the Starving Time towards a focus on animal husbandry and reliance on other locally available wild species, particularly white-tailed deer.

Martial law, instituted in the spring of 1610 by Thomas Gates, exerted strict control over all food resources, forcing a change from individuality to communality in many aspects of life at James Fort, including in animal husbandry, agriculture, and food practices like cooking. Cattle remains were found in proportionally low amounts in the second well, the lowest of any period at Jamestown, confirming the written law that livestock brought from England were to be protected and not consumed in order to allow herds to expand and become self-sustaining. However, this study showed a peak in the consumption of pork during this time, perhaps because swine are prolific breeders, omnivorous, and require little care, making it easier to increase their numbers than cattle.

Additionally, wild resources including venison, fish, turtles, and fowl represented over 40% of the assemblage found in the second well, indicating that hunting and fishing were also an important part of subsistence in the 1610-1618 period. It is still unclear whether these resources were obtained through the colonists' hunting and fishing efforts or through trade with the Virginia Indians. A combination of both may be the case, considering the First Anglo Powhatan War came to an end in 1614 which began a period of peace between the two groups.

Overall, this analysis reveals the growing food security of the English at Jamestown and the New World as local resources, both wild and domestic, contributed to available food supply. In the eight years after the Starving Time, the colonists bred local livestock herds, obtained food supplies through local trade and from England, and fished and hunted, contributing to a diverse but increasingly stable diet.

Historic Jamestowne (HJ) preserves the original site of the first permanent English settlement in America and is jointly administered by Jamestown Rediscovery and the National Park Service. Entrance tickets are available at the HJ Visitor Center from 9:00 a.m. until 4:30 p.m., and the grounds remain open until dusk. General admission is \$25.00 per adult (which includes both Historic Jamestowne and Yorktown Battlefield for seven consecutive days). Children 15 & under are free. National Park Passes and Preservation Virginia Memberships are accepted; however a \$10 per person fee may apply. Entrance tickets and passes include admission to the archaeological site, the Memorial Church, the Voorhees Archaearium Archaeological Museum, as well as scheduled daily walking tours and public programs. For opening hours of the Dale House Café and information about special events, please visit www.historicjamestowne.org or call (757) 856-1250.