

Jamestown Rediscovery

HISTORIC JAMESTOWNE

Contact: Angel Johnston
704-759-6458
hjmedia@preservationvirginia.org

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE



Illustration: Paula Calle Lopez

Jamestown settlers picked up a donkey en route to Virginia, but then had to eat it to survive.

JAMESTOWN, VA (November 6, 2025) –

A new paper studying equine remains excavated at James Fort reveals what may be the first donkey brought to the eastern seaboard of North America, plus new insights into the role of horses. A collaborative group of researchers conducted a full zooarchaeological analysis, plus isotope and ancient DNA investigations, on sixty-two equine skeletal remains from two features excavated inside James Fort: a ca. 1608 barrel-lined well commonly known as Jamestown's "First Well" and a contemporaneous cellar commonly known as Jamestown's "Kitchen Cellar." Both of these features were filled in with trash immediately after the Starving Time winter of 1609-1610. In addition to the equine remains, the Kitchen Cellar previously yielded butchered human remains – the only proof of survival cannibalism at Jamestown. The just-released paper on the investigation revealed a previously-unknown donkey at Jamestown, likely the first brought to English North America. Isotope analysis made clear the donkey, never mentioned in

ship manifests, was not born in Britain and was likely picked up along the journey across the Atlantic.

In 1609, the Third Supply, a fleet of ships bringing settlers, food, and other materials to Jamestown, set sail with “sixe Mares and two horses” aboard. One horse died on the journey, but somewhere between Plymouth, England, and Jamestown, they, or another one of the other supply ships sent to Jamestown before 1610, picked up a donkey. Stopovers may have included the Canary Islands off the coast of Africa and various locations in the Caribbean, including Martinique, Dominica, Nevis, St. Croix, Puerto Rico, and the Mona and Monito Islands. Biomolecular analysis of the donkey tooth excavated the kitchen cellar suggest West African or Iberian ancestry, which, the paper’s authors write, mirrors patterns emerging from other taxa, such as cattle, that show inputs to American livestock population from other regions of the world. “Applying new scientific techniques to the archaeological record of early North America,” says lead author William Taylor (University of Colorado), “is showing us just how complex the early trans-Atlantic exchange of domestic animals truly was. The spread of livestock westward is turning out to look less like a single “event” and more like a stream of animals and people with inputs and outputs from all over Europe, Africa, the Caribbean, and the Americas.”

The horses and donkey were likely brought to Virginia to be used as work animals. But, the new study shows that more than 80% of the skeletal remains of equids exhibit modification related to butchering and consumption. Teeth in the assemblage were broken to access the pulp cavity and larger bones split to access marrow. Some tooth fragments even have iron embedded cut marks from unsuccessful ax swings. This intensive processing of horses and donkeys is consistent with other Starving Time-era artifacts, which show settlers turning to atypical and, eventually, taboo sources of nutrition in their desperate effort to survive.

“The identification of a donkey at Jamestown highlights the significance of archaeology to understanding our shared past, as it represents one of many instances of a gap in the 17th century documentary record,” said Jamestown Rediscovery Senior Curator Leah Stricker. Though this donkey was likely consumed by starving settlers shortly after it arrived at Jamestown, its presence represents the global connectivity of early transatlantic trade and interactions and what we can learn from animal bones discarded by colonists more than 400 years ago.

The paper is available to read in [Science Advances, Vol. 11, No. 36](#).

Promotional photos with crediting details can be found [here](#).

--

About Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation

The Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation preserves and shares the original site of James Fort and Jamestown, established in 1607. The Foundation 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 and jointly administers Historic Jamestowne alongside the National Park Service. Admission includes the James Fort site, New Town, and the Voorhees Archaearium Archaeological Museum, as well as walking tours, living history, and public programs. For more information about visiting Jamestown, please visit www.historicjamestowne.org or call (757) 856-1250.