

Jamestown Island's Documentary History

Clues to the Past

Historical studies of Jamestown traditionally have focused on its very early history and events that impacted the western end of the island. However, the documentary research conducted in support of the Jamestown Archeological Assessment explored the island's historical continuum and cultural landscape holistically. This comprehensive and methodical approach was used because important clues to the past, objectified in the archeological record, often lie buried within documents only peripherally related to the human activity in question. Throughout the research process, historical data were provided to two teams of archeologists: one conducting limited tests in New Towne and the other performing a Phase I survey of the outlying National Park Service property.

One of our principal goals was to determine how land ownership patterns on Jamestown Island evolved over nearly four centuries of historic occupation. This was an exacting task because the bulk of James City County's antebellum court records was destroyed during the Civil War and Virginia's

pre-1683 land patents are copies of originals, some of which were fragmentary when transcription occurred. Moreover, very early patents sometimes lack critical details, such as dimensions or the directional orientation of specific boundary lines. These limitations quite rightly have confounded successive generations of scholars.

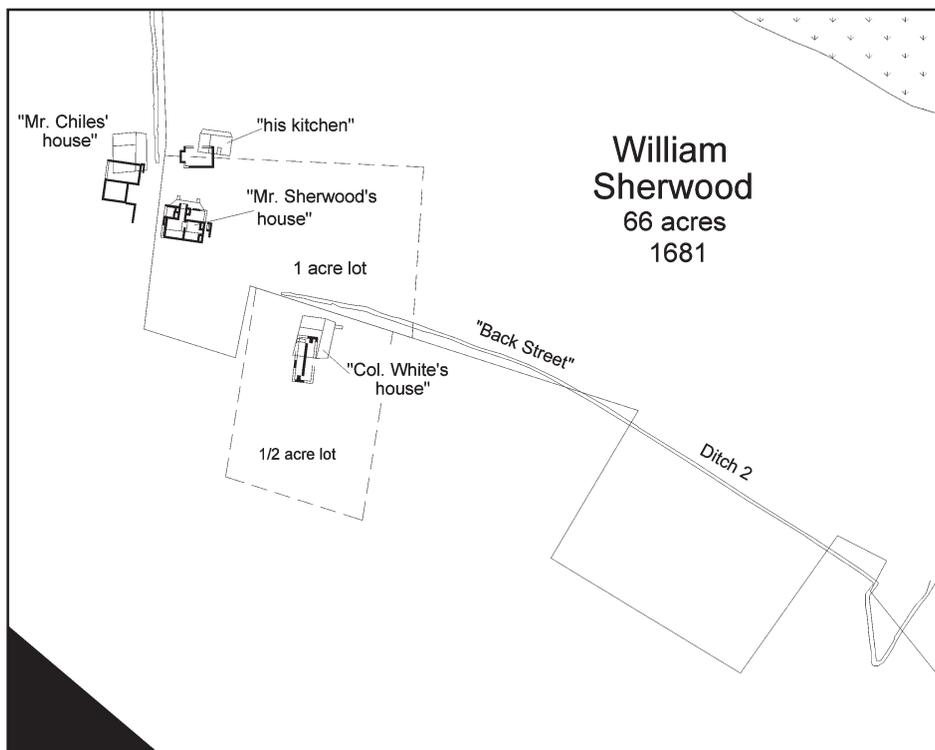
More recently, electronic mapping techniques, which allow simple shape manipulation, re-dimensioning, and geo-referencing of images, have been used in combination with traditional research methods. This approach was of inestimable value in reconstructing chains of title for Jamestown Island properties and in identifying boundary lines, often defined by ditches. Our study also has revealed how certain properties were used and where particular people were living.

The Data Collection Process

Initially, data were compiled from a broad variety of commonly used written records, such as land patents, local court documents, and manuscript collections. These sources, as an aggregate, shed a considerable amount of light on the placement and configuration of specific tracts and their inter-relationship over time.

However, references to Jamestown Island landholders and their properties' traditions also were discovered in several Tidewater Virginia counties and in the records of the overarching branches of government; in historic newspapers, diaries and narratives; and in official documents and correspondence from England, Ireland, Bermuda, Newfoundland, and several North American colonies. Iconographic materials and historical maps from foreign and domestic repositories were examined closely for insight into the progression of cultural and geological changes known to have occurred on Jamestown Island. Data culled from all of these sources were synthesized, analyzed, and then used in combination with digital mapping techniques. The accu-

Boundary lines and buildings drawn on William Sherwood's 1681 plat electronically overlaid on a portion of John Cotter's base map showing archeologically excavated features (darker lines represent foundations; "Ditch 2" is a ditch feature excavated in the 1950s). Digitized base map courtesy Colonial National Historical Park.



mulated data also were employed in determining land use and site function.

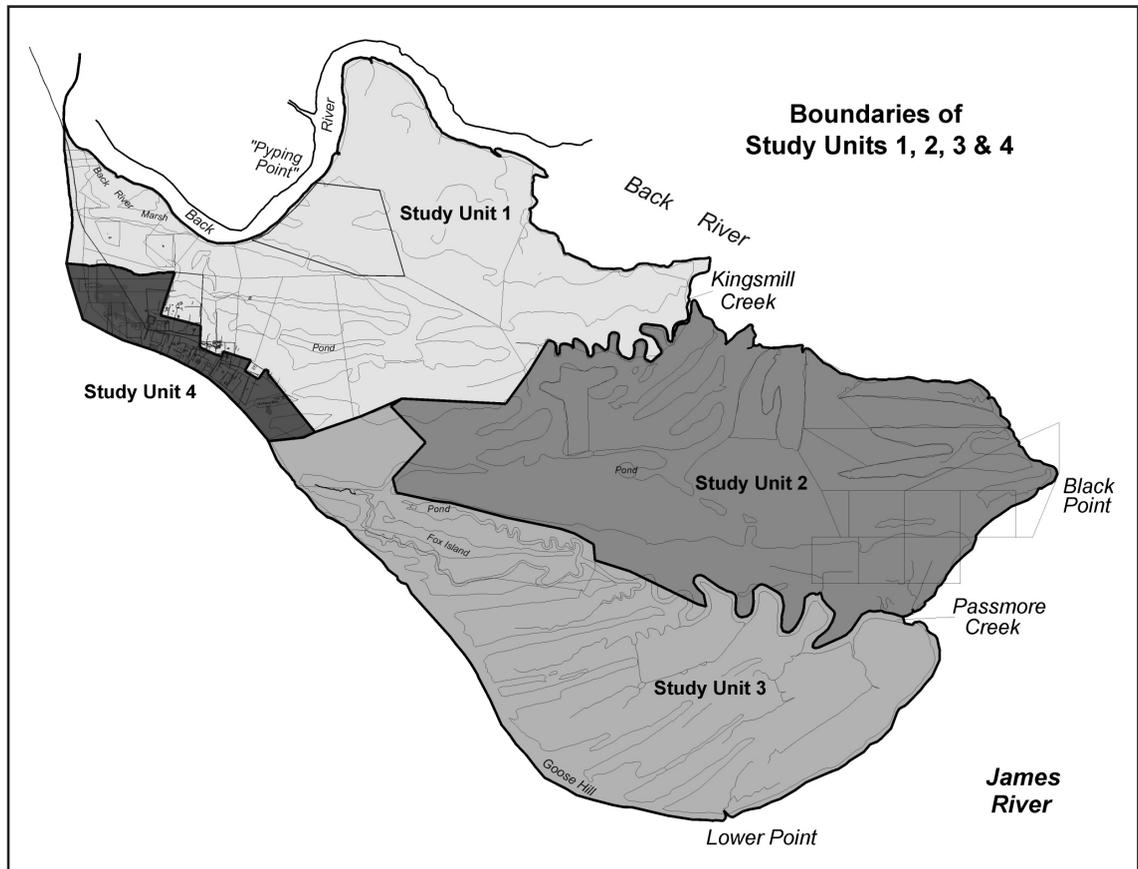
Reconstructing Boundaries Electronically

During the data collection process, four major Jamestown Island plats were identified. These drawn documents and a dozen or more historical maps were digitized at “real” scale in AutoCAD, a popular architectural and mechanical drawing software. Then they were electronically layered or “stacked” (superimposed upon one another) so that common reference points could be reconciled. This electronic template was created for comparison with a digitized version of the master archaeological site plan (or “base map”) created by John Cotter during the 1950s. The length and angle of specific boundary lines shown on the multi-component electronic template were compared visually with the ditches shown on the digitized base map. As numerous “matches” or common reference points were identified, it was feasible to associate certain boundary lines and landscape features shown on both maps. This simple exercise proved extremely useful, for cultural features discovered by archeologists earlier in the century were sequestered within the boundaries of specific properties. Moreover, several sites excavated during the 1930s and '50s were found to correspond with the locations of buildings depicted on two 17th-century plats.

Taking the process a step further, excerpts from patents, local court records, deeds, wills, and legal documents included in private papers were examined closely and sometimes compared word by word. Whenever detailed property descriptions were available, survey data (such as the length of specific boundary lines and compass declinations) were converted mathematically from now-obsolete measuring schemes into their modern equivalents. Often, patent boundaries were sketched by hand and then reconstructed to scale electronically by Christina A. Kiddle and Gregory J. Brown of Colonial Williamsburg. Again, attention was focused upon the identification of common boundary lines. This was done so that particular pieces of what essentially was a gigantic jigsaw puzzle could be joined together, one by one, synchronously. In many instances, individual patents whose boundaries had been reconstructed to scale electronically could be appended to each other and then linked to the electronic template we had created. Sometimes, the size and shape of isolated properties were found to match ditch patterns or distinctive topographic features. This was true in both rural and urbanized portions of Jamestown Island.

Ultimately, the creation of an electronic tract map made it feasible to link numerous archeological sites with specific landowners' holdings. Moreover, it became possible to associate cultural

Boundaries of Study Units overlaid on tract map showing reconstructed land holdings. New Towne and the original landing site on APVA property are in Study Unit 4. Drawings on maps prepared by Christina Kiddle and Heather Harvey, The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.



features mentioned in documentary sources (but which await discovery by archeologists) with specific properties on Jamestown Island. This provides the National Park Service with a planning tool useful in the identification and protection of culturally sensitive areas.

The pastiche of historical records marshaled for use in the Jamestown Archeological Assessment has helped us determine how land ownership patterns on Jamestown Island evolved over time. Documentary sources also have enhanced our knowledge of how specific tracts were used during any one period. Throughout the analytical process, historical archeologists, historians, architectural historians, prehistorians, and other members of the project's multi-disciplinary research team worked together closely in a free-wheeling exchange of information.

Organizing the Evidence

To provide a spatial frame of reference for the final tract maps, Jamestown Island was subdivided into four geographically distinct components, or "Study Units," largely defined by natural physical boundaries. Subsidiary parcels within each Study Unit were designated "Tracts." As certain Tracts had been parceled into lots, especially within urbanized areas, they too were treated as sub-units. This geographically-based, hierarchical organizational scheme enables us to link property histories with Jamestown Island's topography. It also permits us to discuss human activities and events in terms of their impact upon specific portions of the island.

To establish a historical context or temporal frame of reference, the nearly 400 years that have elapsed since the first settlers arrived were apportioned into four time periods. The parameters of each were delimited by broad developmental trends identified through documentary research. During Period I (1607-1745), Jamestown Island was fragmented into more than a hundred parcels, some of which contained a tiny fraction of an acre. Throughout Period II (1746-1831), Jamestown Island accommodated two large plantations and a handful of urban lots. Within Period III (1832 to 1892), the island as a whole (with the exception of the churchyard) was owned by a succession of private individuals. Finally, during Period IV (1893-1998), the island came into the possession of the National Park Service and the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities.

The End Product

Through documentary research and the use of digital mapping techniques we have significantly enhanced our knowledge of land use patterns and the sequencing of development throughout

Jamestown Island. Moreover, new links have been forged between the archeological record and the histories of numerous Jamestown Island properties, findings that will enhance the National Park Service's interpretive program. Culturally sensitive areas have been identified that warrant future investigation.

Historical data have been synthesized in succinct property histories, which have been cross-referenced to biographical sketches of the approximately 1,900 people known to have played a role in Jamestown Island's history. Maps and charts have been created that summarize land ownership patterns during each period of historic occupation. A narrative provides an overview of the island's development over time, offering insight into critical issues that influenced the course of its history.

New Insights

Although Jamestown Island's very early history awaits intense documentary investigation, some interesting discoveries have come to light. For example, we have learned that during the first quarter of the 17th century, the eastern end of Jamestown Island was carved into numerous 12-acre farmsteads, many of which were allocated to "ancient planters," people who immigrated to Virginia prior to 1616. Miraculously, very early archeological features survive within certain "ancient planter" properties, some of which are defined by extant boundary ditches.

We also have learned that from 1649 on, urban Jamestown embraced the entire western end of Jamestown Island and that areas outside of the "New Town" (laid out around 1621) were parceled into tiny lots where development was purposeful. Urban Jamestown also accommodated the generously proportioned estates of two titled noblemen and the home lots of at least two men actively involved in the slave trade.

By the mid-18th century, much of Jamestown Island had been absorbed into two major plantations. Documentary records associated with the Ambler plantation, which enveloped the western end of Jamestown Island and almost all of the frontage on the James River, are among the most complete in Tidewater Virginia. Meanwhile, the Traverses, who owned a plantation in the eastern end of the island, had a townstead in urban Jamestown. These are but a few of the findings that have resulted from the documentary research conducted on behalf of the Jamestown Archeological Assessment. Future research can be expected to fill other gaps in our knowledge.

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