

Lessons from the Past

The ancient adage “The past is prologue” is obviously true in the history of mankind as evidenced by the multitude of historic studies completed over the years. This often-used phrase is equally true and applicable to other scientific disciplines. Significant contributions have been made in the study of the physical man—his skeleton—since World War II. Scientific methods for determining a person’s ancestral lineage have been developed and are readily available. Huge databases of human characteristics addressing many facets of cultures and ethnic origins have been accumulated and validated. These marvelous developments have been used to answer questions that were unanswerable in the past and to solve riddles and puzzles that add considerably to the enrichment of the knowledge of our past.

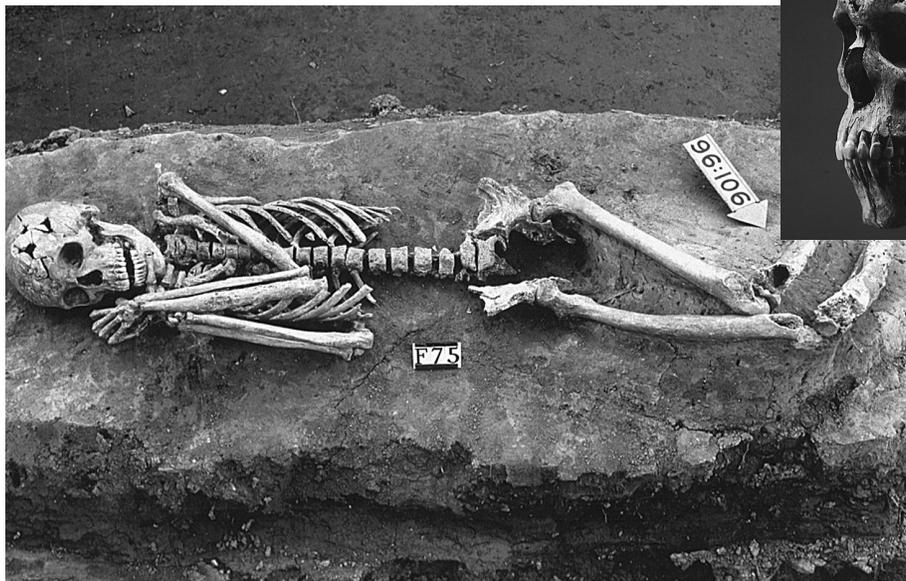
The advent of these techniques are prologue to new ones not yet developed and not even envisioned today. Key to the success of recent studies is the availability of reference skeletal collections in some museums and government and private institutions. Time-consuming and labor-intensive efforts have been directed toward examining, analyzing, and recording physical manifestations of the lives of representatives of past societies. Synthesis of the collected data enables us to understand more about the health, diet, activities, inter-human conflicts, and other aspects of the daily

existence of the individuals represented by these remains.

Not all of the human skeletons collected by such institutions are available for scientific study. Many skeletons from North America are being repatriated and buried in accordance with interpretations of recent laws, principally the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA). Unfortunately, some prehistoric period remains proffered and returned under the terms of this act were not fully documented using the latest techniques and systems. Consequently, valuable information about the groups represented by these remains are forever lost to science—the ultimate denial of their place in history. Equally disturbing is the probability that some have been erroneously offered as a member of a tribe or cultural group, after being misidentified by inadequate review or reliance on inappropriate criteria. These unfortunate determinations are unfair to both the receiving group and to the person whose remains were repatriated.

Several recent studies of historic period collections reveal what could have transpired if the analyses had not been conducted. The author was invited to study and report on collections of remains from Jamestown Island held by the Colonial National Historical Park (CNHP) and by the Association for the Preservation of

Field photograph taken during the excavation of HR10 in 1940. Analysis proved this man was of African descent. Photo courtesy Colonial National Historical Park.



Oblique view of the skull showing syphilitic necrosis of the frontal bone. The circular opening with radiating fractures provide evidence of a gunshot wound. Putty was applied during conservation and early restoration. Photo by Chip Clark, National Museum of Natural History.

Virginia Antiquities (APVA).^{1,2} This study was initiated in conjunction with the recent discovery of two early-17th-century burials inside the perimeter of James Fort. Our studies were sponsored by the holding organizations as a supplement to an earlier NAGPRA inventory.³ Each set of remains was re-examined and re-inventoried on site to determine the number of bones present, age, sex, ancestry, and evidence of skeletal and dental pathology. The osteological data were incorporated into a computerized database. This bioarcheological database is being developed for comparative research dealing with historic populations.

The CNHP collection illustrates the benefit of comprehensive analysis using modern techniques. Our re-analysis of the 15 sets of remains provided considerably more information about the demographic composition of the series. The sex of 12 individuals was identified and age assessments were revised for 10. Furthermore, the commingled remains of four individuals were separated and isolated components of two skeletons were re-associated.

Seven individuals had been previously identified as Native American, and the remainder were unidentified. More extensive analysis using modern classification procedures and comparative databases recognized the additional presence of Europeans and Africans. Only three Native Americans were affirmed. Five individuals were reclassified as having African ancestry. These remains dating to the 17th century provide tangible evidence of the first Africans in the English colonies.

Of particular interest was the nearly complete skeleton of a man aged 23 to 27 years with changes indicative of advanced tertiary syphilis (Burial HR10). This semi-flexed burial was professionally excavated in 1940 and the fractured cranium was carefully restored. Field and conservation documentation, including photographs, is extensive. Studies completed in 1958,³ 1984,⁴ and 1995⁵ identified the person as Native American. Our analysis involved detailed physical and radiographic examinations and the use of the Fordisc 2.0 System,⁶ a craniometric discriminate function program designed with known reference series. Our analysis proved that this man was not Native American as previously believed, but was of African descent. Equally interesting was the evidence, verified by computer enhancement of original photographs, that this person had not died from his disease, but from a gunshot wound to the head. The frontal bone of the skull shows a circular defect with radiating wedge-shaped fractures depicting the entry point of the projectile. Radiographs show metallic fragments around the entry wound. The exiting bullet produced several

additional fractures to the skull. These bullet fractures were not detected during earlier examinations, probably due to partial concealment by past reconstruction efforts and the unavailability of more modern techniques.

The application of modern techniques to studies of colonial burials is well underway. This survey has identified the remains of Africans; future research has the potential of determining the location of their homeland.

Not only would new information concerning these individuals have been denied to current and future studies, but had the holding organizations not sponsored new analyses, additional mistaken offerings, under federal law, would have taken place. What new and exciting scientific processes will be developed in the future? Often, not even small test samples are allowed to be taken from the collections before reburial. These skeletons of representatives of past Americans will not be available for examination under advanced future ideas, and the resulting knowledge will never be accumulated for use and education of coming generations of all Americans.

Notes

- ¹ Owsley, D.W. and K. L. Bruwelheide. 1997 *Analysis of the Colonial National Park Human Skeletal Collection*. Report on file CNHP, Jamestown, VA.
- ² Owsley, D.W., P. Hamzavi, and K.L. Bruwelheide. 1997 *Analysis of the APVA Skeletal Collection, Jamestown, Virginia*. Report on file APVA, Jamestown, VA.
- ³ Neumann, G.K. 1958 *Notes on an Indian cranium from Jamestown, Virginia*. Appendix B in *Archeological Excavations at Jamestown, Virginia* by J.L. Cotter. National Park Service Archeological Research Series No. 4, pp. 213-217.
- ⁴ Clement, L.A. 1984 *Preliminary osteological report on Feature 75*. Report on file CNHP, Jamestown, VA.
- ⁵ National Park Service. 1995 *Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act Inventory*. Report on file, CNHP, Jamestown, VA.
- ⁶ Owsley, S.D. and R.L. Jantz. 1997 *FORDISC2.0*. Forensic Anthropology Center, University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Douglas W. Owsley, Ph.D., is the Division Head for Physical Anthropology, Smithsonian Institution.

The author thanks the administrators of the Colonial National Historical Park and the Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities for the opportunity to examine the collection from Jamestown Island. Editorial guidance for this article was provided by Malcolm Richardson.