

Scholars find cannibalism at Jamestown settlement

May 1 2013, by Brett Zongker



Doug Owsley, division head for Physical Anthropology at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, displays the skull and facial reconstruction of "Jane of Jamestown" during a news conference at the museum in Washington, Wednesday, May 1, 2013. Scientists announced during the news conference that they have found the first solid archaeological evidence that some of the earliest American colonists at Jamestown, Va., survived harsh conditions by turning to cannibalism presenting the discovery of the bones of a 14-year-old girl, "Jane" that show clear signs that she was cannibalized. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

Scientists revealed Wednesday that they have found the first solid archaeological evidence that some of the earliest American colonists at Jamestown, Virginia, survived harsh conditions by turning to cannibalism.

For years, there have been tales of people in the first permanent English settlement in America eating dogs, cats, rats, mice, snakes and shoe leather to stave off starvation. There were also written accounts of settlers eating their own dead, but archaeologists had been skeptical of those stories.

But now, the Smithsonian's [National Museum of Natural History](#) and archaeologists from Jamestown are announcing the discovery of the bones of a 14-year-old girl that show clear signs that she was cannibalized. Evidence indicates clumsy chops to the body and head of the girl, who appears to have already been dead at the time.

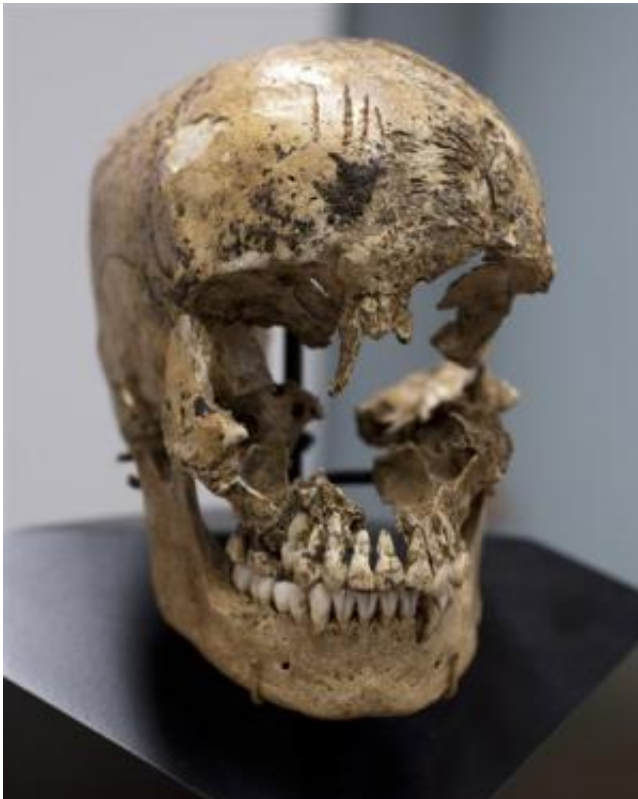
Smithsonian [forensic anthropologist](#) Douglas Owsley said the human remains date back to a deadly winter known as the "[starving time](#)" in Jamestown from 1609 to 1610. Hundreds died during the period. Scientists have said the settlers likely arrived during the worst drought in 800 years, bringing severe [food shortages](#) for the 6,000 people who lived at Jamestown between 1607 and 1625.

The historical record is chilling. Early Jamestown colony leader George Percy wrote of a "world of miseries," that included digging up corpses from their graves to eat when there was nothing else. "Nothing was spared to maintain life," he wrote.

In one case, a man killed, "salted," and began eating his pregnant wife. Both Percy and Capt. John Smith, the colony's most famous leader, documented the account in their writings. The man was later executed.

"One amongst the rest did kill his wife, powdered her, and had eaten part of her before it was known, for which he was executed, as he well deserved," Smith wrote. "Now whether she was better roasted, boiled or carbonado'd (barbecued), I know not, but of such a dish as powdered wife I never heard of."

Archaeologists at Jamestown and Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia were somewhat skeptical of the stories of cannibalism in the past because there was no solid proof, until now.



Strike marks are seen on the skull of "Jane of Jamestown" during a news conference at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, Wednesday, May 1, 2013. Scientists announced during the news conference that they have found the first solid archaeological evidence that some of the earliest American colonists at Jamestown, Va., survived harsh conditions by turning to cannibalism presenting the discovery of the bones of a 14-year-old

girl, "Jane" that show clear signs that she was cannibalized. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

"Historians have questioned, well did it happen or not happen?" Owsley said. "And this is very convincing evidence that it did."

Owsley has been working with William Kelso, the chief archaeologist at Jamestown, since their first burial discovery in 1996.

The remains of the 14-year-old girl, named "Jane" by researchers, were discovered in the summer of 2012 and mark the fourth set of human remains uncovered at Jamestown outside of graves. Her remains were found in a cellar at the site that had been filled with trash, including bones of horses and other animals consumed in desperation, according to archaeologists.

The discovery detracts from the happier mythology of John Smith and Pocahontas that many associate with Jamestown. The vice president of research at nearby Colonial Williamsburg, which oversees excavations of the original Jamestown site, said visitors will have a fuller view of a terrible time in early American history.



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"I think we are better served by understanding history, warts and all, because I think it gives us a better understanding of who we are as a people," James Horn said.

Owsley, who has also done forensic analysis for police investigations, examined the girl's remains and how the body had been dismembered,

including chops to the front and back of the head. The girl was likely already dead at the time. There was a cultural stigma against killing someone for food.

But it was clear to Owsley immediately that there were signs of cannibalism.

"This does represent a clear case of dismemberment of the body and removing of tissues for consumption," he said.



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It was the work of someone not skilled at butchering, Owsley said, indicating a sense of desperation.

The bones show a bizarre attempt to open the skull, he said. Animal brains and facial tissue were desirable meat in the 17th century.

The archaeologists are publishing their findings in a new book but decided against waiting to announce the discovery.

The human skull will be placed on display at Jamestown, and a sign will warn visitors of the room's content. At the Smithsonian, curators will display a computer-generated reconstruction of the girl's face in an exhibit about life at Jamestown.

Owsley said archaeology is helping to fill in details from a time when few records were kept—details that won't likely be found in history books.

Kelso, whose archaeology team discovered the bones, said the girl's bones will be displayed to help tell a story, not to be a spectacle. Through the remains, scientists traced her likely origin to the coast of southern England.



Numerous small knife cuts and punctures in the mandible of "Jane of Jamestown" are seen during a news conference at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, Wednesday, May 1, 2013. Scientists announced during the news conference that they have found the first solid archaeological evidence that some of the earliest American colonists at Jamestown, Va., survived harsh conditions by turning to cannibalism presenting the discovery of the bones of a 14-year-old girl, "Jane" that show clear signs that she was cannibalized. (AP Photo/Carolyn Kaster)

"We found her in a trash dump, unceremoniously trashed and cannibalized, and now her story can be told," Kelso said. "People will be able to empathize with the time and history and think to themselves, as I do: What would I do to stay alive?"

At Jamestown, officials removed a large tarp covering the site where there remains were found for visitors to see. Tourists were told Wednesday of the discovery.

"Oh, wow," said Kim Reyes, who was on a field trip escorting fourth grade students from Alexandria, Virginia. "We all know the [harsh conditions](#) they were here in, but I didn't think it was that bad."

Pam Nagle's mouth dropped when she heard the announcement. She was visiting Jamestown with her children, ages 7 and 10, and her in-laws. Nagle said she had never heard any mention of cannibalism at Jamestown before.

"I was really curious whether it was pre- or post-mortem. I was really glad he said post-mortem," she said. "There was a level of desperation, but maybe perhaps it wasn't as severe as it could've been."

More information: National Museum of Natural History:
www.mnh.si.edu/
Jamestown Rediscovery Archaeological Project:
historicjamestowne.org/

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