

Bones of "four of the first leaders of America" found at Jamestown site

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 08.05.15

Word Count **739**



Crosses mark where the remains were found of four of the earliest leaders of Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in America. They were buried for more than 400 years near the altar of what was America's first Protestant church, in Jamestown, Virginia. Photo: Joe Fudge/The Daily Press via AP

WASHINGTON — Archaeologists have found the skeletons of four of the earliest leaders of North America's first permanent English colony. They were buried more than 400 years ago in America's first Protestant church in Jamestown, Virginia.

The four graves were uncovered in the dirt floor of what was Jamestown's church in 1608. A team of scientists and historians announced the discovery July 28. The church is where Pocahontas, the daughter of a Native American chief, married Englishman John Rolfe. Their marriage led to peace between the Powhatan Indians and colonists at Jamestown, England's first successful settlement in America.

Archaeologists also found artifacts buried with the colonial leaders. One of them was a mysterious Catholic container for relics. These small containers usually hold bones belonging to saints and are considered holy by Catholics.

"Earliest English Church In America"

The Jamestown Rediscovery archaeology team revealed its discovery at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. The museum is helping to study and identify those buried in the church. The graves were first uncovered in November 2013. The scientific team wanted to identify its findings more definitely before announcing the discovery.

Archaeologists have been studying the site since 1994.

The team identified the remains of the Reverend Robert Hunt, Jamestown's first Anglican minister who was known as a peacemaker between rival leaders. Also identified were Captain Gabriel Archer, an enemy of colony leader John Smith; Sir Ferdinando Wainman, likely the first knight buried in America; and Captain William West, who died in a fight with the Powhatan Indians. The three other men likely died after brief illnesses, and were buried between 1608 and 1610.

"What we have discovered here in the earliest English church in America are four of the first leaders of America," said historian James Horn. He is the president of the Jamestown Rediscovery Foundation. "There's nothing like it anywhere else in this country."

A Captain's Staff, A Mysterious Box

In Archer's coffin, archaeologists found a captain's staff as a symbol of his military position. Archer helped lead some of the earliest expeditions to Jamestown. He died at the age of 34 during a six-month period known as the "starving time." Many died due to disease, starvation and battles with Indians.

Mysteriously, a small silver box resting on Archer's coffin turns out likely to be a Catholic reliquary, or container for relics. Inside it are bone fragments and a vessel for holy water. Archer's parents were Catholic, which was outlawed in Protestant England. So the discovery raises the question of whether Archer was a secret Catholic. He may also have been a Catholic spy for the Spanish, Horn said. Catholic Spain was the enemy of England at the time.

Catholic relics have been found in the Jamestown archaeological site before. The placement of this box seems particularly meaningful, the historians said. They used CT imaging scans to see inside the sealed box without opening it.

"It was a real kind of ah-ha moment for a lot of us," said William Kelso. He is Jamestown's director of archaeology. "It was oh, religion was a big deal here, and that's often overlooked."

Looking For Sir Thomas West

In West's grave, archaeologists found remnants of the military leader's silver-edged sash in a block of soil. The silk material was too delicate to remove from the dirt. Instead, archaeologists removed an entire block of dirt.

Archaeologists will continue searching the church site and expect to eventually find the grave of Sir Thomas West, an early governor of Virginia. He led a rescue mission to save Jamestown when the colony was falling apart, Horn said. The Delaware colony was named after West, who was also known as Lord De La Warr.

Artifacts from the burials will go on display within weeks at the site known as "Historic Jamestowne."

The Smithsonian created a 3-D scan of the excavation site, bones and artifacts. This will let people be able to take a look at the discovery online.

The archaeology team said the discovery is a riddle they must figure out over time.

"The things that we look at and can read from the bones are simply details that you're not going to find in the history books," said Douglas Owsley, an anthropologist at the Smithsonian who studies ancient bones. "These are men that you might not know their name. But these are men that were critical to who we are in terms of America today."

Quiz

- 1 Which of the following statements BEST explains why the archaeological team had taken so long to share its discovery with the public?
- (A) The researchers wanted to be certain about the identity of the skeletons before telling the public.
 - (B) The Smithsonian wanted to create a 3-D scan of the excavation site, bones and artifacts to be able to share the discovery.
 - (C) The artifacts were too delicate to remove from the dirt so the researchers had to take more time to remove some of the findings.
 - (D) The researchers needed to identify that church the discovery was made in was the same church Pocahontas married John Rolfe.
- 2 According to the article, why were researchers surprised to find a Catholic artifact on Archer's coffin?
- (A) Archer was known as an important military leader in Jamestown so it was surprising to find a religious artifact in the grave of someone who was not thought to be a religious leader.
 - (B) Before this recent discovery, Catholic relics were never found in the Jamestown archaeological site so it was surprising to find any Catholic artifacts in this grave.
 - (C) The Jamestown colony was always thought to be settled by English Protestants, but now researchers think it might have been settled by Spanish Catholics because of the artifacts.
 - (D) Catholicism was illegal in England so it was surprising to see an English colonist with an object Catholics believe is holy, and researchers didn't think religion was especially important to Jamestown colonists.
- 3 Read the third paragraph in the section "A Captain's Staff, A Mysterious Box."

Catholic relics have been found in the Jamestown archaeological site before. The placement of this box seems particularly meaningful, the historians said. They used CT imaging scans to see inside the sealed box without opening it.

Which word from the paragraph above explains to the reader that there is something unusual about the box found on Archer's coffin?

- (A) relics
- (B) seems
- (C) particularly
- (D) sealed

4 Read the last two sentences of the article.

"These are men that you might not know their name. But these are men that were critical to who we are in terms of America today."

Which of the following words is the BEST synonym for "critical" as used in the sentence above?

- (A) famous
- (B) fundamental
- (C) legendary
- (D) insignificant