



ALL PHOTOS DAVID ANDREWS/AFPS EXCEPT AS NOTED

# LANDFALL

JAMESTOWN AND THE BEGINNINGS OF AMERICA BY JOE BAKER

*In the late afternoon of May 13th, 1607, a young sailor from London holds a bowline in his hand and prepares to step from the gunwale as the ship glides in closer to the bank. His name is lost to history. He is perhaps one of the “divers others,” men whose names never appeared in any of the narratives of those adventurers aboard the three tiny vessels that recently completed their grueling, four month crossing of the Atlantic. The deep channel here abuts the forested bank, and they can tie up without running the ships aground. The young man steps lightly from the bow of the ship onto dry land and prepares to affix the line. He is, of course, unaware of the great historical reach of this moment. What he has just done is establish a tenuous toehold for the first enduring British colony in the New World. He has taken the first stride on shaky sea-legs toward establishing what will become America. Nothing has been the same since.*

**LEFT: REPLICA OF THE SUSAN CONSTANT, ONE OF THE THREE SHIPS THAT BROUGHT THE JAMESTOWN SETTLERS ACROSS THE ATLANTIC, MOORED AT THE STATE-RUN JAMESTOWN SETTLEMENT, A LIVING HISTORY MUSEUM AND SITE.**



## *BY VIRTUE OF HISTORICAL ACCIDENT,*

**THE STORY OF JAMESTOWN IS BY TURNS EXHILARATING AND HARROWING,** inspiring and dolorous. Within its first 15 years, the groundwork of the American economic system, political organization, and language was laid, and the American tradition of exploration and discovery had sunk its roots, too. Those same years saw the colony nearly destroyed by political in-fighting along with the introduction of African slaves to North America and a brutal war with the original inhabitants of the land. The story of Jamestown is every bit as complex and ambiguous as anything after it.

Some of this complexity is reflected in the roughly 140 men packed into those three small vessels, and in the organization that put them there. Jamestown was not the product of a government initiative, but of private enterprise bound on showing a profit. A group of investors, chartered by the Crown as the Virginia Company, bankrolled the expedition and appointed the council that was to govern the new colony. They were charged with extracting resources and establishing industries that would provide a quick return on the investment. The council consisted of six men with military backgrounds, and all but one were noblemen. The commoner, and also the youngest at 27, was John Smith. He had made a name for himself as a soldier in the Balkans, the Netherlands, and France.

Smith comes down to us as self-absorbed and bombastic. His own writings, one of the era's most important records, lend some credence to that characterization. He was tough, disciplined, and resourceful, qualities that served the little colony well during its first precarious years.

**ABOVE: THE ISLAND'S MARSHY TERRAIN. THE JAMES RIVER AND THE SITE OF THE SETTLEMENT ARE JUST BEYOND THE TREES.**

Smith's confidence and curiosity led him to undertake two long voyages into the unknown world of the Chesapeake. Given the circumstances, these were brazenly reckless acts, but they produced the first maps of the bay's complicated shoreline and tributaries, the first written record of the native cultures and natural bounty of the great estuary, and—four centuries later—America's first national historic water trail.

The momentous events at Jamestown have historically eclipsed Smith's adventures in the tidewater. By an Act of Congress, the Captain John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail was established to commemorate this major chapter of exploration. Featuring historic sites, landscapes, and interpretive media, it will follow Smith's excursions throughout the bay, planting a new awareness of its history and fragile environment. Through partnerships and innovative planning, it hopes to heighten understanding of local culture as well as foster heritage tourism, sustainable development, and a healthier relationship with the bay. The trail is just one of a host of elements in the buildup to the 400th anniversary of the Jamestown landing, a meditation on America's beginnings that includes a visit from Queen Elizabeth.

Much of what we know of daily life at Jamestown was literally discovered by digging. By virtue of historical accident, the archeological

site of Jamestown is exceptionally well preserved. The settlement, which grew to become Virginia's first capital, was gradually abandoned for outlying towns and plantations as the century wore on. The better situated Williamsburg became the new capital in 1699, and Jamestown became farmland. In the late 19th century, the nonprofit Association for the Preservation of Virginia Antiquities purchased over 20 acres. The remainder, some 1,500 acres, was acquired by the National Park Service in the 1930s with the establishment of Colonial National Historical Park. There was never any large scale development; what was beneath the fields and forests lay undisturbed for centuries.

Jamestown began to attract the attention of archeologists before the turn of the 20th century, and it has hardly abated since. Amazing collections of well-preserved artifacts—and the discovery of some of North America's earliest colonial building foundations—have astonished both archeologists and the public for a long time. Two giants of

**BOTTOM LEFT: SITE OF "NEW TOWNE," THE NAME THE SETTLEMENT TOOK AFTER EXPANDING OUTSIDE THE FORT. BOTTOM RIGHT: RECONSTRUCTION OF THE "GLASSE HOUSE," DEMONSTRATION SITE FOR ONE OF JAMESTOWN'S FIRST INDUSTRIES.**

Despite the warm relations that typified this reconnaissance, the seeds were planted for what came later. During earlier landings, the party had been ambushed by natives; two English were wounded. Another attack, after the arrival at Jamestown, killed two settlers. The tribes had some experience dealing with Europeans, primarily with Spanish and earlier

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LEFT AND BELOW JAMESTOWN NHS



National Park Service archeology cut their professional teeth here. J.C. Harrington, who practically invented modern historical archeology, worked at Jamestown between 1936 and 1941. John Cotter, for whom the agency's award for archeological excellence is named, worked there in the '50s. Yet some of the most spectacular discoveries have come in the last 15 years or so.

**WHILE THE COLONISTS WERE BUILDING THEIR FORT, SMITH DISCOVERED A** number of native settlements up the James. His group was generally well received. The villages belonged to a confederacy of perhaps 13,000 Algonkian-speaking people led by a charismatic "great king" who lived in the village of Werowocomoco on the next large river north. His name was Wahunseanacawh. He has come down to us as Powhatan.

British forays. Some of those encounters were also violent. While the local peoples were eager to acquire trade goods, they were wary of the long-term intentions, and determined to defend their territory.

The colonists carried their own suspicions and prejudices. The written records are replete with words like "savages" and "heathens." The two worldviews could not have been more different. The Powhatans saw themselves as part of the natural and spiritual world. The English saw themselves above nature, exercising a God-given dominion over it. To them, the new world was wide open, ripe for the taking. The notion that the Powhatans had a birthright to the land didn't enter many minds. These divergent ways of seeing were mutually exclusive. There was bound to be trouble.

## THE TWO WORLDVIEWS COULD NOT HAVE BEEN MORE DIFFERENT. THE POWHATANS SAW THEMSELVES AS PART OF THE NATURAL AND SPIRITUAL WORLD. THE ENGLISH SAW THEMSELVES ABOVE NATURE, EXERCISING GOD-GIVEN DOMINION OVER IT. TO THEM, THE NEW WORLD WAS WIDE OPEN, RIPE FOR THE TAKING.

THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE COMPLETED ITS ARCHEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT OF Jamestown in the early 1990s, an exhaustive compilation of a century of investigation. Older data were combined with a newer set acquired with geoscientific methods like ground-penetrating radar, soil core sampling, paleobotany, tree ring dating, and some old-fashioned test excavation. Researchers also conducted a thorough review of historic maps and documents. Says National Park Service archeologist Andrew Veech, “The survey defined the research questions we wanted to ask of this site well into the future as well as how we want to protect what we have here.” The assessment produced some surprises. Among the hundreds of features identified are what might be the earliest known slave quarters in British North America and a Paleoindian presence on the island shortly after the retreat of the glaciers.

Widely regarded as the birthplace of democracy, Jamestown also held the seeds of destruction for Powhatan’s people. To get a sense of

ty of the place. Trade items of copper alloy and glass, and its close correspondence to historic maps, make identification a near certainty. It’s not simply that this place was Powhatan’s town that makes Werowocomoco so interesting. Martin Gallivan, the William and Mary professor who is directing the excavations, describes the work as “the archeology of landscape and space, and especially, how space was used.” The numbers of artifacts dating to the Jamestown era are quite modest. The site is much older than Jamestown and Powhatan, probably established in the 13th century. The excavations have uncovered evidence of an immense set of ditches possibly arrayed in a D-shape. Interestingly, the 1608 Zuniga Map, based on a John Smith sketch, depicts the location of Werowocomoco with a large D-shaped symbol.

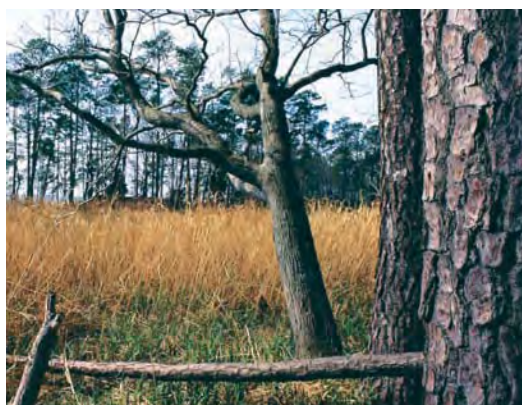
The purpose of these ditches was not defensive: any adult could simply step across them. And the artifacts discovered here are different than those found in the village, perhaps indicating ritual feasting.

John Smith’s own observations of Werowocomoco are replete with references to elaborate rituals conducted by “priests.” Gallivan believes the ditches are a “ritualized location” having to do with the maintenance of political status among Powhatan’s people. Werowocomoco may have been a religious and political center that anchored the confederacy, the site helping to bind the secular and sacred parts of the society into a cohesive whole.

A more complete understanding of this sacred landscape may

come as work continues, but there is little doubt about how the newly arrived English affected life there. As Gallivan observed, “There’s only a two year window of interaction between Werowocomoco and the Jamestown colonists.” By 1609, the centuries-old town was abandoned.

The findings at Jamestown—by a team led by Bill Kelso—are just as momentous. Archeology is Kelso’s second career. His first, as a high school history teacher, is evident in his facility for engaging the public in the remarkable discoveries he’s made. In 1994, Kelso began test excavations in search of the original fort. Most experts thought this was the wildest of goose chases. Over a century and a half of popu-



what was lost, you must look north, to the other side of the Virginia Peninsula, along the York River.

The archeological site of Werowocomoco, Powhatan’s town, was tentatively identified in the 1970s from artifacts picked up by an archeologist in a plowed field and along the river. In the ’90s, the property owners consulted the Virginia Department of Historic Resources, which immediately recognized its importance. By 2001 the Werowocomoco Research Group had been formed consisting of staff from the state and the College of William and Mary. One of its first priorities was involving the descendants of Powhatan’s people. The Virginia Indian Advisory Board was formed to provide guidance and interpretation as work at Werowocomoco proceeded. The discoveries have been remarkable. There is little doubt as to the identi-

FAR LEFT: FROM A BRIEF AND TRUE REPORT OF THE NEW FOUND LAND OF VIRGINIA, 1590. NEAR LEFT AND RIGHT: BLACK POINT, ON THE ISLAND’S TIP.





## NOW, NEARLY 13 YEARS LATER, WORK CONTINUES AT ONE

*OF THE MOST ASTONISHING ARCHEOLOGICAL DISCOVERIES IN THE UNITED STATES. THE REMAINS OF NEARLY THE ENTIRE FORT, IN THE SHAPE OF A TRIANGLE, WERE FOUND BENEATH THE LAWNS AND WALKWAYS OF THE PROPERTY.*

lar opinion put the remains in the James River, a victim of erosion. But Kelso couldn't find any clear evidence that the fort was destroyed. Records indicated that a church—now reconstructed—once stood close to the fort, so that is where they began to look.

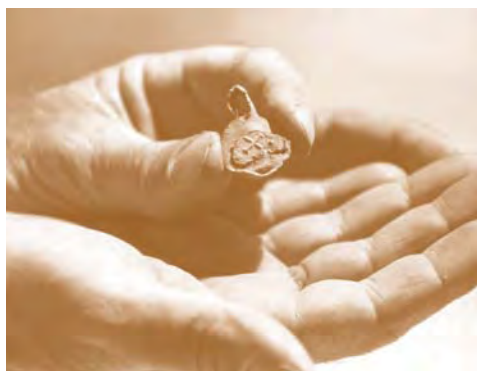
The archeologists immediately encountered evidence of a line of heavy posts, once a wooden fortification. Adjacent excavations found building foundations, a well, and European artifacts from the first decade of the 17th century. Now, nearly 13 years later, work continues at one of the most astonishing archeological discoveries in the United States. The remains of nearly the entire fort, in the shape of a triangle, were found beneath the lawns and walkways of the property. The organization has done its best to share the rediscovery with the public. Thousands of visitors have viewed the excavations; websites, television programs, books, and magazine articles have brought millions of people face-to-face with the earliest evidence of English colonization in America.

Kelso remains an enthusiastic proponent of telling Jamestown's story because of the influence the settlement had on the very underpinnings of our nation. When he and I spoke, the Virginia legislature had just journeyed from Richmond to ceremonially convene at Jamestown. Kelso observes that "the same legislature has convened every year since 1619, a continuous record longer than any other elected deliberative body in the world. What brought colonists to Jamestown was the knowledge that, if you could get yourself here, you could get land. If you got land you could vote, and maybe even stand for election. Jamestown represented a new set of possibilities for a lot of people." So what is being uncovered at Jamestown isn't just the fort. The roots of American democracy are coming to light as well.

**LEFT: BOTTLES ON DISPLAY AT THE MUSEUM OF THE ASSOCIATION FOR THE PRESERVATION OF VIRGINIA ANTIQUITIES, LOCATED AT THE SITE. ABOVE LEFT: A BALING SEAL—MARK OF APPROVAL FOR BALES OF TOBACCO AND FLAX—UNCOVERED DURING A FIVE-YEAR NATIONAL PARK SERVICE ARCHEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT IN THE 1990S. ABOVE RIGHT: SURVEY ARCHEOLOGISTS TAKE READINGS WITH A MAGNETOMETER.**

**IN LATE JUNE 1608, CHRISTOPHER NEWPORT, COMMANDER OF JAMESTOWN'S** little fleet, left for England with two of the three ships. Almost at once, the settlement was beset by calamity. The crops failed. Disease, probably from poor sanitation and near tropical heat, began to kill people. Smith traded for corn that sustained the settlers into the autumn. In December, during the course of one of his forays into the upper Chickahominy River, Smith was surrounded by a large party of armed natives. Two of his companions were killed. Smith was paraded through a succession of villages over the next few days and finally brought before Powhatan himself at Werowocomoco. If we are to believe Smith's 1624 account of what transpired next, he was about to have his brains beaten out at the great headman's feet when Powhatan's 10 year old daughter Pocahontas intervened. Smith was spared and adopted into the confederacy.

That may or may not have happened (his 1608 account of the incident doesn't mention the young woman), but it is more certain that Smith remained at Werowocomoco for a time, and was escorted back to Jamestown in early January. He was shocked at what he found. Of the over 100 people that had landed in May, fewer than 40



ABOVE AND RIGHT TONY BELCASTRO



were still alive. John Ratcliffe, the president of the colony, was preparing to abandon the settlement, furious with Smith for his absence. In the nick of time Captain Newport returned with supplies and a hundred new colonists. But later in the month, much of the settlement was consumed by fire and most of the supplies lost. Newport and Smith went to parlay with Powhatan. An agreement promised peace, a flow of food to the colonists, and trade goods to the natives.

In time another ship arrived with more colonists and provisions. They were undoubtedly observed by Powhatan's people. The newcomers were not simply visiting to trade. They meant to stay.

Friction between Ratcliffe and Smith grew to a dangerous level, the captain faulted for his absence while being held captive. Ratcliffe may have resented Smith's youth, brashness, and facility with the natives. The tension may also have hastened Smith's departure to explore the great estuary north of the James. On June 2, he and 14 other men boarded a small shallow-draft boat, known as a shallop, to





## THE SHEER AUDACIOUSNESS OF TAKING A SMALL VESSEL WITH

head into Terra Incognita. Thus began the first of Smith's two voyages of discovery into the Chesapeake.

The sheer audaciousness of taking a small vessel with a lightly armed crew into the vast, unmapped estuary—with no hope of support in case of calamity—speaks volumes about Smith's nerve and the trust his crew placed in him. Over the next seven weeks the little party explored the eastern shore, going far up the Nanticoke, then crossing back to the western shore to reach as far north as the Patapsco at modern Baltimore. Then they tacked back southward.

Heading toward Jamestown, they rounded a marshy peninsula, now known as Point Lookout, and entered a broad river. Exploring upstream, in a few days they became the first Europeans to see the Great Falls of the Potomac, above what would one day be Washington, DC.

They passed dozens of Native American towns along the way, with Smith making the first maps of the Chesapeake's deeply dissected and complicated topography. There were close brushes with hostile tribes and a near mutiny by the crew. Smith was stung by a stingray while fishing one morning near the mouth of the Rappahannock, recovering enough by evening to dine on the creature. The place was called Stingray Point, the name it still bears.

On his return the feud with Ratcliffe heated up immediately, and in short order Smith and some allies deposed him. He was replaced with Matthew Scrivener, a friend. Soon Smith was off on another voyage. The crew was smaller this time, but meant to go all the way to the head of the bay. In less than two weeks, Smith and his band were almost 200 miles north parlaying with a delegation of Susquehannocks. As he began the return voyage, Smith knew the Chesapeake contained neither

**LEFT: DETAIL OF REPLICA VESSEL. ABOVE: ON HIS WAY DOWN THE CHESAPEAKE, SMITH ROUNDED THE PENINSULA AT POINT LOOKOUT—TODAY A MARYLAND STATE PARK—TO JOURNEY UP THE POTOMAC. THE RECENTLY DESIGNATED WATER TRAIL COMMEMORATES HIS EXPLORATIONS.**

gold nor a northwest passage into the continent, as hoped. But it did contain a seemingly inexhaustible supply of timber, fish, game, and maybe the most valuable commodity of all—land. Smith's voyages are the beginning of another American tradition: the exploration of the frontier. Like Daniel Boone, like Lewis and Clark, he wrote about his discoveries, inspiring others looking for the better chance or the quick buck. The watery trail he blazed was soon a highway into the heart of the new world.

When Smith returned to Jamestown he was elected president. By December, he was demanding corn from the tribes, sometimes at gunpoint, in order to see the settlement through the bitterly cold winter of 1608-1609. Relations degenerated into open hostilities. Smith exhorted his countrymen to pull themselves together, declaring that "he that will not worke shall not eate . . ."

Summer brought supply ships, new colonists, and a more hostile policy from the Virginia Company toward the natives. Infighting at the colony was as bad as ever. Smith, gravely injured in what was probably an assassination attempt, was packed off to England, never to return.

The next winter is known in the chronicle of Jamestown as the Starving Time. Held near-captive in their fort, the frantic colonists ate rodents, pet dogs, and dried leaves. Their numbers dwindled from 214 to 60. Spring brought new colonists and a scorched earth policy toward the natives. The English burned crops and villages, killing men, women, and children. The natives hit back hard, and the



**A LIGHTLY ARMED CREW** INTO THE VAST, UNMAPPED ESTUARY—WITH NO HOPE OF SUPPORT IN CASE OF CALAMITY—SPEAKS VOLUMES ABOUT SMITH'S NERVE AND THE TRUST HIS CREW PLACED IN HIM. OVER THE NEXT SEVEN WEEKS THE LITTLE PARTY EXPLORED THE EASTERN SHORE, GOING FAR UP THE NANTICOKE, THEN CROSSING BACK TO THE WESTERN SHORE TO REACH AS FAR NORTH AS THE PATAPSCO AT MODERN BALTIMORE.

war of reprisals went on for decades. Thus began a sad and bloody arc through the centuries, intersecting with places like Tippecanoe, Sand Creek, Little Bighorn, and Wounded Knee. The colony grew and saw developments that still affect daily life in the modern United States. In 1619, an elected assembly met for the first time at Jamestown, and has met every year since, a model for the framers of the Constitution. In that same year, a Dutch trader exchanged its cargo of humans for a cargo of food, introducing the nightmare of slavery. New towns popped up on the peninsula and eventually throughout the Chesapeake. When Williamsburg became the assembly's new home, the settlement faded away into the quiet fields.

**LAST YEAR, PRESIDENT BUSH SIGNED LEGISLATION ESTABLISHING THE CAPTAIN** John Smith Chesapeake National Historic Trail. The trail—designated thanks to a National Park Service study boasting a wealth of information—will retrace Smith's explorations in the region. A network of connected water routes, covering nearly 3,000 miles, will spotlight the historic, natural, and Native American heritage of the Chesapeake.

The trail is the brainchild of a host of partners including the National Park Service Chesapeake Bay Program and Chesapeake Gateways and Water Trails Network, the National Geographic Society, the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, and the Conservation Fund. In addition to providing opportunities for recreation and heritage tourism, it will help raise awareness and build public support. The trail will be managed by the National Park Service in close cooperation with the U.S.

Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. "The first conversations about the trail only began about three years ago," says Pat Noonan, the founder and chairman emeritus of the board at the Conservation Fund. According to Noonan, the new trail was recognized as a "way to highlight the upcoming 400th anniversary of Jamestown, and to bring some much needed attention to the ecological plight of the bay. It would also highlight the bay's incomparable Native American and colonial history, and serve as an educational resource for generations of regional students." Thanks in large part to the efforts of Noonan, Gilbert Grosvenor of the National Geographic Society, and others, the John Smith trail became the 25th addition to the national trails system.

John Maounis, the trail's recently named superintendent, says that while the management plan is still in development "by law it must be completed in December of 2008." It's already apparent that the trail routes will make use of some innovative technology and interpretive approaches, connecting a wide variety of parks and historic sites to tell the exploration story. NOAA plans to create "talking buoys"—interpretive guideposts for water-borne travelers that also collect environmental data to help monitor the bay's health. The Bay Gateways and Water Trails Network, which coordinates and helps fund the activities of 150 affiliated organizations, sites, and parks, has assisted in the production of *John Smith's Chesapeake Voyages, 1607–1609*. This richly illustrated volume, published by the University



*AS HE BEGAN THE RETURN*

# VOYAGE, SMITH KNEW THE CHESAPEAKE CONTAINED NEITHER

of Virginia Press, will be the definitive history of the explorations. And as part of the anniversary, a 12-man crew will take a reproduction shallop along the route of the trail and, according to Maounis, “deploy the first three talking buoys with stops at Jamestown, Baltimore, and Point Lookout at the mouth of the Potomac.” Sites and parks from the Virginia Living Museum in Newport News, to the James River Water Trail in Richmond, to the Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum in Calvert County, Maryland, are planning exhibits, interpretive signage, programs, and special events on the world of the 17th century Chesapeake. The Virginia-run Jamestown Settlement, a living history museum and site on the way out to the island, will inaugurate a new exhibit entitled “The World of 1607.” Among all, the goal is to share with visitors the sense of wonder and discovery that must have at times overwhelmed Smith’s tiny crew as their small boat rounded each point along the bay’s complex and seemingly endless shoreline.

**ON A SURPRISINGLY WARM JANUARY** morning I find myself sitting in the brand new 18,000-square-foot National Park Service visitor center and curation facility on Jamestown Island. I’m talking with Karen Rehm, chief historian at Colonial National Historical Park, and National Park Service archeologist Andrew Veech.

The immense collection the park has accumulated over the years is showcased in a series of exhibits, which Karen explains with obvious pride. At the first glass case we come to, a period painting depicts a ceramic vessel being used in a 17th century household, a vessel whose twin—the real thing—is exhibited in the same case. The exhibits also depict the social diversity of the settlement, which grew to include English citizens of all social stations, both free and enslaved Africans, and Native Americans. The bustle and energy of an industrious community at the margins of the empire comes through in the objects and images. It’s the palpable connection to the

**LEFT: ALONG THE POTOMAC JUST PAST POINT LOOKOUT. ABOVE LEFT AND CENTER: SMITH EXPLORED THE RIVER’S UPPER REACHES AS FAR AS GREAT FALLS, NOW A NATIONAL PARK. ABOVE RIGHT: REPLICA OF ONE OF SMITH’S VESSELS MOORED AT THE JAMESTOWN SETTLEMENT MUSEUM.**



**GOLD NOR A NORTHWEST PASSAGE INTO THE CONTINENT, AS HOPED. BUT IT DID CONTAIN A SEEMINGLY INEXHAUSTIBLE SUPPLY OF TIMBER, FISH, GAME, AND MAYBE THE MOST VALUABLE COMMODITY OF ALL—LAND.**

day-to-day lives of the people who lived and died here that’s at the heart of the new exhibits—and the park’s mission. As Karen explains, it is all “just a means to an end. They remind us that people

lived here and their lives and stories are what are important about Jamestown.”

And maybe she’s right. Maybe what matters about Jamestown aren’t the famous events or the important precedents established at this little colony on the far edge of the world. Maybe what really matters is where the deeds and ideas that shaped the nation—for both good and ill—came from. They sprang from the vision and accomplishments of ordinary people who lived on this quiet tidewater peninsula, people not so very different from ourselves.

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